

Renée (born again)

Duchess of Ferrara

Courageous Protestant Princess

of the

REFORMATION IN ITALY AND FRANCE

Excerpts from the book: *Sketches of Protestantism in Italy*
by Robert Baird, D.D. (Publ. 1847).

And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens (Hebr. *princesses*) thy nursing mothers.....(Isaiah 49:23).

In many respects, the history of the spread of the evangelical opinions at Ferrara is the most interesting portion of any work which treats of the Reformation in Italy. Under the government of its dukes, of the illustrious house of Este, this city had long vied with Florence in the encouragement which it gave to learning and the fine arts. Situated in a plain, monotonous, and insalubrious country, in the valley of the Po, its natural advantages never could compare with those of Florence, or even Bologna. But what was wanting in this respect, was compensated by the superior wisdom and paternal spirit of several of the dukes of that house, who took delight in having learned men at their court. In the year 1527, Ercole, (or Hercules, as he is more commonly called by English writers), Duke of Ferrara, married the celebrated Renée, or Renata, of France. This excellent princess had become instructed in the evangelical doctrine before she left her native land, and gave decided evidence that her heart was deeply interested in it. It was under her auspices, that, for several years, Ferrara was a *City of Refuge*, if we may so speak, to unfortunate scholars, and to persecuted Protestants, not only of France but also of Italy. John Calvin spent some time at the court of Ferrara, in his younger years, under the assumed name of Charles d'Espeville, and was the instrument of confirming the Duchess in the doctrines of the Reformation. And almost all the distinguished Protestants of Italy visited Ferrara, at one period or other, and passed more or less time there. Among those whom we may mention here, were Fulvio Peregrino Morata, from Mantua, the father of the celebrated Olympia Morata, and Celia Secundo Curio, of Turin.¹

¹ Calvin was actually at the court of Ferrara in 1536. Henceforth developed a life-long ministry of correspondence from him to the Duchess, the result of which she became more and more emboldened to make a public stand for the Reformation. Also, sheltered in Ferrara 1535-36 under her care was that bright poet of the French Reformation, Clement Marot, who translated the Psalms into French verse. She appointed Marot as her secretary. So impressed was he with the Duchess that he wrote a poem in the form of a letter to his friends, which was a play on her name "Renée", meaning "born again".

Most of the distinguished Protestants who spent a considerable length of time at Ferrara, were either connected with the University, which was then in the zenith of its fame, or employed as tutors in the family of the Duke.

It is not possible to ascertain the number of those in Ferrara who embraced the New opinions, or whether they worshipped in public, in churches or chapels, or held their assemblies in private houses. The latter is most likely to have been the case. It would seem that there were sometimes several Protestant preachers among those who, in this city, received the true gospel, and professed it more or less openly. Whatever was the extent to which the Reformed opinions gained ground at Ferrara, it is certain that it was owing to the decided patronage and encouragement of the Duchess Renée.

This distinguished woman was the second daughter of Louis XII, who may be pronounced, on many accounts, one of the best monarchs France has ever had; who, when urged to renew the crusades against the poor Waldenses, in Dauphiny, refused to do it, saying: "*They are better Christians than we are.*"

Renée was born at Blois, in the year 1510. Her mother was Anne, of Brittany, widow of Charles VIII. Scarcely had she reached the age of three years when she lost her mother, and at five she lost her father. She then had to depend upon the care of her cousin and brother-in-law, Francis I, who ascended the throne in 1515. At an early age she was affianced to one prince and then another, as policy dictated; first to Ferdinand of Austria; then to Charles (afterwards Charles V Emperor of Germany); then to the king of England; then to Joachim Marquis of Brandenburg; and lastly to Ercole I, Duke of Ferrara, whom, as we have stated, she married in 1527.

History informs us that this lady had few claims on the score of personal beauty.² But she possessed what was far more valuable—a strong intellect, a sound judgment, and great nobleness of soul, united with much tenderness of heart, and a remarkable amiable spirit. At an early age, she displayed a striking fondness for those studies which are of an ennobling character. She became quite proficient in the exact as well as in the moral sciences. She was well acquainted with the Latin and Greek languages. And she spoke Italian with the same purity and elegance that she did the French.

Such a woman was Renée of France, whom God raised up to protect, for a season, the persecuted Protestants in Italy; and then, when her enemies had rendered it impossible for her to give further aid to the bleeding and prostrate cause of Truth in that country, she was permitted to return to her native land, and there offer an asy-

² Two portraits of this lady available indicate a basically plain visage, but depending on the accuracy of the artists, the one portrait, representing a woman in about early thirties seems to indicate a certain radiant but peaceful beauty of spirit which gives her quite a striking appearance. (So. see 1 Peter 3:3-5 concerning inward and outward adornment.) According to the author Christopher Hare: "*Men and Women of the Italian Reformation*" (London 1914) Renée suffered from a certain "slight deformity", of what nature, we are not told. (Ed.).

lum to such of the poor persecuted Protestants of France as gathered around the walls of the Castle in which she spent her declining years.

It was the misfortune of this excellent woman to be married³ to a man every way unworthy of her. Ercole I was a bigoted Roman Catholic; a man of little spirit, who, notwithstanding the injuries and indignities which Rome had heaped upon his father, was ever ready to cringe at the feet of the reigning pontiff. Indeed, he had neither the desire nor the ability to extricate his neck from the yoke which his house had so long worn. During the first years of his marriage, he seemed to have some affection for his excellent wife. But after the death of his father, and his own accession to the ducal throne, it began to be manifest that he cared little for her. He complied with the first solicitation to enter into a league with the emperor and the pope, by which he bound himself to remove from his court all the French who were suspected of heresy. Soon afterwards he went further, and used all the influence he had with his wife to persuade her to renounce the Protestant religion, and return to the bosom of the Roman Catholic Church.

Nor was the storm slow in reaching Ferrara. In 1545, the pope exhorted the ecclesiastical authorities of that city to great diligence in investigating the sentiments of those who were suspected with heresy, and, having brought their inquiries to a definite judgment, to transmit the same to Rome. Spies were, about this time, sent forth into all parts of Italy, who insinuated themselves into the acquaintance and company of all classes, and transferred to the Vatican the information which they collected. By this means many excellent persons were entrapped in Ferrara. Upon the death of Paul III, Cardinal De Monte ascended the papal throne, under the name of Julius III. He was a man of a persecuting as well as voluptuous spirit. In 1550, the Reformed church, which had existed for a number of years at Ferrara, was dispersed; many of its members were thrown into prison, and one of their preachers, a man of great piety, was put to death.

The Duchess Renée did all she could to shield the little flock of the faithful against these cruel proceedings. But her influence at Ferrara was fast departing. Her husband, who was incapable of appreciating either her noble character, or the elevated motives from which she acted in adhering to the Protestant faith, did all that he could to induce her to return to the Roman Catholic Church—instigated and urged on by the pope. Failing to accomplish this by persuasion, he resorted to harsh measures. He had long ceased to manifest any regard for the person, and had given himself up to a life of criminal and most shameful neglect of his duties as a husband.

The influence of her family was brought to bear upon her, to turn her away from the Truth. Her nephew, Henry II King of France, sent the Inquisitor Oritz, who had

³ “misfortune”..... “to be married...” refers here to the fact that Renée’s marriage was an “arranged” marriage, done for reasons thought to be politically/materially advantageous and “fixed” by parents or guardians over the heads of the couple concerned. Such was commonplace amongst the nobility of those days throughout Europe.

been with him some time as his confessor, to Ferrara, with instructions to labour for the recovery of his 'only aunt' to the Roman Catholic Church, and, if arguments failed, to cause all necessary severity to be employed to effect the object. But all his efforts were to no purpose. The daughter of Louis XII was neither to be persuaded nor frightened into an abandonment of what she conscientiously believed to be the true gospel. One indignity after another was heaped upon her by her husband. . Those of her attendants who were suspected of participating in the new opinions were sent away. Even her children were at length forbidden to approach her. Her intimate friend, the instructress and companion of her daughter Anne, the devoted Olympia Morata had, some time previous to this, been compelled to leave the palace, upon the death of her father, to take care of her mother and the younger branches of her family, and had become exposed to much harsh treatment from the court. From this she was relieved by her marriage with Dr. Gunthler, a German medical student, who took her into Germany upon his return to that country.

But neither the bad treatment of her husband, nor the sophistry and persuasion of the Inquisitor Ortiz, availed to cause the Duchess to return to the fold of Rome; though it would seem that, for the sake of her children, she at last made some unimportant concessions.

In the year 1558 died Ercole, Duke of Ferrara. His character has been sufficiently exhibited in the few sentences in which we have spoken of him. Notwithstanding his immoralities, he was honoured by Paul IV with the title of *Defender of the Church*. His zeal for Rome was still further rewarded by the dethronement of his grandson, and the annexation of the dukedom of Ferrara to the States of the Church.

Upon the death of her husband Ercole, the Duchess Renée left Ferrara and returned to France, where her nephew, Henry II, was still on the throne, and took up her abode at the Castle of Montargis, a small and ancient city, some sixty miles south-east of Paris. There she spent the remainder of her life. There she made an open profession of the Protestant religion; and during the sixteen years which she lived after her return from Italy, she devoted all her energies and her resources to the succour of the poor persecuted Protestants of her native land. In doing this she had, of course, to encounter all the hatred of the fanatical priest-party of the kingdom, headed by the Guises, one of whom, was the husband of her daughter Anne. In the year 1560, Francis II, a mere youth, without experience, and wholly under the domination of a faction of bigots, who had succeeded his father, Henry II, commenced the persecution of the Protestants on an extensive scale. The houses of those whose names were on the lists of the proscribed were pillaged and torn down, and many persons were put to death. The Prince of Condé, a distinguished Protestant, was cast into prison at Orleans, and his sister-in-law, the Countess of Roze, was thrown into that of St. Germain-en-Laye. Renée hastened to Orleans to save Condé. Meeting the Duke of Guise, her son-in-law, she upbraided him with his perfidy, and boldly said, that, "if she had been there, she would have prevented what had been done; whoever gave the king such advice has deceived him; this would

will bleed a long time hereafter, and so much the more as no one has ever become fond of shedding the blood of France, without finding evil in so doing."

Not long afterwards, the Duke of Guise sent an armed force, under the conduct of Jean de Souches-Malicorne to Montargis, to cause the Duchess Renée to deliver up the unfortunate Protestants who had taken refuge in that place. In the onset, a number of these people were killed, their houses were burned and then razed to the ground. The Duchess retired to the Castle, into which all fled that could. De Souches threatened to advance his cannon, and batter the fortress to the ground. But he received this bold answer from the courageous Renée:

"Consider well what you do; know that no one has the right to command me but the king himself; and that, if you come hither, I will be the first to mount the breach, where I shall see if you have the audacity to kill the daughter of a king, who desires only to protect her subjects, and whose death heaven and earth will be bound to avenge upon you and all your line, even to your children that are in their cradles."

This noble answer, when reported to the Duke of Guise, had the effect to arrest his threats. A short time after, he fell by the hand of a fanatical Protestant of the name of Poltrot. This event plunged the Duchess into the deepest grief. She deplored the civil war which had been kindled by the determination of the Roman Catholics, headed by the government, to destroy by force the new sect, whose only crime was, that they held to a religion founded on the gospel, which inculcated the practice of good works instead of vain superstitions, and taught men to rely for salvation upon the merits and intercession of a glorious and only Saviour. This religion she desired to see propagated by reason and persuasion, and not by force. But, alas, those were not the times in which the voice of humanity was likely to be heard. And all that this excellent woman could do was to exert herself in favour of the Protestants and their pastors as far as her influence could shield them. She maintained a constant correspondence with the chief men among them, until her death, which occurred at Montargis on the 12th of June, 1575. To the last she was a consistent and devoted Protestant; and ever gave proof, in her abhorrence of Rome, that she was a worthy daughter of him who caused to be inscribed on the medal which was struck on the occasion of the Council of Lyons—the Council which proclaimed the liberties of the Gallican Church -*Perdam Babylonis nomen*.⁴

The memory of this excellent princess is revered by the Protestants of France, to this day, and with good reason; for she was an ornament to the religion which they profess.

⁴ Meaning: "I will destroy the name of Babylon" - i.e. Rome. The die in which this medal was struck was still to be seen at the Royal Museum in Paris in 1847 or thereabouts when Robert Baird wrote this book.