

## **Persécutés pour leur foi : Mémoires d'une famille huguenote**

By Jacques Fontaine, written in 1722

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### **Fontaine opens his memoir with the following dedication:**

My dear children,

Having observed the deep interest you have taken in all that has befallen your ancestors, when I have related their adventures to you, I am induced to write down their history for your use, to the end that the pious examples of those from whom we derive our origin may not be lost to you, or those who succeed you.

### **Chapter IX p. 127**

But eventually, after the great persecutor Louis the 14<sup>th</sup>, had broken and revoked the edict of Nantes in October 1685, I saw that it was a case of leave or perish.

So I went to Marennes, where I found an English captain who agreed to take me to England, and to take four or five people with me, each paying on average ten *pistoles* (gold coins)<sup>i</sup>. Our place of embarkation was to be at La Tremblade, and, on the day set, I had to go and fetch your mother, Anne-Elisabeth Boursiquot, and her sister Elisabeth, and also we also took with us Jeannette Forestier, the daughter of my sister Marie, who was my goddaughter. I offered others the chance to come, but the response was that it wouldn't only be foolish, but crazy, to risk such great dangers, since the coasts were all well-guarded, both on land and at sea.

We came to La Tremblade and stayed with a drunkard who was to be the pilot for the English vessel and who spoke English, and because of whom we ran a thousand risks of being discovered, due to his carelessness and inebriation. Some days later, he gave us the news that he was ready to leave the next day, and ordered us to go and wait for him on the beach at Mus-de-Long, where he intended to pass between the Ile d'Oleron and the shore, near to the forest of Arvert, and he would there take us off the coast on board his boat.

We left at night, and had a couple of horses to carry our small amount of luggage. Once on the beach, I made a speech to those there, and said a prayer for our situation, which I wrote down at the time (it's among my papers, and I don't think it's appropriate to copy it out here, although when you read it you will discover the blessing of God which was upon me), a prayer which was definitely uttered from the heart as much as from the mouth. Several people were expecting this vessel, so we were among some 40 or 50 people on the shore nearly all of them young men and women. Some of them didn't take all the precautions necessary to conceal their escape, with the result that the papists were forewarned and very soon sent orders that the ship should not depart; therefore, we stayed in the dunes the whole day.

However, the priest of the parish of La Tremblade, accompanied by someone who had been a boatman<sup>ii</sup>, was curious enough to come to the water's edge on foot; they had already done a great circuit in their walk, and were almost upon us; we had placed ourselves between two little hills of

sand, and we could see the dog which they'd brought with them. But, by divine providence, two poor fishermen, who had both seen us and met them too, knowing their plan, made them [the priest and his companion] believe that they were off track. They assured them that if they continued in this direction, they would get lost in the hills of the sand dunes, and then led them firmly away by another path.

In the evening, they sent us horses and we returned to La Tremblade. We lodged at the home of a local townsman, where fifteen or twenty of us spent the day hiding in his house. He took us in very reluctantly, as they'd been searching all the houses in order to discover where we were. He was in a terrible state of fear the whole day, because he would have to pay a fine of a thousand ecus if he were caught harbouring a protestant. Night having come, he finally decided not to run such a risk, and ordered us all to leave his house; this was a little uncivil, but his reasons very pertinent.

'I have,' he said, 'damned my soul in order to save my wealth, and I would lose it to save yours! No,' he said, 'either do as I do or take your chance elsewhere.'

We considered this treatment to be rather cruel, but we had good cause to thank God later since, in less than half an hour after we had left, the authorities came with some soldiers, and visited the house of our host, where they found no one hiding. We hid ourselves again as best we could, one here, another there, among the poor sailors' wives who we found far more charitable than the rich people, and thus we spent the next four or five days.

At that time, there weren't more than twenty papists in the whole of La Tremblade, (I mean old papists because everything had changed) which was a very populous place. At last, the captain of the English ship came to La Tremblade and told me that he couldn't take us unless we followed him in 'chaloupes' (dinghies) to just beyond the borders of the region. He said that he would pass between the Ile de Ré and the Ile d'Oléron, and that if we wanted to wait for him in our boats around there, wherever we could, then after he had completed all the official office business and visited the customs boat, he would take us on board at sea, and would definitely set sail the next day.

In the dusk the same evening, on the 29<sup>th</sup> November 1685, we went on board a little open launch, with my fiancée, her sister, my niece and me, two lads from Bordeaux and six young girls from Marenes, and, under the cover of night, we passed the guard boats on the Seudre and got through the current of Oléron without being spotted. Then at ten o'clock in the morning, we got soaked near the Ile d'Aix, at the tip of the Ile d'Oléron, and there we waited until our ship appeared. We'd given an order to our boatman that if we were pursued, he should beach his boat as fast as he could, and then it would be simply a question of "Run for dear life!"

As for myself, who couldn't count on my legs to carry me off, [he had suffered a broken leg in childhood] I had my gun and a pair of pistols, and was resolved never to sell my life and be taken alive; but God had pity on us, guided us on our way, and closed the eyes of our enemies.

The signal, which we had agreed with our English captain was that when we were in sight of him, we would hoist the sail and let it fall again three times, and that he would reply by letting fall his mizzen sail three times. When our ship appeared, at three o'clock in the afternoon, with its passengers and pilot still on board, it came just to the end of the Ile d'Oléron, dropped anchor and unloaded its passengers and pilot, then put its dinghy back on board. As the sail was hoisted in order to come towards us, something which we were looking forward to, believing ourselves to have surmounted all the difficulties, we saw a royal frigate approaching, one which was used solely for checking ships, to make sure that no Protestant left the kingdom; if they found any, they sent the men to the galley ships and the women to convents.

We were in a dreadful state of fear, such that can't be expressed in writing and can only be imagined by those who have experienced it. It was a terrible change! Just before that, we had been full of hope, and now each one of us felt himself to be the prey of our cruel enemies. After all, what did they think our boat could be doing there at anchor, in a place not safe for larger ships? And we were only a canon ball's length away from them!

On arrival, the frigate dropped anchor beside the English ship, and ordered its captain to drop anchor too; they searched everywhere in the ship. But no one was hiding on board; only M. Mauzy, a minister, and his family were there, with their passport. What a blessing, Lord, that we hadn't already managed to get to the ship! If they had been delayed until an hour later, they would have found all of us. When they had finished, they ordered the English captain to set sail, which he did, and he left with a favourable wind, leaving us behind, and with the frigate positioned nearly between us and him. This was a terrible crisis, because if we returned to La Tremblade, it was a hundred to one that we would not be able to escape. But to stay there would have seemed strange and would have aroused

suspicion, and the frigate would have sent its launch to visit us. The poor boatman, who only had his son as crew, wailed and lamented his plight and that of his son, persuaded that only the hangman's noose awaited the two of them, since he had already changed his religion.

At last I turned to prayer, which has always been my ultimate recourse, and, fortified by the certainty of God's goodness which had already delivered me from so many dangers, I thought of a ploy, which God in his infinite mercy did make happen and was our deliverance. The wind was set fair for sailing to La Rochelle but completely against our return to La Tremblade. Having considered this, I told the boatman to cover us in the bottom of his boat with an old sail. Then he should set sail and head straight towards the frigate as if he wanted to come alongside it, as if trying to find the route to La Tremblade, having come from La Rochelle, and that he should make out that he had only dropped anchor until the wind changed course to take him to La Tremblade. If those on the frigate asked him where he was going, he should say:

'From La Rochelle, and I want to go to La Tremblade.'

If they asked, 'And what have you got on board?' 'Only ballast.'

*The boatman was also ordered by Jacques Fontaine to pretend that he and his son were drunk. The next few paragraphs describing the sailing route, and his gratitude for being on board at last, are omitted here.*

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We did suffer a little at sea, because of the winds against us, and we only arrived on Dec 1<sup>st</sup> (English style calendar). Having been eleven days in the crossing, without putting into port anywhere in France, we had to manage our supplies, and above all our water, accordingly. At last we disembarked on the 1<sup>st</sup> December (old style) at Appledore, in the Bristol Channel, at the mouth of the little river, which flows to Barnstaple.

Having paid for our passage, your mother and I only had twenty gold pistoles left between us; but God, who had not led us to a safe country only to let us die from hunger, touched the hearts of the chief citizens of Barnstaple, who having sent for us, all twelve took one or two of us into their homes and treated us with incredible gentleness and friendliness, each taking as much care of the French person they had in their house as if we had been their children or their brothers, meaning that God made us find fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters amongst strangers.

I am also compelled to remember, with gratitude for Divine Providence, that first mouthful of bread which I ate, having disembarked in Appledore. Our joy at being safe, and the privations we suffered in the ship, added to the usual purgations from being at sea, with myself in particular being the one most afflicted by sea sickness, led us now to having a great appetite, with the result that the most urgent thing (after giving thanks to God) was to ask for some bread.

They gave us ‘biscuits’ [baked roundels of bread], as big as plates, which in France would be worth around two sous apiece; and, when we came to pay, they asked us to pay only half a sou for each ‘biscuit’. I was impressed with their good price, but because the man we were talking to spoke only very poor French, I thought he had made a mistake; after asking him several times he always said that each biscuit cost half a sou. Unable to believe this, I gave a little girl a marked sou, and told her to go and buy me bread with this amount. She went to the baker and brought me back two of these biscuits or galettes. That was what confirmed the price to me.

At first it occurred to me that anyone who could send grain to France would make a considerable profit; but my fiancée and I only had twenty *pistoles* left.

I knew that some of my old friends from France had taken refuge in Plymouth, and that they had brought plenty of money with them. But, before forming any sort of a plan, I decided to get to grips with the price of grain properly. To do this, having learnt by hearsay that there was a market at Bideford the next day, three miles from where we were, I went to visit its corn market. I chose an interpreter who wasn’t the brightest<sup>iii</sup> and enquired there about the price of grain; and, seeing that a sack of the best type of wheat in the world, which would have been worth two ecus in France, was sold there only for thirty sous or two shillings at most, I enquired what the gold coins I had were worth and saw that there would be no more than an eight or ten percent loss on exchange of French money.

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i A pistole was also known as a Louis d'or, and was an exact copy of the Spanish doubloon, containing 6.7 grams of gold. It was worth 10 livres (pounds).

ii Perhaps ‘batelier’ is the word intended, meaning boatman, rather than ‘bateur’ which means juggler or street entertainer.

iii Presumably so the interpreter wouldn’t fathom Fontaine’s plans, and tip off his competitors?