

Doctor Francis Ardan is that French proto-Doc Savage hero created in 1928 by Guy d'Armen in City of Gold and Lepers (available from Black Coat Press). In Randy Lofficier's tale, Doc Ardan, who already had a brief meeting with Antoine de Saint Exupéry's Little Prince in our second volume, makes here a no less extraordinary encounter in...

Randy Lofficier: *The Reluctant Princess*

Southern France, The 1920s

Doctor Francis Ardan (as he was known in France) was hacking his way through a massive forest of thorns on the side of a mountain in the Pyrénées. He felt as if he had no sooner chopped a pathway than a new batch was growing almost before his eyes. He would never get to the other side of the forest at the rate he was going. He was starting to feel discouraged.

He sat down to take a breather and to think about what had brought him on his strange quest. He had returned from his travels in the Far East, planning to take a well-deserved rest while doing some research on the Cathars of Montségur. But that research had awakened a curiosity he could not quench.

While reading about legends of lost treasures in France, he had come across a strange story. It was said that a young Noblewoman had been enchanted more than 400 years earlier in a village named Perceforest, somewhere in the mountains along the border between Spain and France. The legend had it that she would sleep forever, unless awakened by a stranger willing to brave the many enchantments which held her prisoner.

At first, Ardan had dismissed it all as mere fantasy; after all, it had to be a fairy tale. But something about the legend continued to eat away at him and he began to do further research. In the end, it seemed that there was clearly some truth to the whole thing. He was unable to let it rest and decided he had no choice but to set off to find the answer.

The difficulty of his quest had at least helped him to decide that it was true; but he was still unable to reach what he presumed was his goal: the other side of the enchanted forest. The explorer was no quitter; he knew there had to be an answer. If this was a "magic" forest, perhaps he needed to fight his way through it by unconventional means. Rather than using brute force, he decided to use some of the eastern methods he had learned on his journey through Tibet. He centered his thoughts and tried to feel himself becoming one with the forces of nature; in his mind's eye, he pictured a path opening up through the tangle of plants, leading him to his goal. As he gently breathed in and out, he felt a change in the air around him. Cautiously, he opened his eyes and saw that a path had mysteriously appeared directly in front of him.

Still breathing in a set pattern, he began to walk through the forest of thorns.

The path curved and twisted until Ardan no longer had a sense of the direction he traveled. But his meditative breathing enabled him to remain calm and not focus on his fear of becoming lost. Eventually, after walking for what seemed like hours, but which had in reality only been mere minutes, the young adventurer found himself standing in front of a stone tower in the midst of a clearing. As he circled it, he was unable to see any opening in its rough surface. Without a doubt, this was another challenge.

He again tried Eastern meditation, but this time it had no effect. He thought about the legends he had read and tried to recall if there was anything in them that might give him an answer to how to enter the tower. Then he remembered a passage he had read that had talked about an event said to occur just before the mysterious enchantment had overtaken the young noblewoman. He looked at the tower and repeated a phrase supposedly spoken by her.

Immediately, a wooden door appeared in the wall right before his eyes. He turned the massive iron handle that held it closed, and as if it had been oiled the day before, it gently swung open on its hinges.

To Ardan's surprise, the corridors inside the tower were brightly lit with glowing torches. He had no idea where to find the object of his search, but simply walked forward, certain that he would find her as this was now clearly meant to be.

The corridor spiraled around like the shell of a snail, and eventually the adventurer reached a chamber in what he perceived was its center. There, in a large canopied bed, was a beautiful young woman. She had

cascading, golden hair and alabaster skin. Ardan felt mesmerized by her beauty. She lay motionless on the bed, but it was clear that she was not dead, merely in some state of suspended animation.

The young man circled the chamber, looking at the young woman from every angle as he tried to determine what he needed to do to awaken her. Finally, he decided that he would follow the blueprint laid out in every fairy story he had ever read or studied; he approached the beautiful Princess (for he was sure she must be a Princess) and bent over her to kiss her.

As his warm breath touched her face, her dark golden eyelashes fluttered and she opened her astonishingly beautiful sapphire-colored eyes. Ardan was shocked when she reached up a delicate hand and slapped him in the face!

He stepped back as the Princess sat up in her bed. "How dare you!" she exclaimed. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

"I... I..." Ardan felt himself at a loss for words, something unusual for the sophisticated scientist. Finally, he was able to speak, "I'm sorry, your Highness. But you have been under a charm for many centuries. I have fought my way through a series of enchantments to come here to awaken you. I thought I would use a method that has been written about in many stories, and that meant I needed to kiss you for the spell to be broken."

"I don't care about you kissing me, sir," said the beautiful young woman. "I want to know what gives you the right to disturb my peace and quiet!"

"I don't understand. I simply wanted to help you. Weren't you placed under this spell by an evil enchantress?"

"Of course not! I chose to enter this state. It is my sanctuary."

"What reason could you have for such a bizarre thing?"

"You say that centuries have gone by, so perhaps you do not know what life was like for a young woman when I was born, sir. You cannot imagine how hard it was to be a woman with a mind of her own. I wanted to study and walk freely in the forests. I had no desire to be married off to some ugly, old horror of a man because it would gain my family lands and power. Indeed, I am not sure I desired to marry at all.

"If I did not marry, then my only choice was to wall myself off in a convent, and I fear I am not better made for the life of a religious, as I have a rebellious soul and do not take well to being told what to do by anyone, man nor woman.

"Thus, I chose to ask a sorceress of my acquaintance to place me in a state of peace and happiness to forever escape a life I could not bear to contemplate," she looked at Ardan in sadness for what she had lost.

"My Princess," said the explorer, taking her hand, "I think you will find a changed world awaits you! You no longer have to belong to any man if that's your wish."

"Will I be totally free?"

"No. No one is totally free, but I think you will approve of the world outside this place."

"I suppose I can give it a try. But first, tell me how you managed to get inside my tower? I had thought that I was quite clear it was to be a puzzle that no one could solve."

"Ah, that... It was something I read you had said on the day before the enchantment took hold of you."

"And what was that?"

"No day is so bad that it can't be fixed with a nap!"

Paris – Yet again we were astonished by an amazing feat of derring-do, as the latest flying ace on the Parisian scene, the amazing Phantom Angel, flew her bi-plane over the Eiffel Tower and climbed down a rope ladder (while somehow managing to keep the plane circling overhead!) to disarm the notorious anarchist Azzef who was threatening to blow up the radio transmitter at the top. Our City is certainly a better place for having a heroine of her caliber watching over us. – Joseph Rouletabille writing in L'Epoque.