



A STORY FOR CHILDREN.



HERE was once a villainous King of France, named Louis the Eleventh, and a gentle Dauphin, who was called Charles, awaiting the time when he became Charles the Eighth.

Ordinarily the superstitious and sickly old King reigned, trembled, and suffered, invisible behind the thick walls of his castle of Plessis-lès-Tours; but towards the middle of the year 1483 he went on a pilgrimage, dragging himself to Notre Dame de Cléry, near Orleans, supported by Tristan l'Hermitte, his executioner; Coictier, his physician; and François de Paule, his confessor; for the old tyrant went in great fear of men, of death, and of God.

One memory of blood, among a thousand—that of the death of Jacques d'Armagnac, Duc de Nemours—tormented his soul. That great vassal had paid with his head for an attempt at rebellion against his suzerain. So far, only justice had been done; but the cruel conqueror had compelled the three young children to be witnesses of the execution of their father, and, from that time, he had repented of this luxury of vengeance. He repented, but he did not atone. By a strange inconsistency, common to evil-minded men, remorse in him awakened no pity, and at the very moment when he was placing the Madonna between him and the phantom of Nemours, one of the innocent sons of the late duke was languishing to death in a dungeon at Plessis-lès-Tours.

A terrible and mysterious dwelling-place was that castle: its vestibules dark with priests, its courtyards glittering with soldiers, its chapels ever ablaze with candles, its drawbridges always raised, gave to it the double aspect of a citadel and a convent. People talked in whispers, walking on tip-toe, in its great halls, as in a cemetery; captives by hundreds, indeed, lay groaning and buried from the world in its vaults—some for having spoken of the King, some for having spoken of the people—but by far the larger number for nothing. Every stone in the castle might be looked upon as the gravestone of a living prisoner; and it was there that, idle, with an adventurous spirit, an ardent soul, the Dauphin Charles, then in his twelfth year, was being reared.

Poor King's son! He sought in vain to rest his eyes from the horrors surrounding him. A fresh and green forest waved at the foot of the castle; but from the oaks there hung, not acorns, but the bodies of men. The Loire flowed by, brightly and gaily—but every night the King's justice troubled and reddened its waters. So passed his early youth, wearily and painfully.

One day, however, his looks and gestures betrayed a less passive state of weariness.

The noonday angelus had already been rung, and his morning meal, consisting in accordance with his orders, of light pastry and sweetmeats, stood untouched on a table, which the young prince rapped impatiently. Every now and then he rose from his seat, panting with hope, inquietude, and called:—

"Blanchette! Blanchette! why don't you come? The breakfast is melting in the sun, and if you don't soon come, the flies will eat up your share!"

And as the forgetful convive returned no answer to his appeal, the poor amphitryon continued to tap the floor with his feet and become more and more uneasy. Suddenly

a slight sound in the tapestry made him start; he turned his head, uttered a cry, and sank back in his chair, filled with joy, and murmuring a sigh of immense relief:—

"At last!"

No doubt it will be imagined that the "Blanchette" so much desired was some noble lady, a sister or cousin of the young prince. She was nothing of the sort. Blanchette was simply a little white mouse, as her name indicated—so lively that, on seeing her run across the floor, she might have been mistaken for a flitting sunbeam, and so gentle she might have found mercy even with a hungry cat.

Charles caressed his pretty visitor, gazing at her with delight while she nibbled a biscuit in his hand; but then remembering that he owed it to his dignity to scold her a bit, he said to her in a pleasantly grave tone:—

"Now, mademoiselle, will you tell me what you think I ought to say to such conduct? Here, I treat you like a duchess; I have forbidden my door to my father's barber and favourite, Olivier le Daim, because his cat-like face is displeasing to you; Bec-d'Or, my beautiful falcon, has died with jealousy; and every evening, ungrateful that you are, you leave me, to race about the fields like a mere vagabond mouse! Where do you go in this way, heedless of your own danger and of my anxiety? Where do you go?—tell me; I insist on knowing!"

Pressing though the question was, poor

Blanchette, as may be imagined, returned no answer to it; but, with a look of sadness, fixing her intelligent eyes on those of the scolding lad, she turned over the pages of the book of the Gospels, which was lying upon the table, and placed her rosy paws upon these words: "Visit the prisoners."

Charles was surprised and confused, as happens to presumptuous persons when they receive a lesson at the moment when they



"HE SANK BACK IN HIS CHAIR."

think they are giving one. For more than once he had heard tell of strange things concerning the inhabitants of the underground vaults of Plessis-lès-Tours, and more than once he had meditated making a pious pilgrimage to the prison of young Armagnac, whose age and birth more particularly excited his curiosity and sympathy; but the terror with which his father inspired him had hitherto restrained him, and now he reproached himself for his timidity as a crime. He resolved to expiate it that very evening.

A few minutes after the curfew had sounded, he slipped from his tower, and, followed by a young valet carrying a basket containing bread, wine, and fruits, he proceeded into one of the interior courtyards of the castle.

One of the company of the Scotch guard, pacing in the moonlight along the walls, challenged him in a hoarse and threatening voice:—

“Who goes there?”

before tried the power of this formula, which reminded the people of old Louis XI.—soldiers, courtiers, gaolers, or valets—that the boyish pout of a Dauphin might suddenly change into the terrible anger of a King.

The Dauphin and the page, guided by the gaoler, ventured, not without some little hesitation, into a damp and dismal vault and down a spiral flight of stairs, every slimy step endangering their foothold. All three proceeded by the fitful light of a resinous torch, now beaten by the blind wings of a startled bat, now nearly extinguished by water dropping from the roof. At length a sound, vague at first, but growing more and more distinct—a sound of sighs and moans—told them that they had reached their journey's end. The guide retired, and Charles fell back in horror at the sight which met his eyes.

Imagine an iron cage, fixed to the wall, so low and narrow that every movement of the prisoner within it must have caused him a thrill of pain, in which his sleep must have



“WHO GOES THERE?”

“Charles Dauphin.”

“He cannot pass.”

But Charles approached the officer of the watch and whispered a few words in his ear.

“If it is so, go on, Monseigneur,” replied the soldier, visibly disconcerted. “Go on, and God protect you, for if you are discovered, I shall be hung!”

Persisting in his purpose, the young Dauphin applied the same means successfully with the keeper of the prison; the magic words which he employed being simply these: “The king is *very* ill.” He had

been a nightmare!—and the captive was a mere boy, seventeen years of age, but so emaciated and pale as to appear, at most, not more than twelve years old.

Scarcely arrived at adolescence, the unfortunate Duc de Nemours had suffered so much that his tenacious longevity had filled his executioners with wonderment, and made the gaoler who brought him his daily allowance of water and black bread pause on the threshold of his dungeon, and ask himself whether the grave-digger would not have been a fitter visitor.



To open a conversation with the prisoner, the Dauphin searched for tender words, but found only tears. Nemours understood this silent greeting, and responded to it by a smile of gratitude; then both conversed through the iron bars.

When the one timidly announced himself as the son of Louis XI., the other could not repress a movement of astonishment and alarm; but this repellent feeling speedily gave way before the frank speech and guileless face of the Dauphin. Ten years a stranger to what was passing in the outer world, the recluse at first asked his noble visitor questions as *naïve* as those of anchorites to rare travellers in a desert island: "Are they still building cities?—are marriages still being celebrated?" But an unforeseen circumstance gave a new and more pointed turn to the conversation, in which a third person intervened without the least hesitation or apology.

The new-comer was no other than the Dauphin's table-companion, the successful rival of Bec-d'Or—Blanchette, since her name must be given. Passing through the bars, by favour of her tiny bulk, she climbed up the chained legs and arms of Nemours, and lavished on the prisoner caresses as fond, or even fonder, than those obtained by the prince at an earlier hour of the same day.

"So you know Blanchette?" said Charles, surprised and nettled.

"Know her!" replied Nemours; "for ten years she has been my mouse, my friend, my sister!"

"The little ingrate! This very morning, at the castle, she shared with me my breakfast biscuits!"

"For ten years, Monseigneur, she has come to my dungeon every day to share with me my black bread."

"Indeed!" murmured the young prince.

But his boyish anger quickly melted before the cunning smile of Nemours.

"I do not think, Monseigneur, you will do me the honour to break a lance with me for the bright eyes of a mouse. It would be impossible for me, at this moment, to accept your challenge. See!"

And he held up before the eyes of his rival his arms, bending under the weight of their chains.

Then broke forth an original and affecting discussion between the son of Louis XI. and the prisoner, each declaring himself to be more unfortunate than the other. One made his adversary feel the damp walls and bars of his prison; the other described the

atmosphere of weariness and the living chain of courtiers and spies by which he was weighed down; one displayed his bodily torture, the other his bleeding heart; and at the end of their discussion, both arrived at the same conclusion:—

"Therefore, you see, Nemours—therefore, you see, Monseigneur—I need Blanchette to help me to live and suffer."

But as this was no settlement of the question, they agreed to take the object of their discussion as arbiter between them.

"Now then, mademoiselle," said the Dauphin to Blanchette, "say frankly to which of us you wish to belong."

Thus appealed to, the little white mouse went from one to the other caressingly, and then, stopping midway between them, looked



"SO YOU KNOW BLANCHETTE?"



at each in turn, her sparkling little eyes seeming to say:—

“To both, my children!”

Here it must be explained that Blanchette, as her intelligence, tender-heartedness, and gentle manners may have suggested, was something more than an ordinary mouse; she was, in fact, a fairy—named, for her compassionateness, The Fairy of Tears—who, for a slight offence given to a malignant sister fairy, had been transformed into her present shape for one hundred years, ninety-nine of which she had already passed, going from palace to prison (often prisons both), and from sorrow to sorrow, pitilessly gnawing to pieces all the bad books she came upon (there are, alas, no such mice nowadays!) and even munching up death-sentences in the pocket of Tristan, the headsman!

It was not long before that worthy companion of Louis XI. returned to the castle and his master with him; and with them came back distrust and terror. The prince, however, did not discontinue his visits to the prisoner; in fact, they became from day to day longer and more frequent, and even the gaoler—a fact which would have awakened suspicion in any mind less ingenuous than the young prince’s—from having obeyed him reluctantly and with fear and trembling, seemed now to encourage these interviews and provoke them by his complaisance.

One evening he and the poor young duke were talking as usual, Charles with his elbows resting on the ledge of the window in the door of the dungeon, while Blanchette flitted backwards and forwards between them, distributing her caresses with edifying partiality. The conversation, which had for some time been desultory, turned at last to the subject of Charles’s projects for his future reign.

“What are you going to do, when you become King?” gaily asked the prisoner, who, older in years, and more still in misfortune, exhibited in the conversation a marked superiority over his young friend.

“A pretty question to ask me! I shall make war.”

Nemours smiled sadly.

“Yes,” continued the Dauphin, tapping his forehead, “I have long had my plan formed, here. I shall, first, go and conquer Italy: Italy, you see, Nemours, is a wonderful country, where the streets are full of music, the bushes covered with oranges, and where there are as many churches as there are dwelling-houses. I shall keep Italy for myself; then, in passing, I shall take Constantinople for my friend André Paléologue; and,

Vol. viii.—14.

lastly, with the help of God, I count on being able to deliver the Holy Sepulchre.”

“And after you have done all that?” asked the young duke, mischievously.

“Oh!—after that—after that,” repeated the Dauphin, slightly embarrassed, “I shall have time, perhaps, to conquer some other kingdoms, if there are any others.”

“And will taking so much care of your glory make you neglect your people?—will you do nothing for *them*, Monseigneur?”

“Certainly I will! In the first place, before setting off, I’ll give Olivier and Tristan to the Evil One, if he will have them; and I will abolish executioners.” And as Blanchette frisked more joyously and more caressingly than ever at these words, he added, gaily: “I’ll do something for you also, Blanchette; I’ll suppress cats.”

Both burst into laughter at this sally. But their gaiety was brief as the passage of a flash of lightning. They stopped suddenly and looked at each other in terror, for they had seemed to hear other laughter—altogether too unlike their own to be an echo—ring from out the shadow beside them. They presently recovered from their alarm, however.

“Hope and courage!” said the Dauphin to the young duke, holding out his hand in sign of leave-taking.

The poor captive raised himself to press this consoling hand; but his limbs, stiffened by long torture, served ill his pious desire; he uttered a cry of pain and sank back upon his stool.

“Oh, God! when shall I be King?” the young prince could not refrain from crying, as his eyes filled with tears.

“Soon, please God!” said Nemours.

“Never!” exclaimed a third speaker, until then invisible. And Louis XI. appeared, followed by Tristan, Coictier, and some others of his familiars. By the light of a lantern, which one of them had held hidden beneath his mantle, the Dauphin beheld the terrible old man move with slow and feeble steps towards him like a spectre, muttering these words, broken by an irrepressible cough:—

“Ah! gallant damoiseau, you turn hungry eyes towards my crown, while I still live! Pious and provident son, you are looking forward to my funeral! Wretch, your sword!”

A fit of coughing more violent than the others interrupted him.

Charles offered no resistance; only, with a gesture of indignation, he repulsed Tristan, who moved forward to disarm him, and him-



self handed his sword to one of the gentlemen present. Presently, on a sign from the King, he was led away by the guards.

Before quitting the dungeon, Louis XI. cast a look of hate towards the cage of his victim, then in the ear of his creature, Tristan, he whispered a few words.

"I understand," said the headsman; "an end is to be made of it. Leave it to me. At midnight——" and he completed by pantomime the sense of a phrase already but too clear.

The King and his attendants then quitted the dungeon and, amid the fading sounds of their retreating footsteps, Nemours could long distinguish the voice of the nearly dead despot, coughing, scolding, and gasping out sentences of death with his last breath.

Poor Nemours! — that gentle beam of Heaven, called hope, had penetrated his dungeon, then, only to make the darkness deeper that followed it!

"To be seventeen," he thought; "to have a brother like the Dauphin Charles, and a sister like Blanchette, and to die!"

And in each vague and distant stroke of the great castle clock, which was measuring out his last hours, he heard these words distinctly: "Die! — you must die!"

Then, presently, down the long spiral stairs leading to the vaults came the sounds of hurrying footsteps. A thin band of light filled the narrow space between the floor and the bottom of his dungeon door — escaped from the lantern of his executioners, no doubt!

Then, feeling this his last hour was surely come, he hastily set down upon the ground the fairy-mouse which he had been holding to his heart, and cried:—

"Farewell, my little mouse. Get away quickly and hide yourself well, or they will kill you also."

Meanwhile the approaching sounds had grown louder, the streak of light became wider, the door of the dungeon turned on its hinges, and then, believing he already saw

upon the wall the gigantic shadow of Tristan, Nemours joined his hands, closed his eyes, for the last time commended his soul to God, and waited for the end.

He was not kept waiting long.

"Duc de Nemours," said a soft and well-known voice, "you are free!"

The captive started at these words, ventured timidly to look around him, and thought he was dreaming.

Charles was there, no longer constrained and downcast, but calm, grave, speaking and bearing himself masterfully, already aggrandized and ripened by an hour of royalty.

Noble ladies were about him, contemplating with smiles and tears the young prisoner in his cage; then gentlemen, who, at sight of this outrage to infancy—a thing sacred to chivalry—laid hands upon their sword-hilts in a convulsive movement of indignation; and, finally, there was a crowd of pages and squires, bearing torches, and waving their plumed velvet caps to the cry of "Long live the King!"

"Yes," continued Charles VIII., "an hour ago, Heaven made me an orphan and a King. Nemours, forgive my father and pray for his soul." Then, turning towards his suite, he added, hastily, "Let this cage be instantly broken down and its fragments thrown into the Loire, so that not a vestige or remembrance of it may remain."

The workmen, directed beforehand, set to work vigorously; but, oh, sur-

prise! Their files passed over the bars without biting into them, and the stone in which they were set only returned a dull, mocking sound to the blows of the sledge-hammers!

"Sire," said an old monk, shaking his head, "no human power will avail to execute your orders, for this cage is not the work of human hands. I have heard say that a Bohemian, a sorcerer, as they all are, made it, in times past, to save himself from the gallows; to break it down the wand of a fairy would now be needed, and fairies have



"THE HEADSMAN."





"A CROWD BEARING TORCHES."

ceased to exist, and the Bohemian who constructed it has long since disappeared."

"Let him be sought for and brought before me," said the King. "To the man who finds him—honour and largesses!—a diamond from my crown if he is noble, his weight in gold if he is of low birth."

And with a wave of his hand he dismissed his brilliant retinue.

Left alone, with the exception of a few pages, who watched them from a distance, the two friends gazed at each other in silence. A terrible anxiety, which they dare not express, made their hearts palpitate in unison: "If the magic workman were dead!—if the cage could never more be opened!"

They wept—and, strange fact!—Blanchette appeared unmoved by their tears. There was a strong and natural reason for this.

It will be remembered that her expiatory metamorphosis was to endure for one hundred years. Now, at that moment, ninety-nine years three hundred and sixty-four days twenty-three hours and fifty-nine minutes had elapsed since she became Blanchette. The clock of Plessis-lès-Tours began to strike the hour—and instantly the dark and fetid dungeon was filled with sweet perfume and light; the iron cage fell to the ground and disappeared. The terrified orphans thought that the castle had been stricken by a thunder-bolt.

"Blanchette! Blanchette, where are you?" they cried, trembling for the existence of their adopted sister.

"I am here, my children," replied a gentle voice above their heads. And, raising their eyes, they beheld with amazement the retransformed fairy,

standing, wand in hand, upon a pedestal of cloud.

"Have no fear," she continued; "I am she whom you called Blanchette: my companions call me the 'Fairy of Tears.' Your tears are staunched, and my mission to you is fulfilled. Farewell!"

The little duke and the little King besought her not to abandon them yet; but she replied, gravely:—

"It must be; you have no need of consolation, but it is wanted elsewhere. I hear, near this castle, the sobbing of a beggar-child, and hasten to her. Adieu, Sire! Adieu, Monseigneur!" And she disappeared in a great burst of light.