

ARGENTINE
A Norwegian Tale

I. In which a fay is bored

At the entrance to a large grotto opening somberly over a blue gulf, a fay is gazing at the icebergs descending from the pole

It is the time when the men of the North go back up the rivers of the west in their boats.

“How bored I am, how bored I am,” she says. “If I were a woman and I had a friend I would go to weep over her heart, but I’m only a fay. I have no tears, and my friends have no hearts...”

She sits down on the spangled sand licked by the azure waves; her hair the color of ears of wheat hangs down all the way down the ground, her periwinkle-blue eyes shine like sapphires.

Her pink foot is playing with her green slipper; she is dreaming, her hands folded over her knee.

Then a chubby, plump, rubicund being in a blue satin doublet with black stripes appears, out of breath.

“But it’s Grésil!” she exclaims, the sniffing monarch of the steppes.

“You said it, Argentine; I’m Grésil, the king who commands the spirits of the earth, as Perce-Neige commands the spirits of the ice,¹ and I’ve come to ask for you. Your silver thread is under the ice, it’s true, but it’s in the ground, so you don’t belong to Perce-Neige, you’re mine, and I want you for a wife.”

Argentine is about to laugh...but she thinks that her smiths and her elves are far away, in the depths of the grotto, and that Grésil has a merited reputation for being angry and brutal, so she responds to him rapidly; “Since you want to marry me, it’s necessary for you to prove your love to me; go and find Perce-Neige for me.”

“In her polar palace?”

“Yes; when you return you’ll have permission to kiss my fingertips.”

“I’m on my way...”

He swells up like a balloon and rises up to the crest of the cliffs.

“When he comes back,” said the fay, “He’ll have found Perce-Neige, who’ll defend me.”

Soon, two large heads with bristling moustaches emerged from the sea. Those two rounded heads were the heads of two seals harnessed to a coquille Saint-Jacques. Perce-Neige descended from it.

“Greetings, Queen,” said Argentine, bowing. “Good day, Sister,” she added, throwing her arms around her.

Perce-Neige is pretty, but she does not resemble Argentine. Small, slender and brunette, her smooth tresses have no reflections; her eyes, with lids slightly raised toward the temples, shine like velvet; her lips are red and her cheeks gilded.

Perce-Neige is a strawberry from the Northern thickets; Argentine is a peach from the gardens of the Orient.

When only Finns lived in Norway under leather tents, in the lands of the Orient, in a city surrounded by walls of copper, there were twelve men equal in strength and in courage, so tall and so handsome that they were said to be gods and named the Aesir. The city was pierced by twelve golden gates, in order that each of the heroes could go in and out as he pleased.

They were the first among men, and their neighbors were jealous of them; when they were drinking together in their marble palace, around a round table, on twelve similar chairs, the jealous men killed their

¹ The French common noun *grésil* signifies hail, and *perce-neige* is the flower known in England as a snowdrop

wild boar and their fallow deer with arrows. So, one evening, after a long feast, they said to one another: "Let's go where we can hunt in peace."

The next day they went out through their twelve gates, each having his lineage behind him.

Then they cut the copper walls with swords and each of them took one of the golden gates in order to make it into a shield.

They loaded the fragments of the walls on to carts and they marched northwards on their horses with black legs. They passed like a river of milk.

When they arrived in Norway—it was in spring, they had passed over the sea on the ice—they said: "This land is beautiful; its mountains sparkle, its lakes are as blue as the distant sky, its forests murmur and its waterfalls sing. Let's stop."

Their golden shields shone so flamboyantly that the bewildered Finns fled, crying: "They're the sons of the sun!"

But the Aesir, rude with the strong, were gentle with the small, they loved birds and flowers, sylphs and fays; when they departed, the sylphs, who slept there in the calyxes of roses, and the fays, who hid there in the stars of brambles, said to the rose-bushes and the brambles: "Grow so high and so dense that no one can approach the holy city any longer.

The rose-bushes branched like elms and the brambles interlaced like the mesh of a net.

Then the dreamy sylphs and the laughing fays said to the wood-pigeons; "Take us on your wings and let's go to rejoin them.

On seeing them, the fays of the North fled with the reindeer to the pathless solitudes....

When the leaves reddened in the crowns of the beeches, and the spray of the waterfalls sparkled like little rubies, when the mist silvered the reeds of ponds, when the long glaucous blades glided in the blue fjords, the wood-pigeons said to the elves whose flowers withered and the fays who were cold: "Let's go spend the winter in the lands of the sun."

Only the youngest of the fays, the one who was born out there on the eve of the departure, did not want to go; she had no memories.

Then the brunette daughters of the pole came back from the pathless plains, and Perce-Neige, their queen, met her on the shore.

"Since you only like Norway," she said to her, "be our sister. I'll give you a silver palace where the flowers will never wither."

"I'd like that," said the blondest of the daughters of the Orient.

That is why she is called Argentine, and why, in the midst of her brunette sisters, she resembles a spring of honeysuckle on a carpet of myrtles.

Argentine told Perce-Neige about her troubles.

"In sum, I'm bored," she concluded, "And...I'd like to weep."

"In spite of my advice, then, you've gone into the world of humans?" said the queen, sadly.

"I only went there once, eighteen years ago. From the edge of a forest of firs, all white with snow, I saw a child as beautiful as daylight in a cradle lined with swansdown. He was cold and I carried him quickly into my grotto, and...."

"And now?"

"He's still as beautiful as daylight.

"I understand then. You love him."

"If I were a woman, perhaps he'd love me...and I would certainly love him...but I'm only a fay."

"Friend, as long as we remain in our domain, we're immortal, but if we love in the land of humans, we become women.

"I could cry then when I'm sad!" exclaimed Argentine, clapping her hands. "look; can one see Noël without loving him?"

She showed her a handsome adolescent.

He advanced, smiling; the brunette Queen of the North launched forth in her shell.

II. In which we learn who Noël is...

Eighteen years before that day, Otto the Valiant, whose maple-wood boat flew like a seamew, had left Emma the beautiful in his castle.

As he quit her he had said: "The laborer reaps the field he has sown; the sea is the field of the men of the North; the red boats are our plows, the blue swords are our scythes; it's harvest time, I'm leaving. I'll bring you back golden rings, and pearl necklaces as a toy for the child. I'm departing without dread; my name is written on my door, and no one would dare to touch what belong to Otto."

Emma accompanied her husband to the shore. She had buckled his breastplate of scales, she wanted to untie the cable that moored the boat, because the old songs say: "She who buckles the breastplate will unbuckle it, and she who unties the cable will tie it up again."

Otto's companions were waiting for him; there were a hundred, perhaps two hundred; they were the elite of the northern warriors.

On seeing him so strong among the strong, Emma said to herself: "Who would dare to touch what is his?"

With tears in her eyes but confidence in her heart, she went back to sit down in the hall paneled in fir-wood, next to a cradle lined with swansdown.

The summer has passed, autumn is finished, the geese have fled the frozen ponds, the wolves have come in packs; Emma is weeping.

Where is Otto the Valiant? Has the tempest broken his boat? Has the mud of the river entangled it? Is his cadaver rolling beneath the glaucous waves? Is he sleeping under the reeds?"

Where is Otto the brave?

His boat is dancing on the waves like an iridescent bubble, his boat is gliding over the sea like a duck-feather; it is far away, far away where the sun sets. Upright at the curved prow, leaning on the dragon's head that rears up open-mouthed, Otto is still as handsome as a fir-tree, as white as an eider, and as strong as a salmon. He is so strong that his boat is full of golden rings; he is so white that the foam seems gray on his arms; and he is so handsome that the daughter of the sea is singing before his boat: "Otto, Otto, if you wanted...I have a palace of emeralds decorated with sapphires."

"You don't have Emma's eyes," replies the Northern warrior.

"Otto, Otto, in the depths of a wife's eyes, one reads: *Perhaps*; in the depths of mine one reads: *Always*."

Leaning on the red dragon, he dreams about Emma's eyes, as clear as a spring, and Emma's blonde hair, as delicate as spider-silk; but the undine sings so sweetly that her song lulls him, and the boat follows the undine into the depths of the west.

"Otto, Otto, if you wanted...I have emeralds in my palace, and pink anemones."

"In my castle I have a fine white carnation," replies the Northern warrior.

And he cries to the helmsman: "Steer for Norway!"

The boat rears up like a charger under the bit; like a docile charger it turns. The rigging stiffens, the sail stretches, and the joyful men ship the oars.

Otto can no longer see before him the undine with the ivory shoulders; he is thinking about the white carnation that he has left back there, on a swansdown cushion.

"Harder! Harder, companions!" he shouts, while pulling the oar.

"What is this white carnation, then?" wonders the undine. "If I had it in my palace, perhaps he would come."

Like a seamew, the boat flies. The coast is blue in the distance; it shines in the moonlight. It is Christmas Eve.

Then the undine stands upright on the waves; she must have that white carnation. In the radiance that bathes her she glides over the shore, she climbs all the way to the castle, the black silhouette of which is standing out against the steely sky.

A window is shining at the top of the tower; a woman is leaning over a cradle.

“There, she says, “are Emma the blonde and the white carnation that Otto cannot forget. When I have that beautiful carnation in my palace he will come in search of it.

“Woman with blue eyes,” she shouts. “Otto is on the shore.”

The blonde Emma shivers and runs to the window, from which the shore and the sea can be seen in the distance. Over the bay, of which the moon makes a mirror, the black boats are gliding.

Without kissing her son, and without taking her cloak, Emma runs to the shore, and the undine takes away the beautiful white carnation.

The undine swims in the moonlight, but the moon is rising toward the fir-woods and the pale radiance makes the shore distant.

Soon, out of breath, she sighs: “I’m a daughter of the waves, I stifle on land. Like the azure-tinted jellyfish that the sea abandons in the hollow of a rock, I shall die if the sunlight touches me, and this radiance is carrying me away.”

Toward the firs the radiance rides; between the trunks it glides, on the stiff needles it is shredded.

The undine utters a cry; her shoulders are bleeding and the beautiful white carnation escapes her arms...

The moon rises into the sky; behind the mountain the radiance descends, carrying the undine away to the endless snowy plains.

Under a juniper bush, in his swansdown cradle, the white carnation is still asleep.

In the depths of the wood the hungry wolves are howling. Here they come.

Then the earth opens up beside the juniper bush, and a fay emerges from the narrow crevice.

The child utters a plaint and the fay sees him, as dainty as a carnation.

“What’s the point of looking any further?” she says. “At the first step I’ve found a flower as beautiful as one can imagine.”

Into the opened earth she carries the white carnation; the bells are ringing for Christmas.

That is why Argentine’s beloved is named Noël.