

Choice Literature.

HOW THEY KEPT THE FAITH.

A TALE OF THE HUGUENOTS OF LANGUEDOC.

CHAPTER VII.—(Continued).

"The vestry door is but a yard beyond you, monsieur. There is a window there through which the lady may easily reach the ground." He indicated the direction with a gesture, and the next moment was lost to sight in the crowd. But Henri had caught fresh courage and strength from the hint. With all the energy of re-kindled hope he set himself to gain the spot pointed out by his unknown friend. Snatching his half-healed arm from the sling, he used it as a wedge with which he made a passage for them through the throng, while while with the other he drew after him the helpless woman. His strength for the moment was something superhuman. He seemed alike unconscious of pain or of exhaustion. In a few moments he had gained the door, and opening it, would have hurried his companions in, but the younger lingered upon the threshold, her eyes fixed upon the pulpit.

"Look," she exclaimed; "there is the man who spoke to us in the crowd. He is speaking now to the captain of the dragoons; now he has leaped upon the steps. What is he going to do?"

"He can do nothing but immolate himself, mademoiselle. The people are too far gone to listen to reason, and if he attempts to inflame them further, the dragoons will shoot him down without scruple. He is a brave man, but a fanatic. Do not let us linger here."

She did not heed him. "He is motioning to the people to command silence, and they are actually obeying him. Now he begins to speak. Surely he will urge them to rally to the defence of their old minister."

"On the contrary, he is urging them to submit and forbear. See how the crowd lower and shake their fists at him. If he does not take care they will tear him in pieces instead of the soldiers. Mademoiselle, I entreat you."

She turned and followed him, evidently disappointed. The brief glow had faded from her face.

"Submission—forbearance! Am I never to hear the last of them?" she cried passionately. "Will there never a hero arise who will show our people a quicker and surer way out of their troubles? Patience, long-suffering: do I not know too well where that ends?"

He glanced at her in surprise.

"Surely one so young and beautiful, mademoiselle, cannot have seen anything but the bright side of life."

She averted her face, and he was startled to hear the sound of a smothered sob.

"You think because I am a girl I have not seen much trouble," she murmured reproachfully. "But, alas, you do not know. I have seen, I have suffered, ah, such dreadful things. It all came back to me when I saw the pastor standing there bound among the soldiers."

If she had seemed winsome in her gaiety, noble in her peril, now in her softness and her tears she was unspeakably womanly and sweet. Henri La Roche lifted the little white hand to his lips.

"Mademoiselle, your sorrow touches me more nearly than you can imagine; but we should not linger here. My pledge to see you in safety out of this ill-fated building is still unredeemed, and at any moment the tumult may break forth afresh."

"You are right, monsieur. Our escape should not be delayed another instant. But how is to be accomplished?"

"Easily enough, mademoiselle, if you will permit me to make the descent first."

The young officer sprang from the window, and lifted, first the young lady, and then her attendant, safely to the ground.

With the first touch of her feet upon terra firma, and a consciousness of safety, her native wit returned to the tire-woman. With sly amusement she marked Henri's anxious glance at their torn and dishevelled dresses.

"Give yourself no uneasiness, monsieur. The cottage of my mother is in the grove of willows yonder, and my young lady and I are accustomed to resort thither every evening after service for some refreshment. We have only to proceed thither as usual, and send one of my brothers into town for madame's coach and such changes of apparel as these barbarians have rendered necessary."

Captain La Roche glanced at mademoiselle.

"Is this as you would have it?" he asked in a low voice.

"I am at your service now and always."

She started hastily. "Yes, certainly; it is all as it should be," she answered. "Thank you very much, monsieur, for all that you have done for us, but there is no need for you to give yourself any further concern on our account."

"I shall certainly not leave you until I see you under some roof in safety," Henri answered, a little stiffly, and he turned and walked by her side down the narrow woodland path. Still she was strangely silent. The safety which had restored her attendant to volubility and good humour, had brought back to her the shy, maidenly veil which Henri had detected more than once before. Was she afraid he would presume on the confidence she had manifested during the last trying half-hour? She should find he was better worthy of her trust than that, and Captain La Roche also grew silent, and endeavoured to throw into his manner the grave respect he would have thought it necessary to show had one of the princesses of the blood condescended to walk with him through an alley in Versailles. But as they came in sight of the cottage gate mademoiselle stopped short with a low cry of dismay.

"My little Testament! I have lost it," she faltered.

"Then it is gone forever," decided Rosette promptly. "It must have been wrested from you in the crowd, mademoiselle, and long since trampled into a thousand fragments."

The young lady turned pale, and tears sprang to her eyes.

"I would have rather lost every louis d'or I had in the world," she exclaimed piteously. "I am sure I had it in the vestry. Oh, do let me go back and look for it. Indeed, I do not mind returning alone at all."

The intangible mist that had been rising between them was gone once more, and her eyes met Henri's frankly now, with a look of childish appeal.

"Impossible," he answered. "You cannot return to the church, mademoiselle; but if you will permit me to see you to yonder cottage in safety, I will myself go back and make search for your treasure. I am sure I would know it again,

and if there is a fragment still in existence you shall have it. Will it be enough that I leave it at the cottage here, or will mademoiselle do me the honour to name her residence in town?"

The last remark Captain La Roche considered quite a stroke of strategy, but before mademoiselle could answer, Rosette interposed in a shrill staccato.

"Permit you to return to that howling mob in search of a book, monsieur? It would be folly, criminal folly, to think of such a thing. Mademoiselle, you surely will not permit the young officer to incur such useless risk. The book is already out of existence, I feel sure."

Mademoiselle brushed away her tears.

"My little Testament was very precious to me as the gift of a dear friend, and I have had it for many years," she sighed. "But I could not let any one run any risk for it. I have only myself to blame. Alas, monsieur, what is this that I see? You have already endangered yourself more for us than I imagined. Your wound is bleeding."

Henri glanced down at his wounded arm, and saw that the sleeve of his doublet was soaked with crimson. Now he understood the faintness and dizziness which had been creeping over his brain the last few moments. He must have strained the half-healed wound too much in the press, and been losing blood ever since.

"It is only a scratch from a Spanish bayonet that has proved rather slow of healing," he said, smiling lightly into the troubled girlish eyes. "Nothing to frighten the roses from your cheek, mademoiselle. As soon as I have seen you within the garden gate, I will go and have it attended to."

"You shall not come a step farther." The pretty little demoiselle drew herself up like a young empress. "You shall go at once and have it bound up. At once I do you hear, monsieur. I command you."

"And I obey," answered Henri. "It is hardly a pleasant sight for a lady's eyes, I admit. Adieu, mademoiselle. If you think again of me at all, let it be to remember that I would gladly suffer thrice as much for the honour of having served you."

She extended her hand to him, trembling.

"You have saved our lives, and I have not even tried to thank you, but I dare not keep you even for that now. Go, I say."

He held the white, slender fingers to his lips for a moment, gave one more look into her eyes, and went. How could he know that before they should meet him again she should be as far beyond his reach as the white clouds sailing overhead?

Several minutes later a young man, hurrying along the forest path, caught sight of the officer seated by the wayside, his head drooped against the trunk of a tree, and the blood dripping from his shoulder in heavy crimson drops. In a second the stranger was on his knees beside the sufferer, addressed him in a clear, musical voice that made itself understood, even through the stupor of failing senses.

"Monsieur, your wound needs immediate attention, and I am a surgeon. Will you permit me to care for it?"

Taking consent as a matter of course, he tore open the sleeve of the doublet, and began removing the soaked bandages. Henri submitted silently, and watched the energetic efforts that followed for his relief through half-closed eyes, with the indifference of utter exhaustion. The new-comer did not again address or look at him. With water from the neighbouring brook he staunched the flow of blood, and then with quick, skilful fingers, replaced the compress.

With the stay of life's ebbing current, Henri's strength began to return, his brain grew clearer, and he looked earnestly at the grave, kindly face, partially averted from him. There was something in the serious, quick-glancing eyes, and the steadfast lines about the silent lips, that attracted, yet baffled him.

"I think I have met you before," he said feebly. "But I cannot recall your name. Ah, I remember now. You are the young man who spoke to us in the church just now. I am glad to have a chance of thanking you, monsieur. That was a better turn even than this."

The surgeon looked up, without pausing in his work, and smiled.

"Your memory is short. The meeting in the temple was not our first interview, M. Henri."

Was it the old name, or the full glance, or the quiet, well-known smile, that told Henri La Roche the truth? The next moment he had thrown his arms about the stranger's neck, and was sobbing like a child.

"Rene, Rene! I know you now. How could I have been so blind?"

Godfrey Chevalier's son was by far the calmer of the two. He pressed his lips warmly to the hand on his shoulder, and then forced his companion back to his recumbent position.

"For once, I must be allowed to give orders to my young sieur," he said gravely. "M. Henri, if you do not remain quiet for a few moments, your wound will begin bleeding again, and I may not be able to staunch it."

Henri submitted passively.

"I am happy enough to do anything that you wish, mon ami. By the lilies of France, you have learned your calling well. To think I should not have known you from the first: do you come from the schools, or from the hills?"

"The hills, my young sieur. I received my degree three months ago, and have already begun the practice of my profession in sight of the towers of Beaumont."

"Beaumont: the very name is enough to put cordial into the faintest pulses. I think I see them now, glowing like the battlements of Paradise in the light of the setting sun. Tell me something of my father, Rene. It is long since I have heard from him, and he never writes much about himself."

Rene Chevalier hesitated.

"Monsieur's head is less erect, and his step slower," he said sadly. "The troubles of his people and of the Desert Church press heavily upon him. But his eye has the old fire, and his voice is as strong as ever, when he speaks of his son's exploits on the field, and talks of his long-looked-for coming home."

"And I have been kept loitering here for a fortnight, waiting the pleasure of that idle kinsman of mine. By the sweetest eyes I know, I will be tied to him no longer; I will start for the Cevennes to-morrow. What, my doctor! you think I will not, if I persist in wearing out my strength like this? Well; do you talk more then, and I will hold my tongue. Tell me of your mother and the little sister. Are they well, and at Beaumont also? The little maid must be well-grown by this."

Agnes Chevalier's brother smiled—not a momentary parting of the grave lips as before, but a sudden full out-shining of

the soul within, like the coming out of the sun on a wintry day.

"She hath indeed grown, my young sieur, into something whiter and purer than the whitest lily that was ever blown. The soul of my father is in her eyes, and in her voice—the people say—a note that they have not heard since the good pastor went away. The looks of my mother dwell upon her, and your father watches for her coming every day, monsieur, as he watches for the rising of the sun. His sight is not what it used to be, and the little maid is happy to read to him hour after hour, sometimes learned discussions about our faith, but oftentimes from the Book they both love best. Monsieur, too, thinks that he detects in her voice the music of one that will never be heard again."

Henri La Roche stretched out his hand.

"I heard of the end, Rene," he said huskily. "Shot down, chained to the oar, in a skirmish with a Duch squadron, a month after he was placed in the galley-ship. Thank God, the release came soon!"

"Thank God!" echoed the son quietly. "It matters little to him now, monsieur. Through that gate he entered in, and we may well pray to have so abundant an entrance ministered unto us. The truth he died for has not languished in the Cevennes. The temple in which he preached was indeed destroyed, but the chateau-chapel has been repaired, and your father sees that it is supplied every Sabbath by young ministers from Nismes, and more than once pastor Brousson has himself filled the pulpit. We may go down in the fight, monsieur, but the banner of our King goes on 'conquering and to conquer.'"

"I see you are the same old Rene. But what of your mother, my man? You say not of her."

"The stars do not change, my young sieur."

"Nor the angels in Paradise. You are right, mon ami. But tell me how you manage to pursue your forbidden vocation without interference?"

"Very easily, M. Henri. Through the kindness of monsieur, I have been able to rent a farm adjoining the forests of Beaumont, and in the heart of my father's people. If the authorities inquire, I am only a vine-dresser. If my brethren need me, they know where to send."

"Bravo! You are a match for the Jesuits themselves. But that puts me in mind. What on earth did you mean, Rene, by attempting to lift your voice in the tumult just now, and what means the silence in the temple yonder? I thought the people were about to tear you in pieces when I quitted the building."

"The tumult is over, monsieur. The pastor has been removed, and the people are quietly dispersing."

"The people quietly dispersing! Then it is your doing, Rene. But what spell do you carry under your tongue, O my golden-mouthed Chrysostom? You should have been an orator, not a doctor."

"It was only necessary to induce them to pause and consider. Their own good sense and the words of their pastor did the rest."

"Modest as ever. Well, I will not praise you if you would rather not! I will keep it all until I see the good mother and the little sister. They will prove better listeners. But tell me, mon ami, what can I do for you in return for all your service this afternoon? What! You are not so happy and so singular as not to have a wish ungratified?"

"Nay, monsieur; but the debt is on my side. It is I who must thank you."

"Ah! I do not see how you make that out. You have saved my life twice over in the course of an hour, and though it is not of much value to any one else, I confess I am not eager to part with it just yet."

"Yet after all, my young sieur, the obligation rests with me. I have saved your life, perhaps. You have served one who is a thousand times dearer to me than my life."

Henri started. "I do not understand you," he said blankly.

"Captain La Roche is not then aware of the name of the young lady whom he rescued just now from the press?"

The soldier's heart gave a great leap and then stood still.

"How should I be?" he asked defiantly. "I am a stranger in La Rochelle. She was a woman in peril, and I succoured her."

Rene Chevalier smiled.

"I, too, am a stranger in La Rochelle, monsieur, but there is a face I have seen too often in my dreams, not to know it again, though I met it at the ends of the earth, after years of absence—the face of my foster-sister and promised wife. I saw it leaning on your arm, M. Henri, as I passed you in the crowd, and I knew it even then."

Henri La Roche was sitting very still. When he saw that Rene had paused and was expecting some reply, he made an effort to speak, but instead uttered a low cry, and fell back fainting against the tree. His face was so ashy, that the surgeon, in much alarm, ran hastily to the brook near by, and filling a drinking-cup with water, hastened back with it. To his relief he found Henri partially restored and trying to rise to a sitting posture. He caught eagerly at the cup and drained it, smiling feebly but reassuringly into the anxious face bent over him.

"It was only a twinge from my wound, I am better now. Bah, you will make a poor doctor if you are so easily frightened."

"You are weaker from the loss of blood than you imagine, monsieur. I must positively insist that you lie quietly where you are, without speaking, for at least five minutes."

Even had Henri been inclined to rebel he would have known by the firm setting of his friend's lips, that it would be useless; but he was in truth only too thankful to gather up his strength and conceal the blow. He lay passive as a babe until the softening of Rene's watchful face showed that the time had expired, and then he asked lightly:

"So you think the young lady I assisted out of the church is little Mademoiselle Eglantine, whom I used to tease and play with? I am sorry to disappoint you, mon ami, but I am confident you are mistaken. You saw her but a moment. It is likely that I, who was with her so much longer, would not have recognized her, had it indeed been she?" He spoke stoutly, but in truth. Doubt conviction had already fastened upon his soul. He recalled the strange spell with which those eyes had haunted him from the first, the sudden reminiscence of the childish plaything of his youth, which had flashed upon him in the crowd; above all, that outburst of grief at sight of the captive pastor.

(To be Continued.)