LADY RACHEL RUSSELL. From Bruce, The Book of Noble Englishwomen 111-22

The deeds of heroes have been the theme historians have loved to record, but the devotedness and gentleness of women they have usually passed by as of no moment, and unworthy the exercise of their pen. Their province they have considered to be the narration of the ambitious projects of kings, the crimes and intrigues of men seeking advancement and a name, by means honourable or the reverse; the horrors of war, the rise and fall of nations, the conflict of principles and opinions which have their embodiment in monarchical or popular institutions. Few, however, have been the life-deeds and names of women they have commemorated ; and those few, for the most part, are such as seem to have lost the finer qualities of womanhood, and are conspicuous by possessing attributes usually supposed to belong to the opposite and sterner sex.

Few women are to be compared with the wife of

the unfortunate Lord William Russell; and we may safely hope that the evil times in which she lived will never again return to curse this fair England of ours. In her mournful history are seen those noble characteristics which are usually alone to be found depicted in the pages of romance. In her they were actual and real,—the strength, and beauty, and glory of her life; they shine forth in her power of self-denial, in the entire devotion to the memory of her murdered lord, in her study for the well-being of their children, no less than in the persistent goodness of heart, the sincere religiousness of conduct, resplendent alike in her happiness and in her sorrow, which, as the ages glide away, live and brighter grow: time can never dim them.

How purely bright her story shines out amid the darkness of the reigns of the worthless Charles II. and his brother James ! That was an evil period of national transition from the cruel despot

ism of the Stuarts towards constitutional government.' Lady Russell was born in the year 1636, and related to the illustrious Ruvigny family, who were driven from France by religious persecution. She early! learned not only those grand truths that man is responsible for his faith to his God alone, and that it were better to die than live enslaved, but also to feel a perfect sympathy with the misfortunes even of strangers, and thus, as if in anticipation of her future, to know the sublimity of patient endurance. She was married in her eighteenth year to Lord Vaughan, the elder son of the Earl of Carberry, and became a widow at the end of two years. Shortly after the death of her husband, her father, a man of considerable note in his day, died, leaving his vast property to be shared by herself and sister, the Lady Elizabeth Noel.

In 1670, the widowed Lady Vaughan became the wife of Lord William Russell; and it is from this epoch that she is known to the world, sharing the fortunes of the ill-starred but lime-honoured patriot, the victim of a king destitute alike of virtue and a heart. Little is known of her previous years of married life, or of the character of Lord Vaughan; but very rarely indeed in this world, so replete with selfishness, is found such pure and unblemished love as that which Rachel Russell cherished for her

second spouse. It was love without mistrust or fear, a pure passion, without violence and without discord, and in harmony with all aspirations, human and divine, opening up to those who enjoy it a very paradise of delights. Tranquil, modest, and supremely virtuous ; loving ardently and innocently her husband, whose heart beat high with patriotic ardour, and in his hope that one day he should see his fatherland prosperous because free, and that it might be his glorious life-work to establish reasonable liberty on a lasting basis; with a truly Christian soul, warped by no bigotry, and exhibiting always an exalted charity to those who did not think as she thought,—Lady Russell appears before us with peculiar grandeur and nobility of character.

How tender, and yet how touching, are her letters, especially those of her earlier wedded life, sent to her husband during his occasional absences from home! Many of those earlier letters have been preserved. They are written in a negligent style and in homely phrase; there is no studied attempt at embellishment. But they evince a warm interest in all his concerns, and are filled with items of home news, such as the health and amusements of their children ; and little scraps of intelligence of the affairs of the day which had reached her in her retreat, such as the rumour of a great sea-fight off Solebay, in which the Dutch Admiral was vanquished with grievous loss; and now the Duke of York's marriage was broken off; and also little bits of chit-chat about the fashionable world of that time; the gossips, frivolities, and follies of the court of the King, who, according to the witty Rochester, never said a foolish thing, and never did a wise one, and upon whose word no man relied. How these same letters breathe her passionate love, carefulness, and apprehension for her absent lord; and also the fear that such complete joy as theirs could not but some day be overshadowed, as a fair, smiling sky is at times with black clouds!

In one of these charming letters she thus writes : ' What can I pray for, but that God, if it seem good to Him, may continue to me all these joys? And if He decide it otherwise, that He may give me strength to submit without murmuring to His wise arrangements and to His sovereign providence, keeping a grateful heart for those years of perfect happiness which I have already received from him. He knows better than we, at what moment we have obtained and enjoyed enough here below. That which I earnestly implore of His compassion is, that no matter which of us may first depart, the other may not despair, as if without hope of finding his beloved one again.

Let us joyfully hope that we may live together until a good old age ; if not, let us not fear but that God will sustain us in the trial with which He may afflict us. Let us daily pray to God that it may be so, and we shall fear nothing. Death is, it is true, the greatest evil, and which troubles our nature the most; let us overcome our immoderate fear of death, both for our beloved and ourselves ; we shall live then with tranquil hearts.'

Again she thus writes:' These are the pleasing moments, in absence, my dearest blessing, either to read something from you or be writing something to you ; yet I never do it but I am touched with a sensible regret that I cannot pour out in words whatmy heart is so bigwith, which is much more just to your dear self (in a passionate return of love and gratitude) than I can tell you. But it is not my talent, and so I hope not a necessary signification of the truth of it; at least not thought so by you.' The affection of this noble lady did not diminish as the years sped on; it burned clearer and steadier, purer and brighter.

Eleven years passed away since the first of the above extracts were written—years of domestic happiness and peace; but during those years the cloud had been gathering in their sky which was to break upon and overwhelm them with calamities. To all intelligent lovers of their country, the conduct H

of Charles n. had become insupportable. Men who had experienced the virtue and heroic spirit of Cromwell's age, sighed to see their monarch sunk so low as to become the pensioner of the French king; grieved to see, however he strove to hid it from other eyes, that he was popish at heart; the Parliament was corrupt and servile, the standing army a burden and terror.

Among others who looked out upon this disastrous and disgraceful state of things, were Lords Hollis and Russell. Seeing the very existence of the State perilled, and with the hope of remedying the evils, they entered into a clandestine correspondence with the French ambassador; but that their conductwas actuated solely by patriotic motives, Barillon's letters abundantly prove. The time had come, however, when thoughtful men found themselves compelled to ask serious questions: Was royal tyranny to have it all its own way? Were there no means by which it could be effectually resisted? Was the nation to remain prostrate or become free? The nobility of Russell's mind, his lofty and honourable principles, and his glowing patriotism, made him shrink with repugnance from the very thought of calling in foreign aid to slay the evils he, with righteous indignation, saw rampant round about him. But was the old spirit entirely

quelled, which had kindled so great a conflagration against the first Charles? If a conspiracy could be formed among some of the wealthier and more popular nobles, would it not succeed? To establish the Commonwealth again was out ot the question, but it were not difficult perhaps to form a strong and lasting constitutional government, by which a king should rule in harmony with the wishes of the people. Was there not everything to justify an armed resistance ? The Parliament had been corrupted, and the entire State was at the feet of a debauched ruler and his profligate women. Russell resolved these weighty matters — alas ! without consulting his noble wife, whose counsels, perhaps, had overborne his sterner purpose. But his resolution was lormed to overthrow the hated tyranny by the armed hand. Conspirators, like gamblers, calculate on a theory of probabilities entirely their own, but with too little regard to the chances of failure, and with too much placed upon those of success. That success was far from hopeless, may be assumed from the fact that noblemen such as Essex and Russell, who had so much to lose if the attempt miscarried, had not engaged in it but with a prospect of accomplishing their lofty purpose. No one at all acquainted with the character of these two illustrious men, could suppose that they were connected with the minor plot for the assassination of the King. That were to degrade them from patriots to assassins. In an evil hour, Russell, Essex, Algernon Sidney, and Hampden admitted Lord Howard to their counsels,—a man of a fickle nature and malignant heart, a hasty conspirator, and a ready traitor. Howard, fearing for his own safety if the conspiracy failed, or desirous to build his fortune upon the ruin of the confederates, secretly went to the King, at the apartments of the Duchess of Portsmouth, and informed him of all that the misplaced confidence of the patriots had permitted him to learn. Intelligence of the discovery was immediately conveyed to the conspirators. Lord Shaftesbury fled into Holland; Essex was placed in the Tower, where he speedily destroyed himself; Lord Russell was arrested, and taken before the Council. The King presided, keenly watching the noble prisoner, and already resolved that he should not escape, if it were possible to destroy him. The examination was long and perplexing, and at its close Russell was committed to the Tower. On entering that gloomy fortress—the dungeon home through weary years, and at last the grave of many a gallant heart—he said to his valet: ' They will have my life; the devil is unloosed.'l

Eighteen days passed away between Lord Russell's com

1 See Eclectic Review, 1856.

mittal to the Tower and his trial. During that period of suspense, Lady Russell was indefatigable in her endeavours to obtain all possible information relative to the trial, and to provide for .her husband's defence. Prompted by the tenderest affection for her lord, she was desirous of being present at the trial, that she might support him by her sympathy, and assist him by taking notes of the evidence; and she writes to him to obtain his permission, saying, 'Your friends, believing I can do you some service at your trial, I am extremely willing to try; my resolution will hold out—pray let yours. But it may be the Court will not let me; however, do you let me try. I think, however, to meet you at Richardson's, and then resolve. Your brother Ned will be with me." His consent was given; and when, on Friday, July 13, 1683, he was placed within the bar of the Old Bailey to undergo his trial for high treason, Lady Russell was close by him.

Pemberton, the Chief Justice of the Common Pleas, who presided, was a humane but a weak and vacillating man. The counsel for the Crown against the prisoner were Sawyer and Jeffreys, the latter of whom has earned an immortality of infamy, —' a man,1 as Lord Macaulay has described him, ' constitutionally prone to insolence and to the angry passions, the most consummate bully ever known in the profession.' After a few objections as to some legal points had been raised by Russell and overruled by the court, he asked for the use of pen, ink, and paper, and for permission to use such papers as he had with him; and these requests being granted, he, wishing to have notes of the evidence taken, asked whether he might have somebody to write for him, to help his memory. The attorney-general replied, 'Yes, my lord, one of your servants;1 and the Chief Justice added, 'Any of your servants shall assist you in writing anything you please for you.' ' My lord,' was the reply, ' my wife is here ready to do it.' ' If her ladyship will take the trouble, she can do so,' said the judge; and the thronging spectators could not refrain from expressions of sympathy and admiration, when the noble woman, calm, self-possessed, and majestic, seated herself by the side of the man she loved so tenderly and well, and whom she was so soon to lose. During the long and tedious trial, ever ready with wise suggestions, Lady Russell was at once her husband's secretary and counsellor ; but neither able selfdefence nor the more powerful eloquence of her tears could avert his impending doom. He was convicted and condemned, and warnedtoprepare forspeedy death.

After her lord's condemnation, Lady Russell, small as her

prospect was of success, spared no pains in her diligent labours to save his life. Her efforts were earnestly seconded by many of her friends, high in rank, and high in favour at Court, but without effect; the heart of the worthless and selfish King was not to be turned to mercy. Russell's father, the Earl of Bedford, offered the King, through the Duchess of Portsmouth, no less a sum than ;£ 100,000 if he would pardon his son; but Charles, by the advice, it is said, of his brother James, refused this tempting offer. The Earl then, in a more direct and public manner, told his sovereign, in an affecting petition, that he should think himself and wife and children much happier to be left with bread and water, than to lose his dearest son William for so foul a crime as treason; and he prayed God to incline his Majesty's heart to the prayers of an afflicted old father, and not bring his grey hairs with sorrow to the grave. But, after resisting the Earl's money, Charles was not likely to be moved by his prayers. Indeed, it appears quite certain that the King was afraid of his condemned captive; for when Lord Dartmouth represented to him that some regard was due to Lord Southampton's daughter and her children,— that to pardon Lord Russell would lay an eternal obligation on a very great family, while the taking of his life would never be for

given,—Charles replied, 'All that is as true as that, if I do not take his life, he will soon have mine.'

At the prayer of his sad old father and loving wife, Lord Russell himself petitioned the King, solemnly disclaiming the least thought against his Majesty's life, or the least design to change the monarchical constitution; and offering, if his life were spared, to spend the remainder of it wherever his Majesty might appoint, far from public life and politics, with which he would never meddle more. At the entreaties of his wife, he even wrote a letter to the Duke of York, who had never yet been known to pardon an injury. He assured his Royal Highness that he had never entertained any personal malice against him ; that in voting for the Bill of Exclusion, he had followed the imperativfi dictates of his conscience; but that, if the Duke would interfere on his behalf, he would engage never more to oppose him. The letter was presented to the Duchess of York by Lady Russell herself; but it produced not the least effect

Lady Russell thought that if her uncle, the Marquis de Ruvigny, came to London with the permission of Louis xiv., her husband might perhaps be pardoned. Charles, hearing of it, said to the French ambassador, ' I am well convinced that the King my brother would not advise me to pardon a man

who would have given me no quarter; I do not wish to prevent M. de Ruvigny from coming here, but my Lord Russell will be beheaded before he arrives. I owe this example both for my own safety and the good of my kingdom."

Finding all her efforts fruitless to save her lord's life, Lady Russell now laboured to obtain a delay of the execution of the sentence. Lady Ranelagh advised her to attempt to surprise the King, and herself in person intercede for a reprieve. The advice was followed; and gaining access to the King, she threw herself at his feet, and with streaming eyes and in a broken voice pleaded for her husband's life. The King was immoveable. Then she implored that, if his doom was irrevocably sealed, to grant him a short reprieve from Saturday to Monday; but even this slight favour was cruelly denied.

When Lady Russell informed her husband of the utter failure of all her efforts, even to secure him a short reprieve, he was somewhat moved, and observed that he thought such a thing was never denied to common felons ; and when his wife left the prison, he said to Dr. Burnet, ' I wish she would give over beating every bush, and running hither and thither for my preservation ; but when I consider that it will be some mitigation of her sorrow afterwards to refleet that she left nothing tindone that could have given any probable hope, I am satisfied.'

With all her desire to save her illustrious husband's life, she would not have it done at the expense of his conscience. WhenTillotson and Burneturged him to make the declaration that it was unlawful to resist the authority of the sovereign under whatever circumstances, holding out the hope that by so doing he would receive pardon, he said,' I have been of opinion, and I am not yet convinced of the opposite, that a free nation like this might defend their religion and liberties when an attempt was made to invade or take them away, though, under pretence and colour of law, if I have sinned in this, I hope God will not lay it to my charge, since He knows it was only a sin of ignorance.' And to this he adhered, and would not swerve, even though a contrarydeclaration should save his life; and of this determination Lady Russell entirely approved, for she agreed with him in the sentiment that the duty of submission to rulers is neither absolute nor unconditional.

Lord Russell often spoke of his noble wife to Burnet, and always in terms of highest praise, and above all things dreaded their final interview : ' The parting with her,' he said, 'is the greatest thing I have to do, for I am afraid she will hardly be able to bear it. The concern about preserving me fills her mind so now, that it in some

measure supports her; but when that shall be over, I fear the quickness of her spirits will work all within her.' ' I never saw his heart so near failing him,' writes Burnet, 'as when he spake of her. Sometimes I saw a tear in his eye, and he would turn about, and presently change the discourse.'

About five o'clock on the evening before his execution, Lady Russell brought to him their three children, that he might give them his blessing and take his last farewell of them. ' I saw him receive them,' says Burnet, 'with his ordinary serenity.' After conversing with them for some time, of their education and their future, he gave them his parting blessing, and dismissed them tenderly. When they had been removed, Lord Russell said to his wife : ' Remain to supper with me, and let us take our last earthly repast together.' During supper he was very cheerful, and spoke of the many illustrious men who had met death with calmness and fortitude. Then came the final parting : taking her by the hand, the condemned man said, ' This flesh you now feel, in a few hours must be cold.' He kissed her again and again, and yet again, and, as she turned to depart, he followed her with his eyes in silent agony. There had been no passionate cries and sobs, no bitter waitings of despair ; their grief was too deep for tears.

When his wife had dis

appeared, Lord Russell turned to Burnet, and said, ' Now the bitterness of death is past;' adding at intervals, in his grief, ' What a blessing she has been to me! God has shown me remarkable mercy in giving me such a wife — birth, fortune, great intellect, great piety, great love for me; it has been all that! And, above all, her conduct in this extremity ! It is a great consolation to me to leave my children in the hands of such a mother: she has promised me to take care of herself on their account, and she will do if

While the affectionate wife was doubtless spending her night in tears, her noble husband was preparing himself for death. To Dr. Burnet he said, 'What an immense change death must make in us! what new and marvellous scenes must open before our soul! I have heard it said of men who were born blind, that they were stricken with stupor when, after the cataract had fallen from their eyes, they were able to see; how great would this have been if the first object they had looked upon had been the rising sun!' At one o'clock he sank into a sound and refreshing sleep, from which his servant awoke him at four in the morning. He desired Burnet to convey to his wife his most affectionate remembrance, and to tell her that she would have a place in his last prayers. He then wound up his watch, saying, ' I have done with time;

eternity is at hand.' He was executed at Lincoln's Inn Fields on the morning of July 21,1683, in the forty-fourth year of his age. To the very last moment he exhibited an unwavering calmness and fortitude, a Christian stedfastness and heroism, which, combined with the principles for which he died, has gathered so magnificent a lustre round his name.

In this, the hour of her severest trial, Lady Russell doubtless never lacked the sympathy of her friends, which, with her repose in Divine Providence and her own noble nature, enabled her to bear up bravely beneath it all. It is not till two months after her lord's execution we gain any precise information concerning her state of mind, and this in a letter written to Dr. Fitzwilliam, an old and attached friend, in which she says : ' I need not tell you, good Doctor, how little capable I have been of such an exercise as this. You will soon find how unfit I am still for it, since my yet disordered thoughts can offer me no other than such words as express the deepest sorrow, and confused as my yet amazed mind is. But such men as you, and particularly one so much my friend, will, I know, bear with my weakness and compassionate my distress, as you have already done by your good letter and excellent prayer. You that knew us both, and how we lived, must allow I have just cause to bewail my loss. I know it is common to others to lose a friend; but to have lived with such a one, it may be questioned how few can glory in the like happiness, so, consequently, lament the like loss. Who can but shrink from such

a blow!

Lord, let me understand the reason of these dark and wounding providences, that I sink not under the discouragement of my own thoughts ! I know I have deserved my punishment, and will be silent under it; but yet secretly my heart mourns, too sadly, I fear, and cannot be comforted, because I have not the dear companion and sharer of all my joys and sorrows. I want him to talk with, to walk with, to eat and sleep with. All these things are irksome to me. The day unwelcome, and the night so too ; all company and meals I would avoid, if it might be : yet all this is, that I enjoy not the world in my own way ; and this sure hinders my comfort. When I see my children before me, I remember the pleasure he took in them: this makes my heart shrink. Can I regret his quitting a lesser good for a greater ? Oh ! if I did but stedfastly believe, I could not be dejected; for I will not injure myself to say, I offer my mind any inferior consolation to supply this loss. No; I most willingly forsake this world, — this vexatious, troublesome world,—in which I have no other business but to rid my soul of sin, secure by

faith and a good conscience my eternal interests, with patience and courage bear my eminent misfortune, and ever hereafter be above the smiles and frowns of fortune.'

But although her beloved lord was no longer by her side, she could still vindicate the purity of his character; and the occasion to do so was not long wanting. The dying speech of Lord Russell, printed and circulated an hour after his death, was a complete refutation of the charges upon which he had been condemned, and it served to alienate the minds of the people from the Government. The charge was therefore trumped up, that his dying speech had been written by another person, and not by the condemned. Lady Russell warmly contradicted this false charge in a letter addressed to the King himself; in which she informs him, that the things set down in her husband's speech were such as he had often talked over with her, and that the words written down were his, she could avow, as they were written by her desire. ' I do humbly beg your Majesty,' she concludes, 'would be so charitable as to believe that he, who in all his life was observed to act with the greatest clearness and sincerity, would not, at the point of death, do so disingenuous and false a thing as to deliver for his own what was not properly and expressly so."

Among those who sympathized with her in her deep distress was the well-known and celebrated John Howe, who wrote her a letter full of the most sweet and consolatory words, in which he pointed out to her that causes for joy were with her infinitely greater than causes for sorrow. ' You have infinitely more left than you have lost/ he says. ' Doth it need to be disputed, whether God be better and greater than man? or more to be valued, loved, and delighted in ? and whether an eternal relation be more considerable than a temporary one? The principal causes of your joy are immutable, such as no supervening thing can alter. You have lost a most pleasant, delectable, earthly relative. Doth the blessed God hereby cease to be the best and most excellent good? Is His nature changed ? His everlasting covenant reversed and annulled? which is ordered in all things and sure, and is to be all your salvation and all your desire, whether He make your house on earth to grow or not to grow.' Many other strong words the letter contained ; and although Howe did not attach his name to it, it was speedily discovered to be his ; and Lady Russell sent him a letter of thanks, promising that she would endeavour to follow the good advice hehad givenher.

Soon after her husband's death she removed to Woburn, and there resolved personally

to apply herself to the task of conducting the education of her children. And this resolution she carried out with her usual promptitude, energy, and perseverance ; and it is pleasing to think that her labours were not in vain, but were crowned with success. She appears to have been her accomplished daughters' sole in structress. Her chief aim in training them was to make them good rather than great. To the Earl of Rochester she said, ' I do assure your lordship I have much more care to make my children worthy to be great than to see them so. I will do what I can that they may deserve to be so, and then quietly wait what will follow.' And this intention is fully borne out by the contents of a long letter addressed to her children, discovered and published in 1850. It is full of tenderness, wisdom, and earnest exhortations to follow the noble pathway of duty. Faithfully indeed did she fulfil her husband's last behest—she lived for her children, laboured for their highest benefit, and, patiently waiting until she should join her beloved one in the home of eternal peace, she was permitted to see her posterity honoured, virtuous, and esteemed by the entire English nation, who, enjoying that freedom to obtain which Russell died, forgot not, in their regard for his children, what was due to their noble father.

However deep the grief Lady Russell experienced for her murdered lord, she did not allow it to paralyze her actions ; her forty years of widowhood were not passed in alienation from her kind, or in the circle of interests that her own home alone included. Her letters amply prove that she never became neglectful cf the duties incumbent upon her, in whatever shape they presented themselves. When the revocation of the Edict of Nantes involved so many thousand Huguenots in misery, peril, and even death, her heart went out in emotions of tenderest pity to the persecuted ; and to those who were fortunate enough to escape and find a safe asylum in England, she was not backward in extending a helping hand, even engaging one of them as a tutor for her son.

She lived to a great age, and during her long life she saw many changes. She saw the

Stuarts hurled from the throne they had disgraced, never again to find a seat thereon ; she saw the reign of William and Mary, and that of Anne; she saw the accession of the House of Hanover. Surviving the loss of two of her children, she finally expired at Southampton House, on the zgth September 1723, in the arms of the last, who was then Duchess of Devonshire. She died, beloved and honoured by all men, not alone for her great historic name, not alone for the sake of her illustrious husband, the martyr of freedom, but for her gentleness of soul, her sublime devotion to her husband's memory, and her religion pure and undefiled. England has been rich in heroic women, but surely npne so commands our admiration, so kindles our veneration, so exalts us in thinking it was our nation she graced, as Rachel Wriothesley, wife of Lord William RussclL