Traits and Stories of the Huguenots

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I have always been interested in the conversation of any one who could tell me anything about the Huguenots; and, little by little, I have picked up many fragments of information respecting them. I will just recur to the well−known fact, that five years after Henry the Fourth's formal abjuration of the Protestant faith, in fifteen hundred and ninety−three, he secured to the French Protestants their religious liberty by the Edict of Nantes. His unworthy son, however, Louis the Thirteenth, refused them the privileges which had been granted to them by this act; and, when reminded of the claims they had, if the promises of Henry the Third and Henry the Fourth were to be regarded, he answered that "the first−named monarch feared them, and the latter loved them; but he neither feared nor loved them." The extermination of the Huguenots was a favourite project with Cardinal Richelieu, and it was at his instigation that the second siege of Rochelle was undertaken—known even to the most careless student of history for the horrors of famine which the besieged endured. Miserably disappointed as they were at the failure of the looked−for assistance from England, the mayor of the town, Guiton, rejected the conditions of peace which Cardinal Richelieu offered: namely, that they would raze their fortifications to the ground, and suffer the Catholics to enter. But there was a traitorous faction in the town; and, on Guiton's rejection of the terms, this faction collected in one night a crowd of women, and children, and aged persons, and drove them beyond the lines; they were useless, and yet they ate food. Driven out from the beloved city, tottering, faint, and weary, they were fired at by the enemy; and the survivors came pleading back to the walls of Rochelle, pleading for a quiet shelter to die in, even if their death were caused by hunger. When two−thirds of the inhabitants had perished; when the survivors were insufficient to bury their dead; when ghastly corpses outnumbered the living—miserable, glorious Rochelle, stronghold of the Huguenots, opened its gates to receive the Roman Catholic Cardinal, who celebrated mass in the church of St. Marguerite, once the beloved sanctuary of Protestant worship. As we cling to the memory of the dead, so did the Huguenots remember Rochelle. Years—long years of suffering—gone by, a village sprang up, not twenty miles from New York, and the name of that village was New Rochelle; and the old men told with tears of the suffering their parents had undergone when they were little children, far away across the sea, in the "pleasant" land of France.

Richelieu was otherwise occupied after this second siege of Rochelle, and had to put his schemes for the extermination of the Huguenots on one side. So they lived in a kind of trembling, uncertain peace during the remainder of the reign of Louis the Thirteenth. But they strove to avert persecution by untiring submission. It was not until sixteen hundred and eighty−three that the Huguenots of the south of France resolved to profess their religion, and refuse any longer to be registered among those of the Roman Catholic faith; to he martyrs rather than apostates or hypocrites. On an appointed Sabbath, the old deserted Huguenot churches were re−opened; nay, those in ruins, of which but a few stones remained to tell the tale of having once been holy ground, were peopled with attentive hearers, listening to the word of God as preached by reformed ministers. Languedoc, the Cevennes, Dauphiny, seemed alive with Huguenots—even as the Highlands were, at the chieftain's call, alive with armed men, whose tartans had been hidden but a moment before in the harmonious and blending colours of the heather.

Dragonnades took place, and cruelties were perpetrated which it is as well, for the honour of human nature, should be forgotten. Twenty−four thousand conversions were announced to Le Grand Louis, who fully believed in them. The more far−seeing Madame de Maintenon hinted at her doubts in the famous speech, "Even if the fathers are hypocrites, the children will be Catholics."

And then came the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. A multitude of weak reasons were alleged, as is generally the case where there is not one that is really good, or presentable: such as that the Edict was never meant to be perpetual; that (by the blessing of Heaven and the dragonnades) the Huguenots had returned to the true faith, therefore the Edict was useless—a mere matter of form,

As a "mere matter of form," some penalties were decreed against the professors of the extinct heresy. Every

Huguenot place of worship was to be destroyed; every minister who refused to conform was to be sent to the H™pitaux de For ats at Marseilles and at Valance. If he had been noted for his zeal he was to be considered "obstinate," and sent to slavery for life in such of the West−Indian islands as belonged to the French. The children of Huguenot parents were to be taken from them by force, and educated by the Roman Catholic monks or nuns. These are but a few of the enactments contained in the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

And now come in some of the traditions which I have heard and collected.

A friend of mine, a descendant from some of the Huguenots who succeeded in emigrating to England, has told me the following particulars of her great−great−grandmother's escape. This lady's father was a Norman farmer, or rather small landed proprietor. His name was Lefebvre; he had two sons, grown men, stout and true; able to protect themselves, and choose their own line of conduct. But he had also one little daughter, Magdalen, the child of his old age, and the darling of his house, keeping it alive and glad with her innocent prattle. His small estate was far away from any large town, with its corn−fields and orchards surrounding the old ancestral house. There was plenty always in it; and though the wife was an invalid, there was always a sober cheerfulness present, to give a charm to the abundance.

The family Lefebvre lived almost entirely on the produce of the estate, and had little need for much communication with their nearest neighbours, with whom, however, as kindly well−meaning people, they were on good terms, although they differed in their religion. In those days, coffee was scarcely known, even in large cities; honey supplied the place of sugar; and for the pottage, the bouilli, the vegetables, the salad, the fruit, the garden, farm, and orchards of the Lefebvres was all−sufficient. The woollen cloth was spun by the men of the house on winter's evenings, standing by the great wheel, and carefully and slowly turning it to secure evenness of thread. The women took charge of the linen, gathering and drying, and beating the bad−smelling hemp, the ugliest crop that grew about the farm; and reserving the delicate blue−flowered flax for the fine thread needed for the daughter's trousseau; for as soon as a woman−child was born, the mother, lying too faint to work, smiled as she planned the web of dainty linen, which was to be woven at Rouen, out of the flaxen thread of gossamer fineness, to be spun by no hand, as you may guess, but that mother's own. And the farm maidens took pride in the store of sheets and table napery which they were to have a share in preparing for the future wedding of the little baby, sleeping serene in her warm cot by her mother's side. Such being the self−sufficient habits of the Norman farmers, it was no wonder that, in the eventful year of sixteen hundred and eighty−five, Lefebvre remained ignorant for many days of that Revocation which was stirring the whole souls of his co−religionists. But there was to be a cattle fair at Avranches, and he needed a barren cow to fatten up and salt for the winter's provision. Accordingly, the large−boned Norman horse was accoutred, summer as it was, with all its paraphernalia of high−peaked wooden saddle, blue sheep−skin, scarlet worsted fringe and tassels; and the farmer Lefebvre, slightly stiff in his limbs after sixty winters, got on from the horse−block by the stable wall, his little daughter Magdalen nodding and kissing her hand as he rode away. When he arrived at the fair in the great place before the cathedral in Avranches, he was struck with the absence of many of those who were united to him by the bond of their common persecuted religion; and on the faces of the Huguenot farmers who were there was an expression of gloom and sadness. In answer to his inquiries, he learnt for the first time of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. He and his sons could sacrifice anything—would be proud of martyrdom, if need were—but the clause which cut him to the heart was that which threatened that his pretty, innocent sweet Magdalen might be taken from him and consigned to the teachings of a convent. A convent, to the Huguenots' excited prejudices, implied a place of dissolute morals, as well as of idolatrous doctrine.

Poor Farmer Lefebvre thought no more of the cow he went to purchase; the life and death—nay, the salvation or damnation—of his darling seemed to him to depend on the speed with which he could reach his home, and take measures for her safety. What these were to be he could not tell in this moment of bewildered terror; for, even while he watched the stable−boy at the inn arranging his horse's gear, without daring to help him, for fear his early departure and undue haste might excite suspicion in the malignant faces he saw gathering about him—even while he trembled with impatience, his daughter might be carried away out of his sight for ever and ever. He mounted and spurred the old horse; but the road was hilly, and the steed had not had his accustomed rest, and was poorly fed, according to the habit of the country; and, at last, he almost stood still at the foot of every piece of rising ground. Farmer Lefebvre dismounted, and ran by the horse's side up every hill, pulling him along, and encouraging his flagging speed by every conceivable noise, meant to be cheerful, though the tears were fast

running down the old man's cheeks. He was almost sick with the revulsion of his fears, when he saw Magdalen sitting out in the sun, playing with the "fromages" of the mallow−plant, which are such a delight to Norman children. He got off his horse, which found its accustomed way into the stable. He kissed Magdalen over and over again, the tears coming down his cheeks like rain. And then he went in to tell his wife—his poor invalid wife. She received the news more tranquilly than he had done. Long illness had deadened the joys and fears of this world to her. She could even think and suggest. "That night a fishing−smack was to sail from Granville to the Channel Islands. Some of the people, who had called at the Lefebvre farm on their way to Avranches, had told her of ventures they were making, in sending over apples and pears to be sold in Jersey, where the orchard crops had failed. The captain was a friend of one of her absent sons: for his sake" −−

"But we must part from her—from Magdalen, the apple of our eyes. And she—she has never left her home before, never been away from us—who will take care of her? Marie, I say, who is to take care of the precious child?" And the old man was choked with his sobs. Then his wife made answer, and said—

"God will take care of our precious child, and keep her safe from harm, till we two—or you, at least, dear husband − can leave this accursed land. Or, if we cannot follow her, she will be safe for heaven; whereas, if she stays here to be taken to the terrible convent, hell will be her portion, and we shall never see her again—never!"

So they were stilled by their faith into sufficient composure to plan for the little girl. The old horse was again to be harnessed and put into the cart, and if any spying Romanist looked into the cart, what would they see but straw and a new mattress rolled up, and peeping out of a sackcloth covering? The mother blessed her child, with a full conviction that she should never see her again. The father went with her to Granville. On the way the only relief he had was caring for her comfort in her strange imprisonment. He stroked her cheeks and smoothed her hair with his labour−hardened fingers, and coaxed her to eat the food her mother had prepared. In the evening her feet were cold; he took off his warm flannel jacket to wrap them in. Whether it was that chill coming on the heat of the excited day, or whether the fatigue and grief broke down the old man utterly, no one can say. The child Magdalen was safely extricated from her hiding−place at the Quai at Granville, and smuggled on board of the fishing−smack, with her great chest of clothes and half−collected trousseau; the captain took her safe to Jersey, and willing friends received her eventually in London. But the father—moaning to himself, "If I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved;" saying that pitiful sentence over and over again, as if the repetition could charm away the deep sense of woe—went home, and took to his bed and died; nor did the mother remain long after him.

One of these Lefebvre sons was the grandfather of the Duke of Dantzic, one of Napoleon's marshals. The little daughter's descendants, though not very numerous, are scattered over England, and one of them, as I have said, is the lady who told me this, and many other particulars relating to the exiled Huguenots.

At first the rigorous decrees of the Revocation were principally enforced against the ministers of religion. They were all required to leave Paris at forty−eight hours' notice, under severe penalties for disobedience. Some of the most distinguished among them were ignominiously forced to leave the country; but the expulsion of these ministers was followed by the emigration of the more faithful among their people. In Languedoc this was especially the case; whole congregations followed their pastors; and France was being rapidly drained of the more thoughtful and intelligent of the Huguenots (who, as a people, had distinguished themselves in manufacture and commerce), when the king's minister took the alarm, and prohibited emigration, under pain of imprisonment for life; imprisonment for life including abandonment to the tender mercies of the priests. Here again I may relate an anecdote told me by my friend:—A husband and wife attempted to escape separately from some town in Britanny; the wife succeeded and reached England, where she anxiously awaited her husband. The husband was arrested in the attempt, and imprisoned. The priest alone was allowed to visit him; and, after vainly using argument to endeavour to persuade him to renounce his obnoxious religion, the priest, with cruel zeal, had recourse to physical torture. There was a room in the prison with an iron floor, and no seat, nor means of support or rest; into this room the poor Huguenot was introduced. The iron flooring was gradually heated (one remembers the gouty gentleman whose cure was effected by a similar process in "Sandford and Merton;" but there the heat was not carried up to torture, as it was in the Huguenot's case); still the brave man was faithful. The process was repeated; all in vain. The flesh on the soles of his feet was burnt off, and he was a cripple for life; but, cripple or sound, dead or alive, a Huguenot he remained. And by−and−by they grew weary of their useless cruelty, and the poor man was allowed to hobble about on crutches. How it was that be obtained his liberty at last, my informant could not tell. He only knew that, after years of imprisonment and torture, a poor grey cripple was seen wandering

about the streets of London, making vain inquiries for his wife in his broken English, as little understood by most as the Moorish maiden's cry for "Gilbert, Gilbert." Some one at last directed him to a coffee−house near Soho Square, kept by an emigrant, who thrived upon the art, even then national, of making good coffee. It was the resort of the Huguenots, many of whom by this time had turned their intelligence to good account in busy, commercial England.

To this coffee−house the poor cripple hied himself; but no one knew of his wife; she might be alive, or she might be dead; it seemed as if her name had vanished from the earth. In the corner sat a pedlar, listening to everything but saying nothing. He had come to London to lay in a stock of wares for his rounds. Now the three harbours of the French emigrants were Norwich, where they established the manufacture of Norwich crape; Spitalfields, in London, where they embarked in the silk trade; and Canterbury, where a colony of them carried on one or two delicate employments, such as jewellery, wax−bleaching, The pedlar took Canterbury in his way, and sought among the French residents for a woman who might correspond to the missing wife. She was there, earning her livelihood as a milliner, and believing her husband to be either a galley−slave, or dead long since in some of the terrible prisons. But, on hearing the pedlar's tale, she set off at once to London, and found her poor crippled husband, who lived many years afterwards in Canterbury, supported by his wife's exertions.

Another Huguenot couple determined to emigrate. They could disguise themselves; but their baby? If they were seen passing through the gates of the town in which they lived, with a child, they would instantly be arrested, suspected Huguenots as they were. Their expedient was to wrap the baby into a formless bundle, to one end of which was attached a string; and then, taking advantage of the deep gutter which runs in the centre of so many old streets in French towns, they placed the baby in this hollow, close to one of the gates, after dusk. The gendarme came out to open the gate to them. They were suddenly summoned to see a sick relation, they said; they were known to have an infant child, which no Huguenot mother would willingly leave behind to be brought up by Papists. So the sentinel concluded that they were not going to emigrate, at least this time, and locking the great town−gates behind them, he reentered his little guard−room. "Now quick! quick! the string under the gate! Catch it with your hook stick! There, in the shadow! There! Thank God! the baby is safe; it has not cried! Pray God the sleeping draught be not too strong!" It was not too strong. Father, mother, and babe escaped to England; and their descendants may be reading this very paper.

England, Holland, and the Protestant states of Germany were the places of refuge for the Norman and Breton Protestants. From the south of France escape was more difficult. Algerine pirates infested the Mediterranean, and the small vessels in which many of the Huguenots embarked from the southern ports were an easy prey. There were Huguenot slaves in Algiers and Tripoli for years after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Most Catholic Spain caught some of the fugitives, who were welcomed by the Spanish Inquisition with a different kind of greeting from that which the wise, far−seeing William the Third of England bestowed on such of them as sought English shelter after his accession. We will return to the condition of the English Huguenots presently. First, let us follow the fortunes of those French Protestants who sent a letter to the State of Massachusetts (among whose historical papers it is still extant) giving an account of the persecutions to which they were exposed, and the distress they were undergoing, stating the wish of many of them to emigrate to America, and asking how far they might have privileges allowed them for following out their pursuit of agriculture. What answer was returned may be guessed from the fact that a tract of land comprising about eleven thousand acres at Oxford, near the present town of Worcester, Massachusetts, was granted to thirty Huguenots, who were invited to come over and settle there. The invitation came like a sudden summons to a land of hope across the Atlantic. There was no time for preparations; these might excite suspicion; they left the "pot boiling on the fire" (to use the expression of one of their descendants), and carried no clothes with them but what they wore. The New Englanders had too lately escaped from religious persecution themselves not to welcome and shelter and clothe these poor refugees when they once arrived at Boston. The little French colony at Oxford was called a plantation, and Gabriel Bernon, a descendant of a knightly name in Froissart, a Protestant merchant of Rochelle, was appointed undertaker for this settlement. They sent for a French Protestant minister, and assigned to him a salary of forty pounds a year. They bent themselves assiduously to the task of cultivating the half−cleared land, on the borders of which lay the dark forest, among which the Indians prowled and lurked ready to spring upon the unguarded households. To protect themselves from this creeping deadly enemy the French built a fort, traces of which yet remain. But on the murder of the Johnson family the French dared no longer remain on the bloody spot, although more than ten acres of

ground were in garden cultivation around the fort; and, long afterwards, those who told in hushed, awe−struck voices of the Johnson murder, could point to the rose−hushes, the apple and pear trees yet standing in the Frenchmen's deserted gardens. Mrs. Johnson was a sister of Andrew Sigourney, one of the first Huguenots who came over. He saved his sister's life by dragging her by main force through a back door, while the Indians massacred her children, and shot down her husband at his own threshold. To preserve her life was but a cruel kindness.

Gabriel Bernon lived to a patriarchal age, in spite of his early sufferings in Prance and the wild Indian cries of revenge around his home in Massachusetts. He died rich and prosperous. He had kissed Queen Anne's hand, and become intimate with some of the English nobility, such as Lord Archdale, the Quaker Governor of Carolina, who had lands and governments in the American States. The descendants of the Huguenot refugees repaid in part their debt of gratitude to Massachusetts in various ways during the War of Independence; one, Gabriel Manigault, by advancing a large loan to further the objects of it. Indeed, three of the nine presidents of the old Congress which conducted the United States through the revolutionary war were descendants of the French Protestant refugees. General Francis Marion, who fought bravely under Washington, was of Huguenot descent. In fact, both in England and France, the Huguenot refugees showed themselves temperate, industrious, thoughtful, and intelligent people, full of good principle and strength of character. But all this is implied in the one circumstance that they suffered and emigrated to secure the rights of conscience.

In the State of New York they fondly called their plantation or settlement by the name of the precious city which had been their stronghold, and where they had suffered so much. New Rochelle was built on the shore of Long Island Sound, twenty−three miles from New York. On the Saturday afternoons the inhabitants of New Rochelle harnessed their horses to their carts, to convey the women and little ones, and the men in the prime of life walked all the distance to New York, camping out in their carts in the environs of the city through the night, till the bell summoned them on Sunday morning to service in the old Church du Saint Esprit. In the same way they returned on Sunday evening. The old longing for home, recorded in Allan Cunningham's ballad −−

"It's hame, and it's hame, hame fain would I be; Oh, hame, hame, hame, to my ain countree!" −−

clung to the breasts, and caused singular melancholy in some of them. There was one old man who went every day down to the seashore, to look and gaze his fill towards the beautiful cruel land where most of his life had been passed. With his face to the east—his eyes strained as if by force of longing looks he could see the far−distant France − he said his morning prayers and sang one of Cl‡ment Marot's hymns. There had been an edition of the Psalms of David put into French rhyme ("Pseaumes de David, mis en Rime fran oise, par Cl‡ment Marot et Th‡odore de Bˆze"), published in as small a form as possible in order that the book might be concealed in their bosoms if the Huguenots were surprised in their worship while they lived in France.

Nor were Oxford and New Rochelle the only settlements of the Huguenots in the United States. Further south again they were welcomed, and found resting−places in Virginia and South Carolina.

I now return to the Huguenots in England. Even during James the Second's reign, collections were made for the refugees; and, in the reign of his successor, fifteen thousand pounds were voted by Parliament "to be distributed among persons of quality, and all such as, by age or infirmity, were unable to support themselves." There are still, or were, not many years ago, a few survivors of the old Huguenot stock, who go, on quarter−day, to claim their small benefit from this fund at the Treasury; and, doubtless, at the time it was granted there were many friendless and helpless to whom the little pensions were inestimable boons. But the greater part were active, strong men, full of good sense and practical talent; and they preferred taking advantage of the national good−will in a more independent form. Their descendants bear honoured names among us. Sir Samuel Romilly, Mrs. Austin, and Miss Harriet Martineau are three of those that come most prominently before me as I write; but each of these names is suggestive of others in the same families worthy of note. Sir Samuel Romilly's ancestors came from the south of France, where the paternal estate fell to a distant relation rather than to the son, because the former was a Catholic, while the latter had preferred a foreign country with "freedom to worship God." In Sir Samuel Romilly's account of his father and grandfather, it is easy to detect the southern character predominating. Most affectionate, impulsive, generous, carried away by transports of anger and of grief, tender and true in all his relationships—the reader does not easily forget the father of Sir Samuel Romilly, with his fond adoption of Montaigne's idea, "playing on a flute by the side of his daughter's bed, in order to waken her in the morning." No wonder he himself was so beloved! But there was much more demonstration of affection in all these French households, if what I

have gathered from their descendants be correct, than we English should ever dare to manifest.

French was the language still spoken among themselves sixty and seventy years after their ancestors had quitted France. In the Romilly family, the father established it as a rule that French should be always spoken on a Sunday. Forty years later, the lady to whom I have so often alluded was living, an orphan child with two maiden aunts, in the heart of London city. They always spoke French. English was the foreign language; and a certain pride was cultivated in the little damsel's mind by the fact of her being reminded every now and then that she was a little French girl, bound to be polite, gentle, and attentive in manners; to stand till her elders gave her leave to sit down; to curtsey on entering or leaving a room. She attended her relations to the early market near Spitalfields, where many herbs, not in general use in England, and some "weeds," were habitually brought by the market−women for the use of the French people. Burnet, chervil, dandelion, were amongst the number, in order to form the salads which were a principal dish at meals. There were still hereditary schools in the neighbourhood, kept by descendants of the first refugees who established them, and to which the Huguenot families still sent their children. A kind of correspondence was occasionally kept up with the unseen and distant relations in France—third or fourth cousins, it might be. As was to be expected, such correspondence languished and died by slow degrees. But tales of their ancestor's sufferings and escapes beguiled the long winter evenings. Though far away from France, though cast off by her a hundred years before, the gentle old ladies, who had lived all their lives in London, considered France as their country, and England as a strange land. Upstairs, too, was a great chest—the very chest Madame Lefebvre had had packed to accompany her in her flight and escape in the mattress. The stores her fond mother had provided for her trousseau were not yet exhausted, though she slept in her grave; and out of them her little orphan descendant was dressed; and, when the quaintness of the pattern made the child shrink from putting on so peculiar a dress, she was asked, "Are you not a little French girl? You ought to be proud of wearing a French print—there are none like it in England." In all this, her relations and their circle seem to have differed from the refugee friends of old Mr. Romilly, who, we are told, "desired nothing less than to preserve the memory of their origin; and their chapels were therefore ill−attended. A large, uncouth room, the avenues to which were narrow courts and dirty alleys, . . . with irregular unpainted pews and dusty unplastered walls; a congregation consisting principally of some strange−looking old women scattered here and there," Probably these old ladies looked strange to the child, who recorded these early impressions in after−life, because they clung with fond pride to the dress of their ancestors, and decked themselves out in the rich grotesque raiment which had formed part of their mother's trousseau. At any rate, there certainly was a little colony in the heart of the city, at the end of the last century, who took pride in their descent from the suffering Huguenots, who mustered up relics of the old homes and the old times in Normandy or Languedoc. A sword wielded by some great−grandfather in the wars of the League; a gold whistle, such as hung ever ready at the master's girdle before bells were known in houses, or ready to summon out−of−door labourers; some of the very ornaments sold at the famous curiosity−shop at Warwick for ladies to hang at their chatelaines, within this last ten years, were brought over by the flying Huguenots. And there were precious Bibles, secured by silver clasps and corners; strangely−wrought silver spoons, the handle of which enclosed the bowl; a travelling−case, containing a gold knife, spoon, and fork, and a crystal goblet, on which the coat−of−arms was engraved in gold. All these, and many other relics, tell of the affluence and refinement the refugees left behind for the sake of their religion.

There is yet an hospital (or rather great almshouse) for aged people of French descent somewhere near the City Road, which is supported by the proceeds of land bequeathed, I believe, by some of the first refugees, who were prosperous in trade after settling in England. But it has lost much of its distinctive national character. Fifty or sixty years ago, a visitor might have heard the inmates of this hospital chattering away in antiquated French. Now they speak English, for the majority of their ancestors in four generations have been English, and probably some of them do not know a word of French. Each inmate has a comfortable bedroom, a small annuity for clothes, and sits and has meals in a public dining−room. As a little amusing mark of deference to the land of their founders, I may mention that a Mrs. Stephens, who was admitted within the last thirty years, became Madame St. Etienne as soon as she entered the hospital.

I have now told all I know about the Huguenots. I pass the mark to some one else.