

FELLOW TRAVELERS 1697-1715

Catherine Bernard: *The Rose-Bush Prince*

The queen of a realm that is not found on the map, being the widow of a king she had loved tenderly, lived in a dolor proportionate to the amour she had had. A daughter, the unique fruit of their marriage, gave her an occupation of sorts capable of dissipating her chagrin, but Florinde—that was the daughter's name—was to cause her some in her turn.

One day, when all the queen's women were in her room with the princess, a little ivory chariot appeared drawn by six butterflies with wings painted in a thousand colors. A person whose stature corresponded to the carriage, and whom they suspected to be a fay, after having circled them in the chariot several times, threw this note:

*Florinde was born with many charms,
But her misfortune will be extreme
If she has to love one day
A lover whom she cannot see.*

The fay disappeared, and left a great surprise in all minds. The queen was more disturbed by it than she ought reasonably to have been; the eccentricity, and even the apparent impossibility, of that misfortune, did not reassure her against the caprices of amour and those of destiny combined. She thought of forestalling them, and did not wait until Florinde had reached the age of amour to make her known to all those who might be potential suitors.

Among the neighboring princes there was one hidden from the eyes of the world, but Florinde's portrait did not fail to reach him by way of the fays, for whom nothing is impossible. The king, his father, being the widower of a wife who had made him suffer all the horrors of jealousy, had married a second one unlikely to inspire it but born to feel it. She took the caprices of her passion so far that the prince in question knew that he had only exchanged troubles, and did not know which of his woes was the greater. In that uncertainty he had concluded that marriage was a frightful bond, and he resolved to keep the only son he had far from commerce with all women. He had him brought up in a magnificent castle, and delivered him to all the diversions of his age.

The young prince was taught all the sciences that could not instruct him of what it was desired to keep hidden from him. In sum, all his amusements were lavish, except the one for which he was born; but Amour allows no one to escape.

The prince, who found Florinde's portrait under his feet, initially looked at it in surprise. Admiration followed close behind, accompanied by a disturbance unknown to a young man accustomed to exercises and reflections that had nothing in common with those sentiments.

His first desire was to see the original of the portrait; it was a face more delicate than those he had seen until then, and, either because of the instinct of a mystery natural to amour or because he realized that something was being hidden from him, he did not communicate to anyone the design he had to quit a place that had always appeared agreeable to him, but which he began to regard as a prison as soon as he wanted to leave it.

He was able to escape his surveillance, and he set forth without knowing where he was going. He had only taken a few steps when he encountered the fay that we have already mentioned.

"Where are you going, unfortunate prince?" she said to him. "You're running toward all the misfortunes that your father wanted to enable you to avoid, but you can't escape your destiny."

Meanwhile, Florinde's mother ordered a magnificent tourney, which attracted to her court all the princes of the neighboring realms. They wanted to show off their handsome faces and their skill splendidly; but, although Florinde could not help holding them in esteem, amour did not enable a choice, and a pity that was cruel to all of them prevented her from determining in favor of any of them. They had acquired for her the sentiments that her beauty was bound to inspire, and she would have made too many of them miserable if she had made one of them happy.

The queen sent away those princes dolorously; her daughter did not like any that she had seen, so half of the prophecy had been fulfilled, and the rest remained to be dreaded.

Sometime after that, Florinde, weary of the court and having nothing to keep her there, obtained permission from her mother to retire to a country house. It was an agreeable place, appropriate to amuse a young person free of the cares of amour.

One day, while she was walking in a flower-garden, she perceived a rose-bush that was greener and more florid than the others, which curbed its little branches as she approached, seemingly giving her approval in its fashion.

An action so novel in a rose-bush surprised the princess; the prodigy made in her favor pleased her; it was a kind of homage by which she was touched. She went around the flower-bed several times; the rose-bush bowed every time she went past. She wanted to pick a rose that seemed to her to be very red, but she pricked her finger painfully.

The sting of the wound prevented her from sleeping at night, and the next morning she got up earlier than usual, and went to walk in the flower-garden.

The rose-bush redoubled its reverences with an urgency that delighted the princess and made her forget the pain, only to think about the marvel. Finally, while musing, she approached the rose-bush too closely, and found herself caught on it without being able to free herself. As she tried to pull away she felt an extraordinary resistance.

She struggled nevertheless, but she heard a sound emanating from the leaves that resembled sighs.

“What!” she exclaimed. “A rose-bush can sigh?”

“It can do more, Madame,” it said to her, “and you have the power to make it talk. Permit it to tell you its sad story.

“I am a prince,” it went on. “The most precious thing in the world had been hidden from me. I lived without seeing you, and this is what it has cost me to come in search of you. A fay has given me this form, and told me that I would keep it until the day when I would be loved by the most beautiful person in the world; but what I see here must be reserved for the gods, and I am running the risk of always being a rose-bush.”

The princess made to reply. Something serious took the place of the joy that the reverences of the rose-bush had given her; she even thought it too bold in having dared to embrace her with its branches. She quit it, but not without looking toward the flower-bed more than once.

Her night was agitated by sentiments that were quite similar, although she thought that they were different. The animated rose-bush caused her astonishment; the prince it concealed caused her pity; she felt a sort of anger because it had had the audacity to speak to her about amour, but in the end, she pardoned the lover in favor of the bush. How can one be angry with a rose-bush?

The princess returned to the flower-garden the next day. In truth, she took care to keep her distance from the rose-bush, but she could be perceived by it, and could even hear its complaints. After circling it several times she drew nearer to it, and tried to console it for its metamorphosis, without answering for anything else.

A few days later, seeing that it was too exposed to the insults of the atmosphere, she had a little marble cabinet built for it, sustained by pilasters, where she went to visit it frequently.

Gradually, she became accustomed to giving it a human face in her mind, and even a pleasant face. Little by little, she permitted it to speak to her about amour. It seemed to her that the discourse of a tree could not be dangerous.

The rose-bush was able to take advantage of that favorable disposition; it said a great deal, but it made it understood that it was suppressing even more; and by means of a disorder above eloquence, it convinced her that she was loved very tenderly.

The princess thought so often about the prodigy of the rose-bush that she no longer thought about anything else. The marble cabinet was the place to which her steps naturally conducted her; it even escaped her to say excessively tender things to the prince, for whom she felt a great compassion, but the fay’s menacing oracle could not be effaced from her mind. Perhaps she already loved what she had not seen, but she doubted it as long as she only saw a tree; she was afraid of returning its original form, but sometimes wished it involuntarily.

For its part, the rose-bush found room for laments amid the most flattering words that the princess said to it. “If I can believe your words and your cares,” it said to her, “I excite your pity, but you do not have enough if you give me nothing more; and that mild sentiment of the most beautiful person in the world cannot give me back my form.”

Meanwhile, the queen could no longer support the absence of her daughter, and gave her an order to return immediately. That was a thunderbolt for the princess; it was necessary to separate from the rose-bush, for which she found, at that moment, that she had a veritable passion. She shed a quantity of tears over its leaves, which could not be washed by them without sensing their virtue.

Immediately, the rose-bush disappeared, and Florinde no longer saw anything at her feet but a charming prince. He embraced her knees with all the certainty of being loved: a pleasure that is almost never sure for other lovers, all the ordinary evidence being suspect by comparison with that marvelous event. Thus, the idea of his happiness

transported him to such a point that he lost, so to speak, the usage of his senses; when he recovered them, he seemed by virtue of his immobility still to retain something of the tree that had hidden him.

At the sight of such a lovable prince, Florinde's amour was augmented, but her modesty increased proportionately; she regretted the veils that had hidden her own sentiments from herself.

She returned to court, and the prince went with her. The queen, who did not know anything about the adventure of the rose-bush, and who only knew the birth of the prince, permitted him to be a suitor for her daughter.

He saw his mistress every day, but it was no longer without witnesses, and he often regretted his tree-bark; it had constrained him less than all the decorum that was required of him.

The prince pressed for his marriage, but Florinde, frightened by the prodigy of her amour, which gave her reason to fear the fay's oracle, engaged the queen to agree that she send that lover away in order to make sure of his constancy before giving herself to him.

She summoned the prince and said to him: "Prince, you know that I love you, and in accordance with that word I have the right to dispose of you. The prediction of my misfortunes frightens me; everything that ought to make me fear them has happened. If you were not sure of being loved infinitely, my alarms can convince you of it; if you were less so, I would anticipate my disgrace by breaking with you, but in spite of my terrors, I cannot, and it is better that, in giving me certain marks of your fidelity, you belie the oracle. You had only seen me when you loved me. Perhaps I was only able to please you by virtue of the novelty. It is necessary to test you; go and live on the Isle of Youth until I recall you. Go; I want to flatter myself that the more charming the abode is, the more the voyage will afflict you."

What a proposition for a beloved lover! Since he had known amour he had always seen the person he loved, and he had never had the idea of absence. To live far from Florinde seemed so terrible to him that he thought his last moment had come. He did not have the strength to complain; his tears flowed without him sensing them, and his action marked such a great amour that the princess, judging that she could not resist such a great passion, fled to the queen's apartment. From there she sent an order to her lover that he obey her without seeing her again, that he simply leave, and that she would take care of soothing her woes.

The prince set forth with a submission of which few examples have been seen since. He was ill when he arrived on the Isle of Youth, and thought he would find physicians there, but there had never been any need for them on an island of that name. Laughters, Games and Amours welcomed him by throwing roses at him; immediately he breathed an air that restored his health, and at the same time, all the charms that dolor had caused him to lose.

He was taken to the palace of the queen of the realm by way of a path covered with the flowers that are born with the commencement of spring. He saw a person who had all the graces of beauty with all the naivety and joy of childhood; she was only fourteen years old. She was sitting on a jasmine throne; a thousand Amours were playing around her, some of them enchainning her with orange-blossom and others spreading it over her head; others were undoing her hair and allowing the tresses to fall over a nascent cleavage. She was exchanging badinage with her women and throwing them flowers with a marvelous grace.

That spectacle had the wherewithal to distract him from his sentiments for Florinde. The Queen of Youth was not married, because she wanted a husband of her own age, and gallant, whom she had not been able to encounter. The prince was twenty-four and bearded. A few of the followers of youth asked him for news of past centuries, but the queen began to look at him favorably. The century of ten years that distinguished their ages disappeared because of all the charms with which the prince was replete.

The queen did not neglect anything to engage him: gazes, flattering words and little teasing actions, the meaning of which is very serious, everything was put to use, and everything was understood, although the prince, who was cleverer than her, pretended not to pay any attention to it. She explained herself more overtly, and made him proposals of marriage, with the advantages most capable of touching an amiable man, such as always being his, and possessing forever and without interruption all the benefits without which the others are nothing, all the graces and all the pleasures.

It was difficult for the prince to refuse the dowry that she was offering to bring him. Gradually, he forgot Florinde, and it was just in time that she forced him to remember that she was still in the world.

Scarcely had she spent a day without seeing the prince than she had sensed the horror of living without the person one loves; however, she strove to vanquish her sentiments; she had already loved without seeing; she did not want to marry without knowing that she was loved constantly. A fortnight passed in those agitations, but she was about to succumb to them, dread and jealousy coming to join the dolours of absence. It was necessary to sacrifice reflections to amour, and she sent for the prince, who was given this letter on her behalf:

If you are suffering as much as me, you have much of which to complain. I cannot support my dolours and yours; I cannot risk losing you for having wanted too much to make sure of you; it is enough, you are already

worthy of being recompensed for having obeyed the cruelest of all orders. Alas, I did not know their rigor very well, but I have felt it, and I judge that you cannot sustain it. Depart and come back; why are you not here?

That note arrived very appropriately; the prince, to whom his solitude had given a severe education, had not yet had the leisure to be spoiled by society; he believed that it was not permitted to him to be inconstant, and in spite of the liking that he had for the Queen of Youth, he left the island. As he drew away slowly from a place that had charms for him, however, he read the news of his proscription on a few placards that he encountered on his road. The queen promised anyone who delivered her fugitive, dead or alive, the same favors that she had offered him.

It did not require any more to cure the prince. He hastened his flight, and he arrived at Florinde's feet; seeing him return, she did not have the strength to examine whether he had been faithful.

They were married, and, the prince having become king by virtue of the death of his father, he took his wife to his own estates, where the marriage, in accordance with custom, ended all the charms of their life. Fortunate are those who live therein in honest indifference, but people accustomed to love are not as reasonable as others, and hardly ever provide an example of good households.

The prince, by virtue of idleness, told Florinde that he had had a slight weakness for the Queen of Youth. Florinde made him as many reproaches as if she had not been his wife; he was shocked and importuned by them; he wanted to lament them and console himself with the ladies of the court; she spied on him, surprised him, and heaped him with insults.

Finally, persecuted by her furies, he asked the fays to become a rose-bush again, and obtained that as a favor.

For her part, the jealous Florinde had a head so weak that she could not bear the odor of a flower that reminded her of her amour; it is since that time that roses have always caused the vapors.