

Choice Literature.

HOW THEY KEPT THE FAITH.

A TALE OF THE HUGUENOTS OF LANGUEDOC.

CHAPTER XIV.—(Continued.)

"Not unless you have come back the stainless gentleman that went away."

Henri made no answer, a dusky flush had mounted to his brow.

"Answer me, monsieur. Am I to congratulate you upon making your escape?"

The beautiful young face was as stern as that of a rebuking angel. The sieur of Beaumont fell on his knees before his wife.

"Have mercy, Eglantine! Yours should be the last voice to reproach me. It was for you that I did it—to save you and our helpless babe from the horrors of this Dragonnade. You do not know what it has been to lie there, fettered with irons to my dungeon-floor, and think of you at the mercy of those brutal soldiers. I told you once I loved you better than my conscience and my religion; I am here to-day to prove it."

She drew her dress from his clinging hold and retreated a step, her eyes flashing.

"You can say that to me! You dare to tell me it was the thought of me that unnerved your heart and brought you to this dishonour? Is this my reward for having kept down my woman's heart and borne my pain bravely that I might show myself worthy of you—you? Is this my return for having trusted you as I did not even trust my God, for having staked my soul upon your steadfastness?"

"Eglantine," interrupted Henri in a voice of agony, "they told me you were crushed, broken-hearted; that you entreated me to have mercy upon you and our innocent babe; that you claimed the promise I once made to you, to protect you at any cost. My God! have I been deceived?"

Her pale face did not soften. "You could believe this of me," she said in a dull, stunned voice—"you could believe me capable of weakening your arm at such a moment with such an appeal? Then you have never loved me—never been worthy of the love and trust I gave you. When they told me you were wavering, I would not believe it; when they said one entreaty from my lips would overcome your resolution and save my child, I would not utter it. Take back your ring, Henri La Roche. It was not you I loved, only something I thought you to be. I am widowed as the sword could not have widowed me, and Rene is avenged! He would not have stooped to such an act if I had gone down on my knees to him!"

Henri had already snatched up the golden circlet she had shaken from her finger, and was standing before her, as pale with anger as herself.

"Be careful," he said in a low, stern voice; "there are limits to what a man will bear, even from the woman he loves. Do you suppose I do not appreciate my own degradation? Why else have I crept back to my father's house, under cover of the twilight, not daring to look one of my own peasants in the face? I need no words of yours to add stings to my conscience, but you may goad me to desperation and repent it when it is too late. You are justly indignant at the trick that has been perpetrated upon us, but you have no right to upbraid me because I could not divine you had not really sent me that message. What reason did you ever give me to believe that God's truth would be dearer to you than all other considerations? When did you ever speak of anything but honour and loyalty? A man needs something more than honour to strengthen him in the hours of agony I have endured, and to give him the victory over the tempting devil in his own soul, as well as over outside temptations. Do I look as if the struggle had been an easy one? Not even for your sake could I lightly resign the religion in which my father died, and which had been the trust and glory of our house for centuries. Faith I had none. I do not know what these weeks of suffering have done for you Eglantine, but they have taught me that—" Henri La Roche paused for a moment and looked wistfully at his wife. She had thrown herself upon the divan, and her face was buried in her hands. He fancied she was beginning to relent, and went on earnestly.

"I found it out when I was left alone to do battle with my own heart. I had prided myself on being a Huguenot, but God was a stranger to me. It had been my own glory, not His, that I thought of; my way, not His, that I had chosen. I had no language in which to speak to Him when I would have cried for help. You may well feel disappointed in me, Eglantine. I am humbled in your eyes. I have been nothing but a miserable hypocrite all this while, and my defence of the religion has been only a hollow mockery. I wonder God has not swept me off from the face of the earth!"

Eglantine could bear no more, "I wish I had never been born!" she cried bursting into an agony of weeping. "I wish my baby and I had died together! There is nothing left worth living for. There is nothing in heaven or earth of which I can feel sure."

"Because you have put your trust in an arm of flesh, not in God himself," whispered Henri; and he would have drawn her to his breast, but she repulsed him proudly, and rose, and confronted him once more, holding back her tears.

"Yes, I did trust you," she said in a low, quivering voice, "as some do not even trust their God; and you have failed me! What is the use to say more? I could have knelt by your scaffold, and smiled in your face to the last, and rejoiced, though with a broken heart, to know you brave and faithful, and stainless to the end. Do not talk to me about religion. You were a soldier, and you had your honour. You might at least have been as true to the faith for which your old father died, as you would have been to the banner of France. Did you forget the eyes that were on you, the hundreds that would be guided by your example? If the sieur of Beaumont could put his hand to a lie, if Henri La Roche could purchase his liberty by a cowardly concession, what wonder if his servants and vassals falter too?"

"Eglantine," interrupted her husband in a horse voice, "do not speak to me like this. You have not a patient, slow-blooded man like Rene Chevalier to deal with, and a few more words like that may make me go away, and never look upon your face again."

She gave him a strange, intent look. Henri's glance fell upon the cradle at her side. The fatherhood, which until now he had scarcely realized, stirred in his breast.

"Let me see the babe," he whispered. "Surely, we should be patient with each other, my wife, with this new bond between us."

The appeal did not soften her as he expected. With a firm hand Eglantine drew down the coverlet from the face of the sleeping child, and regarded him coldly, as he bent over the cradle in speechless emotion.

"You think I ought to forgive you for my baby's sake," she said in a strange voice. "It is for her sake that I cannot pardon you. You might have done your child the grace to die like a gentleman."

It was the last drop. With white passion, Henri gripped his wife by the wrists.

"Be careful, Eglantine! My sentence has been commuted to that of banishment, and every arrangement has been made for us to leave France at once, and in perfect safety. But one more word like that and I will put an end to this miserable existence, and leave you to find a protector more to your taste. Think well before you speak. You are dealing with a desperate man."

Where was her better angel? Did she know what she was doing? Where was the love that had threatened like a lava-torrent to overflow her heart, one short hour before?

"I have thought well," came in low, distinct tones from the pale lips. "I will suffer any fate rather than accept freedom on such terms; happiness I will never know again. Provide for your own safety, monsieur; your arrangements for leaving France have no concern for me. Perhaps God will be kind to my baby, and let her die soon; I could not bear to have her live to blush to hear her father's name."

"Her father at least will not live to see it," returned Henri, as he loosened his hold upon her hands and cast them violently from him. "You have finished your work, Eglantine. I had hoped in another land we might have begun a new life, and learned together to know and love our God; but you have decided otherwise. You have stood between me and my God ever since I first loved you; you have ruined me now soul and body." He cast one look of despair and reproach upon her, and rushed from the room.

She made no effort to call him back. She had no idea he would put that rash threat into execution; but it did not seem to matter now what happened to either of them. Wearily she sank into her chair, and let her hands fall listlessly upon her lap. Was it only an hour ago that she had sat there in the summer twilight, dreaming of his fond embrace, and flattering her broken heart that the touch of his lips upon her cheek would rob even parting of its pang? The world had come to an end since then. That Henri had ceased to exist; nay, he had never had any being except in her fond imagination. This wretched, laggard man, who talked sternly of the happy past, and humbly of the degraded future, was a stranger to her. His words opened a gulf which parted them as death could not have done. The solid earth had given way beneath her feet; God was blotted out of heaven; on the edge of a black abyss she seemed to stand, unable to get back, not daring to look forward. Why had she ever been born? Why could she not be blotted out of existence?

How long she had sat thus she could not tell, when she heard M. Renau ascending the turret-stairs. A vague inclination to leave the apartment, and avoid the interview, crossed her mind, but she was too much stunned to put the thought into execution. M. Renau tapped once lightly on the door, and receiving no reply, lifted the latch and entered. He had expected that his pretty little kinswoman would make something of a scene on first hearing of her husband's change of faith, and he had delayed his appearance, until, as he considered, the affection and good sense of the wife should have had time to assert themselves. That she would do anything eventually but gratefully acquiesce, had never for a moment entered into his calculations, and at sight of the still, solitary figure in the chair beside the cradle, he started with an exclamation of dismay.

"What does this mean, madame? Where is your husband?" he demanded sharply.

Eglantine turned her desolate eyes upon him, but made no answer.

"Speak!" he commanded, grasping her shoulder with a hand of steel. "I am not to be put off with these theatrical airs. Where is Henri, and what fool's game have you been trying to play?"

At another time she would have cried out with pain, his grasp upon her shoulder was so hard, but she only answered in a dull, dreary voice:

"I told him that I hated and despised him, that I would suffer any death rather than have a share in his dishonour, and he said he would go away and never look upon my face again."

M. Renau was not the man to be betrayed into a second note of surprise. His fingers closed more firmly on the slender young shoulder, that was all, and he was silent for a full moment before he asked in a voice as quiet as though he had been discussing some change in the weather:

"Where did he say he would go? Did he give you no hint of his intention? He was only here on parole."

"He said he would go and put an end to his miserable existence," repeated the young wife in the same dull, passionless tone—"that I have ruined him body and soul, and he would not live to see his child blush to bear his name. But I do not think he will kill himself. Oh, no; he has not manhood enough left for that. He will simply go away into another country, where people do not know him; that is all."

Henri's kinsman gazed searchingly into her face, but could read no attempt to deceive him in its sad, hopeless lines.

"You are an ungrateful girl; you will repent your folly when it is too late," he said, loosening his hold. "But I have no time to waste on you now; I must save that unhappy boy, if it is yet possible."

He stumbled over the cradle as he turned from her, and the babe woke and cried. With a rush of new-born tenderness, Eglantine sank on the floor beside it. Hitherto there had been little room in her heart for the most unselfish of all passions, but now in her desolation it leaped up in her soul with all the force of an unsealed spring.

"My baby! my baby! We are all in all to each other now," she moaned, and her icy sorrow melted into floods of saving tears.

From the threshold, M. Renau, forgotten, watched the tableau with his own peculiar smile.

A woman who could be moved neither to hope nor despair might have been hard to manage. A mother who could love and weep like that was still within his power.

Lulling her child to sleep with tender touch and word, Eglantine soon became aware of an unusual commotion in the chateau. Doors opened and shut; feet hurried to and fro; M. Renau's voice could be heard giving sharp, peremptory directions; torches began to gleam in the wood. She knew what it meant. Her husband's dishonour and flight had been made known to his domestics, and the place was being searched. She was glad her attendants were too much occupied, or too terrified, to bring her lights and supper; she was not ready to look any one in the face yet.

Presently the clatter of hoofs in the court and out upon the flinty road told her that the search was being extended. The infant was once more at rest. She rose from her kneeling posture beside the cradle and went to the window. There was a stricture across her throat which made her feel that she must have air. The lights were still hurrying to and fro in the wood, but the greater number of them were evidently converging to the black, sullen pool that lay at the foot of the hill. Was M. Renau such a fool as to imagine that Henri's own servants would betray him if he was in hiding, or did he attach more importance than she had done to that wild, vague threat? Did he really believe her husband might have been goaded to the crime of self-destruction?

"What does it mean, Marie?" she asked of the old nurse, who came in at the moment with candles. "What are they doing with torches in the wood?"

"Oh, madame, do you not know? Surely you must guess. They say it was to you he said what he was going to do. God have mercy on us all! Our brave young lord was never in his right mind when he gave up his father's faith and talked of taking his own life."

Eglantine turned back to the window and asked no more questions. They knew it all, then. With fascinated eyes she watched the lights move to and fro through the trees. Had Henri really taken his own life, and if so, was it not as much her doing as his? Still there was no repentance in her misery. If it were all to be gone over again, she could not unsay a single word; only, it had been better if they had never been born. Suddenly a loud hail from the foot of the hill made her shudder. There was a hurried focussing of lights in the direction of the pool, then a terrible silence. They had found something. What was it? Surely not the white, frozen horror which she saw already in anticipation! They were coming quietly back to the house, very silent, but without the even tread of those who bore a burden. Eglantine listened at last to the old nurse's entreaties that she would not expose herself to the air, and came and sat down by the window and let Marie close the window.

"Surely you will let me bring you your supper now, my lady," remonstrated the old woman. "It is an hour past your time."

"Not until I have heard what they have found."

Surely they would come and tell her; yes, there was M. Renau's delicate, cat-like tread upon the stair once more—she was beginning to know it so well already—and others following him.

"Come in," she said in answer to the light tap upon the door, and her husband's kinsman entered. Jean and several of the chateau servants hung back in the corridor. She caught the sound of a stifled sob from the valet, and glanced anxiously at him, but M. Renau stood between.

"Do you recognize this?" he asked, holding up before her a handkerchief stained with ooze. The La Roche crest, worked by her own hand was in the corner. She caught at it fiercely.

"Where did you find it?"

"On the edge of the pool at the foot of the chateau-terrace; there were footprints, too, which Jean swears are his master's. You have done your work well, madame."

"Is this true, Jean?" The young wife looked past her kinsman to the corridor, "I hardly know who to believe now, but I do trust you."

Jean came and knelt at her feet.

"It is quite true, madame. I could take my oath to the stamp of my master's foot anywhere, and I saw him take the path to the pool when he left the chateau. I tried to follow him, but he waved me back. If I had only known, I would have dared his anger to save him."

Eglantine turned her eyes upon M. Renau once more.

"Have you searched the pool?" she asked.

The courtier shrugged his shoulders.

"It is useless, they tell me; no one has ever touched bottom. But I will make the attempt to-morrow, of course."

She rose, and confronted him, with the gathered grief of her soul in her eyes.

"It is you who have done it,—you who have murdered him soul and body. He would never have been goaded to despair by what I said, if his conscience had not echoed every word. It was you who tempted him to his ruin, who deceived him, and made him believe that I was weak and cowardly, and entreated him to first think of me. He would never have faltered for his own sake. Until then he had been the bravest knight that ever drew sword. No wonder I trusted him as I did. I would have put my soul in his keeping, without fear. If he had died like that, I could have borne it. I could have gone proudly to the end of my days, and stayed my heart on the memory of what he was. But now! you have made me see him die twice before my eyes; you have made me worse than a widow. Go, and leave me to my misery. I have no power to banish you from the chateau; I know well it is mine no longer; but I will never see your face again. Go!"

"I go," returned M. Renau, his thin lips folded a little more closely together than usual. "You will repeat this passion when it is too late; but you have rejected my help. Abide by your own decision." He turned and left the room, with a dull glow in his eyes, which would have warned Eglantine of danger, had she been less occupied with grief.

To have been reproached and defied would have mattered as little to him as the sighing of the evening wind, had he gained his point. But to be foiled, out-witted, by this slip of a girl, just after the prize was within his reach, for which he had toiled so many years—this was an injury M. Renau could not forgive.

Eglantine had made an enemy, patient, watchful, unscrupulous.

(To be continued.)

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