

Choice Literature.

HOW THEY KEPT THE FAITH.

A TALE OF THE HUGUENOTS OF LANGUEDOC.

CHAPTER VI—(Continued).

She walked slowly, as if unconscious of his scrutiny, with her pretty head held proudly, and her eyes fixed upon the ground—the tender curves of childhood yet lingering upon lip and chin, but the light of a sweeter morning breaking from under the downcast lids. He had time to study the picture for a moment, and then the maid, a sharp-eyed, flashily-dressed woman, whispered in her mistress' ear. The young girl glanced toward him, and catching sight of the flower in his doublet, flushed, and turned away. Every morning since had found him on the boulevard, fully satisfied, if after an hour or two of loitering, that face went by him in the crowd, and irrationally jealous if other eyes than his seemed to see that it was fair. Before a week had gone, the whole twenty-four hours came to turn on the brief bliss of that instant—the light of the day to come and go in the passing of those radiant eyes. Though after that second day she had never looked again in his direction, he liked her none the less for that touch of maidenly dignity. It proved her gentle breeding, as her dress and attendant did her gentle station. And now he stood waiting in the shadow of the old church, with a flutter at his heart, to see her pass. He had not thought to be himself observed; but as if attracted by the earnest gaze bent on her, the young lady looked up as she mounted the steps. There was no mistaking the warm admiration of his glance, and in some confusion, mademoiselle let slip the little volume she carried in her hand. Before the maid could interpose, Captain La Roche had stepped forward and restored it, with uncovered head, the stranger murmured a word of thanks, and would have passed on, but he glanced a little field-flower which she had plucked by the way had fallen from the leaves of the book, and lay on the stones at her feet. Henri picked it up, but made no offer to return it. A spirit of audacity seized him. His eyes preferred the request his lips dared not utter. The girl hesitated only a moment, and then, with the air of a young princess granting a favour, she smiled, and tripped by into the church, leaving the soldier standing still on the steps, with the fading little marigold in his hand; and from that hour roses and marigolds were to Henri La Roche the flowers most akin to those that blossomed in Paradise.

Like one in a dream he followed her into the church, and took his stand in the shadow of a pillar, where he could watch her without observation. The audience-room, which he had entered in this light and careless mode, was a large one, but quite devoid of furniture, saving the high, steep pulpit at the upper end, and a few old hatchments on the walls. It was the policy of the Catholic authorities, before resorting to actual persecution, to render Protestant worship unpopular by the imposition of petty tyrannies. Accordingly, a royal edict had lately deprived Huguenot temples of the right to furnish seats to their worshippers, compelling the latter to absent themselves from public worship, or to remain standing throughout services which a modern audience would have regarded as interminable. The effort had failed in the present instance, for the large building was crowded to its utmost capacity with both men and women, and there was no sign of weariness as the venerable, white-haired pastor invoked the blessing of God upon the assembly, and read from the book open before him, a chapter of St. John's Gospel. Then followed the simple liturgy, in which lay crystallized the faith of the reformers and the memory of martyrs.

An awe he had not looked for fell upon the young soldier, as for the first time in many months he listened to the familiar words. His eyes grew moist and his heart tender as he recalled the days of his youth and the voice—long since silent—that at such bitter price to itself had so often in his hearing repeated those solemn and sacred truths. Years had passed since then, but he could still never recall the memory of his martyred pastor without a pang of fierce indignation, and it suited well with his mood, that the psalm lined out to the waiting people—for books were also now forbidden to Protestant worshippers—was one of the battle-songs with which his forefathers had struck hard blows for the truth. The audience took it up with one voice, and he joined in the strain with all the heartiness of his young, powerful lungs. He had almost forgotten the lovely spell that had drawn him thither, when his ear caught the sound of a silvery voice on the other side of the pillar, pealing up like a skylark's. The face of the stranger was uplifted, and glowing as if with inspiration. So might Miriam have looked, he thought, chanting a psalm over the downfall of the enemies of her people; and after that, it is to be confessed, he thought as much of the singer as of the strain.

The psalm ended, the old pastor reopened the Bible and announced his text, but scarcely had the first sentence fallen from his lips; when he was suddenly interrupted. A trumpet blew sharp and shrill from without. A strain of martial music followed. There was a faint cry from the old beadle, and then the temple doors were thrown open, and a band of soldiers, armed to the teeth, marched in. For an instant the congregation stood paralyzed; then seeing that the eyes of the intruders were fixed upon the pulpit, where their aged minister stood calm, but unable to make himself heard amid the uproar, they uttered a hoarse roar of indignation, and endeavoured with the desperation of love, to interpose between him and the threatened danger, in vain. The dragoons pushed steadily forward, forcing the people back at the point of the bayonet, and bearing with stoical indifference the threats and execrations hurled upon them. They gained the pulpit and formed a cordon round it. Two of their number mounted to the reading-desk and secured the person of the pastor, while an officer stood upon the pulpit stairs and read aloud the royal warrant, of which the listeners gathered little more than that for some imaginary cause of offence their pastor was to be arrested and their temple closed. They had hushed their clamour long enough to hear it read, but at its conclusion they burst into another hoarse, indignant roar, which, instead of expending itself, seemed every instant to grow louder and more threatening. The old minister, who had resigned himself unresistingly to his captors, now endeavoured with outstretched hands and streaming eyes to induce them to do the same. But his voice was lost in the tumult, and the people misunderstanding the gesture, and thinking

he appealed to them for rescue, answered him with fiercer threats and cries. Every moment the uproar became more appalling. At a signal from their captain the soldiers brought their prisoner down and placed him in the centre of the squad. Cool and undismayed they stood with sabres drawn and eyes fixed upon their leader, ready at his word to cut their way out. The incensed Huguenots far outnumbered them, but they were unarmed, and without discipline, and the war-worn veterans of Louis XIV. knew well what would be the result of such an unequal contest. Maddened with grief and fear the people, however, would certainly have made the vain effort to stay their progress, and blood must have flowed, had there not appeared upon the scene at this moment an individual destined to turn the tide of events. The captain had turned to his men and was about to give the order for which they waited, when a young man stepped hastily forward from the crowd and addressed him. He wore the plain dress of a citizen, but his frame was tall and powerfully built, his eyes piercing, and his speech had a strong Southern accent.

"If you are Frenchmen, and do not wish to stain your hands with the blood of your countrymen, give me permission to speak one moment to the people without interruption."

Without waiting a reply, he sprang upon the pulpit steps, and turning his pale, set face toward the surging multitude, with a gesture commanded silence. The very audacity and unexpectedness of the act chained the arms of the dragoons, and startled the people into silence. All eyes turned toward the pulpit. Those of the Huguenots who had been loudest in their threats, began to press toward it. Perhaps here had come the leader who would organize their resistance and help to rescue their wronged minister. All waited with eagerness to hear what he would say.

The stranger who had succeeded in gaining this momentary foothold, lost not an instant in using it. Before the multitude had time to recover from that second of startled quietness, he was pouring out in a mighty voice that made itself heard to the remotest corner of the building, a rapid passionate appeal for prudence and forbearance.

"Resist, and you give our persecutors the opportunity for which they long; submit, and you deprive them of the voice with which to accuse you. Attempt to rescue your pastor by force, and you not only fail, but rivet his chains. Suffer his arrest patiently, and you do for him all that man can do, by proving how severe and unswerving is the loyalty he has taught you. It is the delight of our enemies to represent to his Majesty that his Huguenot subjects are continually in a state of insubordination and revolt. They love to goad us into acts of which they may afterwards accuse us. Disappoint them. Prove to your king the falsity of their charges, by showing him with what humility and patience you can resign your dearest ties at the expression of his royal will."

Such was the argument on which he rang the changes of his appeal—bold, impetuous, but shrewdly practical. The people listened, disappointed, sullen, wavering, but they listened, and at length the speaker paused, apparently satisfied with the impression he had made. The fire died out of his face, his head dropped low upon his breast; he seemed to feel himself unworthy to utter the words, which he knew well were all the people now needed. Bending low over the pulpit railing, he addressed the captive pastor in a voice of exceeding reverence and love.

"My father, they will hear you now. Speak to them, and the work is done."

The spell that was upon the people seemed to have fallen on the dragoons also. Without remonstrance they suffered the aged minister to step forward, and extend his arms in farewell and in blessing toward his smitten flock.

"My children"—the voice, though trembling with emotion, was now distinctly audible in the hushed assembly—"My little children, I address you, not in my own words, but in the words of Him who endured much contradiction of sinners against Himself, and 'when He was reviled, reviled not again': 'Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven.' Love your enemies. Bless them which curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you. So shall ye be the children of your Father which is in heaven."

He ceased speaking, and throughout the vast building, which a few seconds before had echoed to the shouts of a raging mob, was now heard only the sound of sobs and murmured prayers.

The captain of the dragoons saw his advantage, and seized it. A whisper to his men, and they closed once more about their prisoner, and moved towards the door. The people gave way before them, sorrowful but unresisting. At the temple door the officer glanced back.

"Where is the young man who quieted the people?" he demanded. "There was mischief in what he said, and he seemed to have much influence among them."

But the young man had disappeared as suddenly as he had come.

"Caught up, and smuggled away in the crowd," muttered the soldier angrily. "Could not one of you have had an eye to him?" But had the truth been known, he would have discovered that the congregation knew no more of the stranger than he.

The pastor crossed the threshold of his temple never to re-enter it; the people poured after him; the great oaken doors were closed, and stamped with the royal seal.

Another shadow had fallen from the night now rapidly closing around the Huguenots of France.

CHAPTER VII.

AFTER MANY DAYS.

Captain La Roche's first motion on the entrance of the soldiers had been one of hot indignation. His instinctive impulse had been to place himself at the head of the people and organize them into resistance. What he did, however, was only to move hastily forward to where the young lady and her maid stood, and silently take upon himself the charge of their protection. With a keen sense of humiliation flashed back upon him the memory of the uniform he wore, and the support of the royal authority to which it bound him. But, at least, it raised no barrier between him and the sweeter and lowlier task, and every instinct of manhood and chivalry drew him toward the gentle girl, now trembling amid the surging crowd like a frail flower in the grasp of a hurricane. She was very pale, but quietly composed, with her delicate

lips folded firmly together, while her attendant wrung her hands and lamented volubly:

"Alas, mademoiselle! this is what comes of wandering off to these out-of-the-way, forbidden places. Would to God I were safe home! alas! we will be murdered."

"For shame, Rosette!" answered a low voice. "It is the old pastor, not we, who is in danger. It is selfish to think about our own safety."

"Selfish!" shrieked Rosette. "Selfish, mademoiselle! when we are about to be shot or trampled to death. Look! the people are about to tear the dragoons in pieces. The soldiers are lowering their muskets. God have mercy!"

"I am ashamed of you, Rosette. You are not a Frenchwoman if you cannot die bravely. I, at least, cannot forget—" But here mademoiselle's brave words died away in a low cry, as she caught sight of a uniform at her elbow. The next instant, recognizing the earnest eyes fixed upon her, the cry glided into a sigh of relief.

"Mademoiselle knows me: she will trust me?" Captain La Roche said eagerly, but with grave respect. "If she will accept of my protection, I pledge my honour to see her out of the melee in safety."

The crowd surged heavily against them, and he put out his free arm to shield her. She caught hold of his sleeve with the frank confidence of a child.

"Oh, yes, we will trust you, and thank you very much, monsieur. We are alone together, Rosette and I, and she is very much frightened, and I do not know what to do. What ought we to do?"

There was no coquetry now in the beautiful eyes, only tears and soft appealing. The soldier's heart swelled proudly. He drew her closer, and laid his broad palm on the small hand clinging to his arm, and kept it there. It was one of those crises when the petty conventionalities of life are forgotten.

"There is nothing for us to do but wait quietly where we are for the present," he said. "Give yourself no alarm, mademoiselle; there shall not a hair of your head be hurt." He felt the strength of twenty men rise in him as he spoke. He knew his uniform would no longer be a restraint upon him if a sword were lifted against her. He would fight his way through a host before a rude hand should touch that delicate head.

She did not seem to hear him. She was looking with dilating eyes at the pulpit.

"See!" they have seized the poor old minister, and are binding him with cords. Are not the people going to interfere? Will they let him be carried off without resistance? Ah, if I were a man—" She checked herself, blushing. "Pardon me, I am ungrateful."

"No, mademoiselle, you are noble, you are right," he said warmly. "It is enough to put fire even in a woman's soul, and if I had not been tied hand and foot by my uniform, you would have seen that there is one man at least who would not witness the outrage tamely."

She looked up, her eyes flashing. "Then you are not one of those, monsieur, who think with the preachers that we should bear all insults patiently?"

"I am not, mademoiselle. The only light I have long seen in the darkness that oppresses us is the light that sleeps in the scabbard here, and if there are many more scenes like this, all the preaching of the ministers will not be able to smother the fire that burns in every man's breast." He stopped, feeling he had said too much, but her face was upturned and glowing, as when she sung that martial psalm.

"The women and children of France would have less to dread if more thought as you do," she sighed softly, as she turned away her head. Did she know what seeds of fire her looks and words were sowing?

The tumult was now at its height. The crowd moved heavily to and fro. On every side the people were pushing and trampling down each other. Women screamed, fainted, and were thrown down in the press. The quiet, orderly congregation seemed suddenly transformed into a beast, lashed to fury and deprived of reason. Captain La Roche braced himself against the pillar, and exerted all his strength to maintain a standing-place for himself and his companions. But even had not his crippled arm deprived him of half his strength, he might as well have tried to stay the waters of an incoming tide. Step by step he was forced to give way. All that he could do was to keep his charges from being knocked down and trampled on. He had thrown his arm around the young lady to prevent her from being torn from him, and her small hands were clasped upon his sleeve with a tenacity of trust that made him glad even then. She was very white, but still, in the dark, flashing eyes and firmly-folded lips there was no sign of weakness or despair.

"Mademoiselle is brave; she does not fear even now," he said joyously.

She gave him a quick look.

"I am not afraid—with you," she said softly.

The words were spoken with the frank confidence of a child. He dared not fancy that she felt, as he did, that it was sweet to be together, even there. Why, then, should the words move him so strangely? Why, at this moment of stress and danger, should a sudden breath from the past sweep over him, and he seem to be galloping along a mountain road in the gloom of a winter night, with a small head resting against his shoulder? Then he knew.

"La Petite," he whispered, smiling. "That was what the little child said the night I brought them in such hot haste up to the chateau; but why should I have thought of it here and now?"

He came suddenly back to the present. His companion was addressing him in a voice whose intense quietness made him realize how great was the danger to which she attracted his attention.

"We are being pressed towards the wall, Monsieur. If they force us against it, and the people keep on moving like this, we will be ground to powder."

He glanced over his shoulder and saw that she was right. Slowly but steadily they were being forced toward the side of the church, and the white, despairing faces and agonized shrieks of those who had already reached it, warned him what would be their fate if they too were borne thither. Anxiously the young man looked around him, for some chance of escape. For the first time his heart began to fail him. "What can I do, what shall I do?" he asked unconsciously, the cry of his heart rising involuntarily to his lips. A young man forcing his way past them in the crowd, turned and answered, as though the question had been addressed to him.

(To be continued.)