



SOME SECRETS OF A FRENCH KITCHEN.

HOW shall I introduce Babette—that cleverest and shrewdest of Bretonnes, who had been my aunt's "bonne" when she was a little swaddled-up baby, and is still my aunt's bonne, now that she is widowed and grey-haired?

A very autocrat is old Babette, ruling with a spoon of iron in the little kitchen, where a subdued maiden, with a head cropped like a boy's, nimbly obeys her behests—peels onions, plucks fowls, and prepares salad. Nobody but Babette must put her hand to the real business of cooking: she it is who does all the buying, bustling, scolding, stewing, roasting, and ordering required in that small household; and as the result is the perfection of comfort, my aunt sits passively by,

and offers no objection—indeed, it would not much matter if she did, things would go on very much the same, I fancy. Nothing pleased me better when a child than to slip away to the tidy kitchen, with its wonderful array of shining brass, and its clumsy little charcoal stove, where the fire was so carefully hidden.

Only last summer I again visited that out-of-the-way French town. How strangely unchanged it all seemed: the brown foreign-looking cattle, staring with soft meditative eyes at the cool wavelets rippling softly over their feet; the fleecy white sheep dozing under the pollards; the blue-capped shepherd piping some endless tune, or humming softly in praise of his "Margot, hey hi, Margot, ma mie;" the crowd of chattering washerwomen coming and going, with their piles of wet linen; the hundreds of swallows fluttering in and out and about the tall moss-covered gables which crowd about the banks, or nestle in the shades of the old *château* perched on the dark hillside—altogether forming as pretty and peaceful a picture as a tired city dame could wish to see.

Within doors, my tall aunt had bent and aged, and looked up to me now; but Babette seemed all unaltered: the stiff frills of her tall, quaint-looking cap stuck out just as trimly when I ran down into the well-remembered kitchen—that had grown strangely smaller and darker; and she was busy stuffing a fowl with chestnuts, just as she had been doing twenty years ago, when I last saw her. There was another subdued, cropped handmaid, chopping onions; another black Minette, always under one's feet; a newer and brighter stove; but the same shrewd, faithful Babette—still doing the buying, bustling, scolding, and cooking to perfection. After the first week or two I often found myself straying from the upper rooms, and taking my place, as of old, at Babette's elbow—not now for the sake of the tit-bits, but to profit a little from her art in making nice things, a few of which I noted for the benefit of those at home, to whom they might be new and welcome.

To begin with, there are certain delicious little cake-loaves, called, I believe, "tortolong"—at least, that was Babette's name for them—which I have never met with in England, but which will be remembered gratefully by many of our friends who have resided in France. They are exceedingly light and delicate, and usually made their appearance in the form of linked rings or figures of 8, with the early morning's coffee or noonday chocolate.

I believe there are several inferior members of this particular section of the "petits pains" family; but here is Babette's own method of making the very best kind—and I do not see any reason why Jane or Betsy should not be able, with a little practice and a few failures, to turn out as tempting a batch now and then for the benefit of those who enjoy such dainty, light things, in preference to slices from our very solid and satisfying British half-quartern, or somewhat unwholesome penny roll:—Babette set to work with, for instance, three pounds of flour, half a pound of butter, six ounces of powdered sugar, and a dozen eggs; mix-

ing the whole most thoroughly, and not forgetting to scatter about a "suspicion" of salt (those were her own words). I must leave you to find out what quantity this represented. When she had stirred it all to her heart's content—mind, this was not done very soon—she proceeded to roll the dough into a long, thin, sausage-like shape, and to cut it into lengths of about four inches; these she bent into rings, which she linked two and two together, neatly joining the ends by folding over and pressing them lightly into one. Then, when some half a dozen were ready for the oven, as I thought, Babette coolly flung them into a large stew-pan half full of boiling water, which stood ready on the fire; they at once sank out of sight, but presently reappeared floating on the bubbling surface. She at once whisked them out with a flat spoon, and popped them into a bowl of cold water, where she left them to soak while she went on rolling, twisting, and linking more rings and eights, which, one at a time, were dropped into the boiling stew-pan, then in cold water, where they were allowed to remain in soak. "But, Babette, why don't you finish them?" I asked, seeing her turning away presently as though her task was finished. The *bonne* explained that they were finished as far as to-day went. To-morrow, before madame's breakfast-time, she would take them out of their cold bath, drain them as dry as possible in a sieve, put them on that thin sheet of iron which slipped so easily into the oven, and let them bake until they were of that pretty light brown which madame admired so much. The oven must be very hot, and she (Babette) must watch closely to see that they puffed and grew big and light enough; for if at all overdone or burned, they would be detestable and unrepresentable—a disgrace which, according to the energetic old lady's account, she could never survive for one little moment.

Another thing which Babette made to perfection was the sweet-smelling, delicate, and tempting "brioche"—that nearest French representative of the English bun and the Scotch cookie, but a refined representative, being neither puffy, brown, nor indigestible. They are beginning to take their place in the best English confectioners'; on the Continent they are found everywhere, and much favoured by our countrymen, who generally know a good and wholesome thing when they get it—and why they should not get this particularly good thing at home as well as abroad, at their own tables as well as in a shop, I cannot quite see. At any rate, I will do my best to make this excellent little cake-loaf better known, by telling you how old Babette proceeded when she meant to give us brioches for breakfast or luncheon next day; as the dough, when mixed, has to stand at least twelve hours before baking.

First she provided herself with, let us say, one pound and a half of flour, one pound of good butter—a thing which Babette was always most particular about—twelve ounces of sugar, rather over one ounce of German yeast, a little salt, and about ten eggs. She spread about a fourth of the flour upon her board, and, having dissolved the yeast in enough tepid water to mix the flour into a paste, she poured this into it and

kneaded it thoroughly into a stiff ball of dough, which she then scored with a knife and placed in a large pan, which, having covered, she put in a warm place to ferment, or, as the bakers call it, to set the sponge, while she proceeded to mix the rest of the ingredients. The remaining flour was now spread on her board, and a well or hollow place made in it, into which she put the sugar and salt, mixed together in a little cold water; then the butter and eggs followed the rest, to be stirred or worked together by Babette's strong fist, who rubbed and rolled and passed the whole most carefully through her hand, that no ugly lumps should remain unnoticed to tell of a careless cook. By the time all this was sufficiently mixed, the "sponge," which had risen and spread and puffed up to some three times its original size, was pronounced ready for use, and spread on the paste, with which it was carefully mixed and kneaded, then the whole lump placed on to a cloth spread in a large wooden bowl, over which a handful of flour had been shaken, more flour scattered on the top, and the whole being covered with a towel, the bowl was set in a cool corner, and left to work as it would. Our ancient *bonne* usually made this her evening's employment; and as she was an early riser, the sweet little loaves were ready for us by breakfast-time, although the dough had first to be again turned out of its protecting cloth and bowl to have flour shaken over and under it, and to be then doubled and folded, and pressed and rolled, and knuckled into all kinds of forms and shapes; then to be put back into its bowl, and left to its own devices for some three hours; after which Babette again found time and energy to double and fold, and knead and knuckle, until the paste was full of small bubbles, and felt like a large piece of soft white elastic padding, and then was ready to be fashioned into ordinary double-ball-shaped brioche of every-day life, or fashioned into rings, twists, or fancy shapes, and brushed over with water and egg, so that when baked they should assume that light brown, tempting colour which it was the old lady's pride to see them assume.

The one particular kind of holiday brioche which the youngsters loved most to patronise, almost resembled a very choice sort of Bath bun, and was made with several additions to the things already mentioned. There were cream and candied peel, a wine-glassful of orange-flower water, and chopped almonds, or plum or cherry kernels, the whole mixed up with the brioche paste, which was then divided into little pats and put into small buttered tins or round moulds of cardboard, stuck about with chopped-up lump sugar, and carefully baked in a rather slow oven. I would advise you to try these if you want something really nice for tea, or as Babette used to bring us one at odd times—with a strong cup of *café au lait*, without sugar, that we might the better taste their flavour.

Our skilful Babette excelled in making other things besides "*petits pains*," especially those creamy and delightful, though, alas! delusive, lumps of melting sweetness known as meringues—some deliciously creamy, others the rich brown of the chocolate of which

they were composed. A good many folks who read this may know them, but for the benefit of those who do not, and who may like to turn out a lovely dishful to deck a supper-table, and delight their friends' palates, I will keep at Babette's elbow, and tell all about them; the more as, though it may require practice, it is neither a difficult nor expensive treat.

First she made about a pint of clear white sugar syrup, boiling it slowly till it began to bubble; then she tested it by rubbing a sweet spoonful against the side of the pan, where, at the proper moment, it turned quite white. During this time I had been vigorously whisking the whites of half a dozen eggs in a basin; this she now took hastily from me, and poured its contents sharply into the boiling sugar—explaining, while she stirred vigorously, that if she lost any time over it, the sugar would cake and powder, and the whole thing prove a failure. Having mixed the whole into a stiff batter or paste, she proceeded to lay large egg-shaped spoonfuls of it on to strips of paper laid on a long, narrow board of hard wood, which she first well wetted—explaining that otherwise the meringues would dry and become hard before they were done. When she had spooned out a long row of these half-eggs at about an inch distance from each other, she sifted some finely-powdered white sugar over the whole; and as soon as that had a little dissolved, placed the board in a rather cool oven, and watched them rise—the outside shining a little, and becoming slightly set and clouded with brown, but the inside remaining moist, as becomes properly-cooked meringues. In a few moments they were slipped out, stripped off the papers with a broad knife, a pat of preserve or jelly popped on the flat side so as to stick it fast to another half, and so form a complete egg-shaped meringue, which, piled up with others on a large silver plate, was to form one of the prettiest ornaments of my aunt's birthday suppers.

And now for the chocolate meringues, which Babette treated us to occasionally. They were rather more troublesome to make, I fancy, but being also more uncommon, and much favoured by those who like chocolate (which I do not), I made a note of the *bonne's* proceedings when she was preparing these rich confections.

Half a dozen eggs, one pound of sugar, one quart of milk, six table-spoonfuls of corn-flour, a spoonful of vanilla, and five ounces of chocolate; that is the list—now to see what she did with them. First of all she broke up the chocolate, put it into a pan, and, having nearly covered it with milk, put it in a place where it could heat very gently; as it dissolved she stirred it into a smooth paste, adding the milk gradually, and stirring until it arrived at scalding point. Then, having mixed the corn-flour with two or three spoonfuls of milk, she poured it slowly in, keeping on the stirring until the whole was of the consistence of very thick boiled custard; then she set it aside to cool a little before putting in the vanilla and turning the rich brown, creamy stuff into small glass dishes, which she about half filled. Having allowed them to cool, she then covered the contents with a layer of

white meringue batter, made with the remaining sugar and eggs—the sugar being boiled to a syrup, the eggs beaten up and dropped suddenly into it, as already described; this should be poured on so as to stand up in little snowy peaks, which can be very slightly browned and set, by holding a hot shovel over them.

As I have said, Babette made sweets as well as bread and cakes—one, a special French goodie, I must mention. Perhaps you will know it when I tell you it is called “nougat,” of which there are several sorts, but this was our especial favourite, and our *bonne's* recipe, as nearly as I can remember it, was as follows:—twenty ounces of almonds (she preferred pistachio-nuts), half a pound of sugar, half a pound of honey, one glass of orange-flower water, and three whites of eggs; she also used some white wafer-paper, as I will explain presently.

Having allowed the sugar to boil, the melted honey was poured into it, together with the orange-flower water, and well stirred. Then all this was added by degrees to the well-whipped whites of egg, which were formed in a large bowl; stirring it quickly until it formed a paste, which was decided to be of a sufficient consistence when a spoonful dropped into quite cold water might be easily snapped and broken in half. The almonds or pistachios were then added, and having been well stirred in the paste, it was spread out, forming a thick and sweet cake, on the wafer-paper, a sheet of which was also placed on the top; over this was laid some clean letter-paper, and the whole pressed down flat by a tin or baking-plate, and left to cool, after which it was cut into tempting slabs of about two inches square, and put in tin boxes and out of our reach for the time being.

But even above the nougat let me give honourable mention to those delicious little “*cache-cachets*,” to which I must call your attention, though I hardly know if I should call them sweets or cakes. They were made with half a pound of sweet almonds and half an ounce of bitter almonds, pounded together in a mortar with a little water. With this was mixed about half a pound of sugar; then a sheet of clean white paper was laid

on the tin, and white wafer-paper on that, and small spoonfuls of the mixture laid in round dabs on it. In the centre of each little cake, a preserved cherry, damson, or plum was placed, and fine sugar shaken over all. Then they were for a little time baked in a moderate oven, Babette's sharp eyes watching that they should only slightly brown; then taken out, allowed to cool, the paper closely cut round them, and then, alas! like the too tempting nougats, they generally disappeared from my view.

But before leaving thee, my Babette, let me immortalise thy gingerbread—such gingerbread! I give it a sigh of regret, for I never tasted better in France, where the commerce is so great that we are told in Paris alone 1,200 people—400 of whom are women—get their living by making this much-esteemed “*pain-d'épice*,” to be sent on its travels to the young folk—ay, and the old folk too—all over the country.

But for her favourites Babette made something much nicer than the generality of such things. It was not hard and brick-like—not to say suggestive of glue, as is the ordinary English gingerbread—neither was it spongy and tasteless, like the every-day gingerbread of French life. It was—well, it was—“Babette's gingerbread,” and this was how she made it: out of a great tin can she poured perhaps six pounds of rich, clear, brown treacle into a big pan; then she trotted off to the dairy and fetched a pound and a half or two pounds of sweet fresh butter, which she melted almost, not quite though, and then poured into the pan of treacle; to this she added two ounces of ground ginger, a quarter of a pound of carraway-seed, a whole half-pound of candied peel chopped up ever so small, some angelica, half a dozen beaten-up eggs, and as much, or rather as little, flour as would work the whole into a stiff paste, to be made into round cakes, or large slabs, afterwards to be cut into oblong brown bricks, and set round with split half-almonds or strips of peel. These were then baked in a brisk oven, and set by in a cool place, where they never remained long—that is, if I were anywhere near. That was gingerbread indeed.



SHEILA.

BY FREDERICK E. WEATHERLY.

THE King of Borva sits alone,
 For Sheila has departed;
 His bonny bird has southward flown,
 And left him broken-hearted;
 No more he sees her dear blue eyes,
 In his her soft hand lying,
 'Tis not her voice that now replies,
 'Tis but the breezes sighing.
 “Sheila, my own little daughter,
 My own where'er thou art!
 Oh! come across the water,
 To thy father's lonely heart.”

And Sheila in the far-off town
 Sits cold and broken-hearted;
 Life's golden leaves are turning brown,
 She dreams of days departed.
 Her father's heart, her rocky home,
 Oh! how they call and greet her;
 And he is there, beside the foam,
 With arms outstretched to meet her.
 “Sheila, my own little daughter,
 My own where'er thou art!
 Come back across the water,
 To thy father's loving heart.”