

PRINCESS CAMION

There was once a king and a queen who had only one son; he was their unique hope. In the fourteen years since he had been born, the queen had never had the slightest suspicion of pregnancy. The prince was marvelously handsome; he learned everything that was wanted of him. The king and the queen loved him madly, and their subjects had put all their tenderness into him; for he was affable to everyone, and yet knew how to make the distinction of the people who approached him. His name was Zirphil.

As he was an only son, the king and queen resolved to marry him as soon as possible, in order to see princes born who could sustain their crown if Zirphil, unfortunately, were to be taken away from them. A search was therefore made on foot and on horseback for a princess worthy of the dauphin, but none was found who was suitable.

Finally, after a great investigation, someone came to tell the queen that a veiled woman wanted to speak to Her Majesty in private, about an important matter. The queen went swiftly to her throne in order to give her an audience.

The lady approached without removing her white crepes, which fell all the way to the ground. When she was at the foot of the throne she said: "I am astonished, Queen, that you thought about marrying your son without consulting me; I am the fay Marmotte, and my name has made enough noise to have reached you."

"Oh, Madame," said the queen, descending promptly from the throne in order to go and embrace the fay, "you will easily forgive me for my fault when you know that I have only listened as if to a tale to all the marvels that I have been told about you; but now that you have done me the favor of coming to my palace, I no longer doubt your power, and I beg you to be kind enough to honor me with your advice."

"It does not go thus with the fays," said Marmotte. "Such an excuse might satisfy a common one, but I am mortally offended, and to commence your punishment, I order you to have your Zirphil marry the person that I am bringing you."

With those words she rummaged in her pouch and took out a little toothpick case; she opened it and took out a little enamel doll, so pretty and so well made that the queen, in spite of her dolor, could not help admiring it.

"This is my goddaughter," the fay continued, "and I have always destined her for Zirphil."

The queen was in tears; she implored Marmotte in the most touching terms not to expose her to the ridicule of her people, who would mock her if she announced that marriage to them.

"What is there to mock, Madame?" said the fay. "Oh, we shall see whether anyone will mock my goddaughter, and whether our son will not adore her. I want to tell you that she has merit; she is small, it's true, but she has more intelligence than your entire realm put together; when you hear her, you'll be surprised, for she speaks, I can assure you. Go on, little Princess Camion,"¹ she said to the doll, "Speak to your mother-in-law a little, and show her what you can do."

Then the pretty Camion jumped on to the queen's tippet and paid her a little compliment so tender and so reasonable that the queen suspended her tears in order to kiss Princess Camion with all her heart.

"Here, Queen," the fay said to her. "Take my case and put your daughter-in-law back into it; I want your son to become accustomed to her before marrying her; I believe that won't be long delayed, your obedience might soothe my anger; but if you go against my orders, you, your husband, your son and your kingdom will feel the effect of my wrath. And above all, put her back in her case this evening, for it's important that she doesn't stay up late."

¹ *Camion* is nowadays the French term for a truck or wagon carrying goods; at the time when the story was written, however, its far more common referent was a small pin used by dressmakers, and that is the resemblance that the name is supposed to evoke.

With those words she lifted her veil, and the queen fainted in fear when she perceived a veritable living marmot, black, hairy and as large as a human. Her women came to her aid, and when she had recovered from her faint she could no longer see anything except the case that Marmotte had left her.

She was put to bed and the king was informed of the accident; he arrived, very frightened. The queen sent everyone away, and, with a torrent of tears, related her adventure to the king, who did not believe it until he saw the doll, which the queen took out of its case.

“Just Heaven!” he cried, after having meditated a little, “can it be that kings are exposed to such great misfortunes? Oh, we are only above other men in order to feel more dolorously the pains and misfortunes attached to life.”

“And to give greater examples of firmness, Sire,” said the doll, in a tiny, soft and clear voice.

“My dear Camion,” said the queen, “you speak like an oracle.”

Finally, after an hour of conversation between the three individuals, it was concluded that they would not divulge the marriage as yet, and would wait for Zirphil, who was away for three days, hunting, to decide whether to follow the fay’s orders, of which the queen took charge of informing him.

In the meantime, the queen, and even the king, shut themselves away in order to converse with little Camion. She had a very well-ornamented mind, she spoke well, and with a singular turn that was very pleasing; however, although she was very animated, her eyes had a fixity that was unpleasant, and the queen was only shocked by that because she had begun to love Camion, and feared that the prince might acquire an aversion to her.

More than a month had already passed after Marmotte had appeared, and the queen had not yet shown him his intended bride. One day, however, he came into her apartment when she was still in bed.

“Madame,” he said to her, “the most surprising thing in the world has happened to me some time ago while I was hunting; I wanted to continue to hide it from you, but it has become so extraordinary that it’s absolutely necessary that I tell you.

“I was following a wild boar very ardently into the depths of the forest, without noticing that I was alone, when I saw it hurtle into a hole in the ground. My horse having gone after it, I fell for half an hour, but found myself at the bottom without having been wounded. There, instead of the wild boar, which, I confess, I dreaded seeing again, I found an exceedingly ugly woman, who invited me to dismount from the horse and follow her. I did not hesitate, and gave her my hand. She opened a little door that had previously been hidden from my sight, and I went with her into a green marble hall, where there was a golden vat covered with a curtain of very rich fabric. She lifted it up, and I saw in that vat a beauty so marvelous that I nearly fell backwards.

“‘Prince Zirphil,’ said the lady who was bathing there, ‘the fay Marmotte has enchanted me here, and it is by means of your help alone that I can be liberated.’

“‘Speak, Madame,’ I said. ‘What is it necessary to do to recue you?’

“‘It is necessary,’ she said, ‘to marry me directly, or to flay me alive.’”

“I was as surprised by the first proposal as I was frightened by the second. She read my embarrassment in my eyes, and continued speaking: ‘Don’t imagine,’ she said, ‘that I’m making fun of you or that I’m proposing to you something that you might repent. No, Zirphil, be reassured; I am an unfortunate princess, to whom the fay has taken an aversion; she has made me half woman and half whale, for not having wanted to marry her nephew, King Merlan,² who is frightful, and even more wicked, and she has condemned me to the estate that I am in until a prince named Zirphil has fulfilled one of the conditions that I have just proposed to you. In order to achieve that end, I had my maid of honor take the form of a wild boar, and she is the one who lured you here. I even have to tell you that you will not get out until you have fulfilled my desire in one way or the other. I am not the mistress of that, and Citronette, whom you see here with me, will tell you that it cannot be otherwise.’

² *Merlan* is the French term for a whiting. The word is used in the story both as a proper name, when I have left it untranslated, and as a trivial noun, when I have translated it, as with Marmotte/marmot and other words employed in the same dual fashion. I have, however, always translated *baleine* as whale, because it is not really used as a proper name with reference to the princess in the vat.

“Can you imagine, Madame,” said the prince to the queen, who was listening attentively, “the state in which that last speech put me? Although the face of the whale princess pleased me infinitely, and her graces and misfortunes rendered her extremely touching, the whale part gave me a frightful horror; however, when I thought that it was necessary to flay her alive, I was in despair. ‘But Madame,’ I said, finally—for my silence had become as stupid as it was insulting,’ is there not a third means?”

“I had not finished speaking when the whale princess and her maidservant made cries and lamentations to pierce the vault of the hall. ‘Ingrate! Cruel man! Tiger! Everything there is of the most savage and inhuman!’ she said to me. ‘You want me, then, to be condemned to the torture of seeing you expire? For if you do not resolve to grant me what I request, you will perish, the fay has assured me, and I will be a whale all my life.’

“Her reproaches pierced my heart; she raised her beautiful arms out of the water, and joined her charming hands in order to beg me to choose promptly. Citronette was at my knees, which she was embracing, screaming as if to render me deaf.

“‘But how can I marry you?’ I said. ‘What sort of ceremony is necessary for that?’

“‘Flay me,’ she said to me, tenderly, ‘and don’t marry me; I love you as much as that.’

“‘Flay her,’ said the other, still screeching, ‘and don’t be embarrassed by anything.’

“I was in a perplexity that I cannot describe, and while I thought about what I ought to do, their cries and tears redoubled, and I no longer knew what would happen. Finally, after a thousand combats, I raised my eyes to the beautiful whale princess again, and I confess that I found her inexpressibly charming. I threw myself to my knees next to the vat and took her beautiful hand. ‘No, Princess,’ I said to her, ‘I will not flay you; I would rather marry you.’

“At those words, joy spread over the face of the princess, but a modest joy, for she blushed, and, lowered her beautiful eyes. ‘I shall never forget the service that you are rendering me,’ she said. ‘I am so penetrated with gratitude that you can expect anything from me after that generous resolution.’

“‘Don’t waste time!’ cried the insupportable Citronette, ‘Tel him quickly what he has to do.’

“‘It is sufficient,’ said the whale princess, ‘for you to give me your ring and that you receive mine. Here is my hand, receive it as a pledge of my faith.’

“I had no sooner made that exchange and kissed the beautiful hand that she presented to me than I found myself back on my horse in the middle of the forest. Having called my men, they came to me and I returned here, without being able to say a word, so astonished was I. Since then, every night, I have been transported, without knowing how, into the beautiful green hall, where I spend the night next to an invisible person; she speaks to me, and tells me that it is not yet time for me to know her.”

“Oh, my son!” cried the queen. “It is really possible, then, that you are married.”

“But Madame,” said the prince, “although I love my wife infinitely, I would have sacrificed that tenderness if I had been able to get out of it without doing that.”

At those words, a little voice emerged from the queen’s pouch, which said: “Prince Zirphil, it was necessary to flay her; but your pity might perhaps be fatal to you.”

The prince, surprised by that voice, remained quite nonplussed. The queen tried in vain to hide the cause of that adventure from him; he promptly rummaged in that pouch, which was on the armchair next to the bed and took out the case, which the queen took from his hand and which she opened. Immediately, Princess Camion emerged, and the astonished prince knelt down next to the queen’s bed in order to consider her at closer range.

“I swear to you, Madame,” he cried, “that this is the miniature of my dear whale. Is it, then, a gallantry that you are making me, and did you want to frighten me by letting me believe any longer that you did not approve of my marriage?”

“No, my son,” said the queen, “my chagrin is veritable, and you have exposed us to the cruelest misfortunes by marrying that whale, because, in sum, you were promised to Princess Camion, whom you see in my hands.”

Then she told him everything that had happened with the fay Marmotte, and the prince let her say everything she wanted without interrupting her, so surprised was he that she and his father had lent themselves to an affair that seemed so ridiculous.

“God forbid, Madame,” he said, finally, when the queen had finished, “that I would ever oppose Your Majesty’s designs and go against my father the king, even if he had ordered me to do things as impossible as these seem; but even if I had wanted to, even if I had fallen in love with this pretty princess how would your subjects ever have...?”

“Time is a grandmaster, Prince Zirphil,” said Camion, “but it’s over; you can no longer marry me, and my godmother appears to me to be a person who will not suffer it easily when some breaks their word to her. Tiny as I am, I feel as much as another the annoyance of this adventure, but as it was not entirely your fault, except that you were a little too stupid, perhaps I can persuade the fay to reduce her vengeance.”

After those words, Camion fell silent, for she was exhausted by having said so much.

“My darling,” said the queen, “I beg you to rest, for fear of doing yourself harm, in order that you will be in a fit state to speak to the fay when she comes to desolate us. You are our consolation, and if we are punished, mine will be mild if Marmotte does not take you away from us.”

Little Camion felt her tiny heart moved by the queen’s words, but being completely out of breath, she could only kiss the queen’s hand, over which she shed a few tiny tears.

Zirphil was touched by that situation, and asked Camion for her own hand, in order to kiss it in his turn. She gave it to him with a great deal of grace and dignity, and then she went back into her case.

After that tender scene, the queen got up in order to go and tell the king what had happened and to take reasonable measures against the anger of the fay.

The following night, in spite of the guard having been doubled in his apartment, the prince was removed as midnight chimed, and found himself, as usual, next to his invisible companion; but instead of hearing the pleasant and touching things that she was accustomed to say, he heard her weeping, and the person drew away from him.

“What have I done?” he said, finally, after tiring himself out running after her. “What have I done for you to treat me so badly? You’re weeping, my dear whale, when you ought to be consoling me for what I have to dread for my tenderness!”

“I know everything,” said the whale princess, in a voice punctuated by sobs. “I know everything cruel that can happen to me, but, ingrate, it is of you that I have the most to complain.”

“O Heaven!” cried Zirphil. “For what have you to reproach me?”

“The amour that Camion has for you,” said the voice, “and the tenderness with which you kissed her hand.”

“Tenderness!” said the prince, hotly. “My dear whale, do you know mine so little that you accuse it so lightly? Furthermore, if Camion could have amour for me, which is impossible, since she only saw me for a moment, how could you fear it, after the love I have for you, after the proofs that I have given you? It is you that I ought to accuse of injustice, for if I looked at her with some attention, it was only because her face represents yours, and, deprived of the pleasure of seeing you, everything that resembles you pleases me extremely. Don’t hide any longer, my dear princess, and I will never look at another woman.”

The invisible woman seemed consoled by those words and drew nearer to the prince. “Forgive me,” she said, “that little fit of jealousy; I have enough reasons to fear that I might be separated from you to have been afflicted by something that seemed to commence announcing that misfortune to me.”

“But may I not know why it is not permitted for you to show yourself?” said the prince. “For, if I have delivered you from the tyranny of Marmotte, how it is possible that you are still submissive to it?”

“Alas,” said the invisible princess, “if you had chosen to flay me, we would have been much more fortunate; but you had so much horror for that proposal that I did not dare to proffer it again”

“By what hazard,” the prince interjected, “is Camion informed of that adventure, for she said something very similar to me?”

Scarcely had he finished pronouncing those words that the whale princess uttered a frightful scream and leapt out of the bed. The surprised prince got out precipitately. What was his fear, though, when he perceived the hideous Marmotte in the middle of the room, holding the beautiful whale princess—who was no longer either a whale or invisible—by the hair. He wanted to draw his sword, but the whale princess, in tears, begged him to moderate his anger, because it would serve no purpose against the power

of the fay. The horrible Marmotte ground her teeth, and a violet flame emerged therefrom, which singed the hairs of his beard.

“Prince Zirphil,” she said to him, “a fay who is protecting you against me prevents me from exterminating you, your father, your mother and everything that belongs to you, but you will suffer no less in that which is dear to you for having married without consulting me, and your torment will not end, nor those of your princess, until you have submitted to my orders.”

As she finished speaking, she disappeared, along with the princess, the room and the palace, and he found himself in his apartment, naked except for a chemise, sword in hand. He was so astonished and so beside himself with anger, that he did not think that it was freezing cold, for it was the middle of winter. At the noise he made, his guards entered his room and begged him to go to bed or allow himself to be dressed. He made the latter decision and went to the queen’s room.

For her part, she had passed the night in the cruelest of all anxieties. She had not been able to sleep on going to bed, and in order to try to succeed in that she had wanted to talk about her chagrins with little Camion; but she had shaken her case in vain; Camion was no longer in it. She feared having lost her in the gardens, and had got up after having torches lit in order to search for her, but it was futile; she had disappeared completely, and the queen had returned to bed in a frightful chagrin. When her son came in she let it burst forth.

He was so afflicted himself that he did not perceive the queen’s tears. Seeing him so agitated, she said to him: “Doubtless you’ve come to announce something frightful to me?”

“Yes, Madame,” said the prince, “for I’ve come to tell you that I want to die if I cannot recover my princess.”

“What, my son? Do you love that unfortunate princess already?”

“What, your Camion?” said the prince. “Can you suspect me of it, Madame? It’s my dear whale that has been stolen from me; it’s only for her that I can’t live, and it’s Marmotte, cruel Marmotte, who has taken her.”

“Oh, my son,” said the queen, “I am much more afflicted than you, for if someone has stolen your whale, someone has also stolen Camion from me; she had disappeared from her case since yesterday evening.”

They told one another then about their reciprocal adventures, and bewailed their common misfortune together. The king was informed of the cries and despair of the queen and the chagrin of his son. He came to the apartment where that tragic scene was unfolding, and as he had a good deal of intelligence he immediately thought of having posters put up regarding Camion, offering a large reward for anyone who brought her back. Everyone thought that expedient marvelous, and even the queen, in spite of her great dolor, was obliged to agree that one could never imagine such a singular thing without having a transcendent mind.

The posters were made and distributed, and the queen was calmed by the hope of soon having news of the little princess. For Zirphil, the loss of the princess interested him as little as her presence; he resolved to go in search of a fay of whom he had heard mention; he asked the king and queen for permission, and departed, only accompanied by a squire.