

THE TYRANNY OF THE FAYS ABOLISHED

The power of the fays had reached such a high degree that the greatest people in the world feared displeasing them. That accursed breed, of which no one knows the origin, had made themselves redoubtable by the harm that they caused those who disobeyed them to suffer. Their fury was only satisfied by changing the most amiable people into the most horrible monsters, and if they did not give you a prompt death, it was only in order to make you languish for longer in a more wretched condition than the death they refused you. The impossibility of exacting vengeance upon them rendered them more imperious and cruel, but of all the people they took as the object of their rage, none had ever been as unfortunate as Princess Philonice. Her supernatural beauty gave them a desire to marry her to one of their kings.

With that in mind they abducted Philonice one day when she was walking with her mother, the princess, without being touched by the screams of the mother or the daughter. She was about twelve years old. At that age, so hardly advanced, she was a masterpiece of nature in body and in mind. To console her for the violence they had just done her, they transported her to a charming place. It was a palace built between two hills, from which one could see a valley filled with everything that could please the eyes; the Tempe praised by the poets was never so beautiful. An eternal spring reigned in that delightful place; the gardens were filled with canals and fountains, and the orange trees formed a shade there that provided protection from the most ardent sun. In sum, everything that nature and the art of fays had of the most surprising was found in that enchanted abode.

The young princess was not sensible to so many marvels. She was in a melancholy state of mind that would have softened the heart of anyone except the pitiless fays. They put her under the guard of the least barbaric among them, whose name was Serpente; but they recommended, above all, that she should not be able to communicate with anyone.

In order to carry out that order, Serpente caused a magnificent pavilion to emerge from the ground in an instant at one end of the garden, to which she took Philonice. In order to keep her company she gave her a girl name Elise, who had been abducted at the age of two. She gave her all sorts of rare animals to divert her, and enabled her to work with golden and silken fabrics for part of the day in order to occupy her. Magnificent garments, diamonds and pearls were not spared in her regard. All in all, everything that she believed might please a young person, the fay gave her in profusion. She refrained carefully from talking to her about the monster whose wife she was destined to be.

The time had not yet come when she had resolved to make that scarcely suitable marriage; they wanted to accustom her to their manners before announcing her misfortune to her. Sometimes Serpente took her for a walk in the beautiful places I mentioned, and, inviting her to admire so many beautiful things, she told her that if she was obedient to her will, she would one day be mistress of them, but that she had to be careful not to merit her hatred, because she would be able to punish her in recompense.

While the fay was saying that, Philonice saw on the bank of the canal two turtle-doves that appeared so tame that they did not flee from their presence; she desired them, and asked for permission to capture them in order to take them to her room.

"I cannot grant you that," the fay said to her. "The destiny of those birds is not to quit this canal. They have not always been in this condition; they were once a handsome prince and a beautiful princess, whom we took in affection. We destined them for one another and they loved one another tenderly, but in the time when we were only thinking of their happiness they encountered one of our sisters who was bathing in the canal, all of whose body was covered with turtle-dove feathers, which she concealed carefully. The chagrin of being discovered made her desire that those who had seen her could not say so, and that they became turtle-doves themselves. At that moment she threw water over their faces, which had no sooner touched them than they changed their nature and became the birds that you see. Since that time they have not quit one another, and, conserving their tenderness in that new form, they spend their days lamenting their common misfortune.

“There are many other examples here of our power,” the fay continued. “All the statues that you see along these terraces were once subjects of a neighboring prince. These gardens were not yet made; we had not made our residence here, but the beauty of the valley sometimes attracted us here. One evening, when we were dancing in the moonlight, we were perceived by those men. They made fun of our different postures. Irritated against those insolent fellows, we made them remain motionless in the positions they were in, and since then we have converted them into statues.”

That speech only augmented Philonice’s dread. She promised the fay that she would always be submissive to their will and would never merit their hatred, although that seemed very difficult to her.

Meanwhile, her beauty was augmented every day; she was the delight of all the fays. With pleasure, they saw her succeed in everything that they showed her; they heaped her with caresses and presents. They reached such a point of amity with her that she had the liberty to go everywhere without the fay Serpente. If she had been able to forget her homeland, she would have led a happy enough life. She loved Elise passionately; the girl merited it; she had so much mildness in her character that was difficult to avoid liking her.

One day, when it was very hot, they were walking in the evening in a citrus wood some distance from their pavilion. The beauty of the night charmed them so much that they were unable to resolve to retire, when they saw a woman coming toward them who was holding a handkerchief in her hand, with which she was wiping away tears that were flowing from her eyes in abundance.

Such a sad encounter excited the pity of the two young persons; they both advanced at the same time to ask her what was wrong, but they were prevented from doing so by the fear caused to them by a dragon of enormous size, which emerged from a bush and came to hurl itself upon the neck of the woman, without her giving evidence of any fear. On the contrary, she returned its caresses, and when she sat down on the ground, it lay down next to her, with movements so tender that Philonice could not doubt that there was some mystery concealed under that form.

With that thought in mind, she was drawing nearer, in order to try to learn more about an adventure that excited her curiosity, when she heard the afflicted woman say to the dragon, while redoubling her tears:

“My dear Philoxipe, until when shall I see you so different from yourself? Will the barbarity of our cruel enemies never weary of persecuting us? Ought they not to have been sated by my tears since the time when our misfortunes drew them from my eyes? Or rather, when will the adorable princess that the solitary told us has been born for the happiness of the world, come to break our chains by destroying the detestable fays, whose tyrannical power extends all the way to our hearts?”

Philonice could not help uttering a sigh at the woman’s discourse, which the latter heard. She turned her head to see where it came from, and perceived the princess. She was afraid that she might be one of the fays, and that made her get to her feet in order to flee her presence, but Philonice, recognizing her fear, approached her and said: “Have no fear, Madame; we are unfortunates, like you, retained in this place. Veritably touched by the laments you have just made, if we can help to soothe your woes, we will do anything in our power to do so.”

“It’s a great deal, Madame,” the woman replied, “to find someone in this place capable of compassion, and this is the first time in the five years that the fays have been retaining me with the deplorable Philoxipe”—she indicated the dragon—“that such a thing has happened to me.”

“I wish to Heaven,” said the princess, “that I had the power to end your woes; you would see that I would not stop at lamenting them; but since that is all that is in my power, do not refuse that sad pleasure, and tell us by virtue of what cruel fate you have been brought here.”

“It’s a discourse too long to make this evening,” said the stranger. “Our implacable enemies would take our absence badly. They only grant me one hour in the entire day to see this lovable dragon, and it is only after many tears that I have obtained that mercy from the fay Serpente, the only one who sometimes allows herself to be touched by pity; but tomorrow, at the same hour, I will satisfy your curiosity.”

Philonice agreed to that, and left her to employ the little time that remained to her with her dear dragon.

That object had so touched the young princess and her companion that they did not sleep that night. When the fay Serpente came into her room she found her very dejected; she asked her the reason, but Philonice refrained carefully from telling her, and after having told her that she felt ill, she went with her to the palace, where the fays were assembled. She spent the day there, impatient for the hour of her rendezvous, which finally arrived.

She took her leave of her imperious mistresses in order to go and find the afflicted beauty, with her dear Elise; but destiny had prepared another adventure for them. Instead of taking the path to the citrus trees they took, without noticing it, a route that led them on to a large terrace overlooking the valley, from which one discovered all the beauties of nature that enchanted the eyes.

They were surprised to have gone astray, and as they tried to recover their route they encountered a man lying at the foot of a yew tree at a bend in the path, who seemed to be asleep. That novelty made them stop; they had never seen a man in that place, and young Elise, who had not gone out since she was born, asked the princess what kind of animal it was.

She spoke so loudly that the stranger woke up. He got up precipitately at the sight of the two beautiful persons, who wanted to flee, and having advanced toward them he said, addressing Philonice, whose supernatural beauty surprised him: "Am I unfortunate enough to have caused you some fear, and will you be cruel enough to punish me for that by going away so promptly?"

"The lack of habit that we have of seeing persons like you," replied the princess, stopping, "has astonished us at such an advanced hour of the night. It might be dangerous for us to stop here. You doubtless don't know where you are, since you went to sleep here so tranquilly. The fays who are the mistresses here will not pardon you for having entered this place without their permission. Leave as quickly as possible, for fear of experiencing their dangerous wrath, and leaving us in dread of being mistaken for accomplices of your crime."

"Oh, Madame," exclaimed the stranger, "I have no fear of the powers of the fays when it is a matter of losing you; although I have only known you for a moment, I sense that I shall not quit you while I live, even if I must suffer the most terrible woes; whatever threats you make me, I cannot help praising Heaven for having caused me to stray from my equipage in order to see a beauty as accomplished as yours. But what demon fatal to the pleasure of the entire earth is hiding you in this place unknown to mortals?"

"It is for my particular misfortune," said the princess, "that I have been retained here for some years."

"Oh, Madame," said the stranger, "if it is against your will that you are here, and that such a beautiful abode serves as your prison, you have only to tell me to what place you want me to take you, and I will do it at the peril of my life, without asking any other recompense of you than that of spending the rest of my days at your feet."

"No, generous stranger," replied Philonice, "I cannot accept your offer, obliging as it is; I would be putting you in unnecessary danger. You could not remove me from their cruel hands. Only take care that they do not discover you; leave with diligence while you are free to do so. Take advantage of my advice, I repeat: flee, for the sake of your repose and mine."

As she finished speaking, she took Elise by the arm and drew away.

The man could not resolve to withdraw from that fatal place without knowing where the beautiful person lived; in order to enlighten himself on that score, he followed her at a distance and saw her enter the pavilion. He remained there for some time, gazing at the place where the amiable object of his nascent amour resided, but, fearful of being surprised by daylight, he withdrew, by the same route by which he had arrived, and without being perceived by the guards who were posted around the gardens.

The princess had forgotten the afflicted beauty; the encounter with the stranger occupied her all night long in spite of herself. Daylight appeared without her having slept, the generosity with which he had offered to extract her from captivity having evoked her gratitude.

In fact, a violent passion had taken possession of her heart without her being aware of it; she spent the day as she had spent the night, in anxieties that seemed entirely new her.

When the evening arrived, Elise reminded her of the rendezvous of the previous day, to which she allowed herself to be led without paying any attention. The presence of the afflicted beauty, whom she found beside her dear dragon, drew her out of her reverie.

The princess apologized for having missed the appointment that she had promised her, sat down beside her and begged her to satisfy her curiosity.

The stranger, without having to be begged further, commenced her story in these terms, addressing Philonice.