

THE QUEEN OF THE FAYS by Jean de Préchac

There was once a king who was known as King Guillemot. He was the best prince on earth, who asked for nothing but love and simplicity; it is even affirmed that he wiped his nose on the sleeve of his doublet. He was in no hurry to get married. However, as the Guillemot race was very ancient, his people wanted him to give them successors. There had been talk of several different marriages, but he had always found invincible difficulties in them.

A neighboring princess, whose name as Urraca, had estates that were much to the liking of King Guillemot, but Urraca had always shown a marked repugnance for marriage and a great deal of insensibility to the efforts that several sovereigns, particularly Comte d'Urgel, had made to please her. Her dominant passion was astrology, and she was determined not to marry until she had read in the stars that she would be the mother of a perfect princess, who would be a prodigy of beauty and virtue, who would do infinite good, and would have no other concern than relieving the afflicted.

That knowledge obliged her to listen to the proposals that came to her from all directions. Her nurse often spoke to her in favor of Comte d'Urgel, who had put her in his interests by means of great liberalities, but Urraca, who had the same humor as most other women in being sensible to distinguished ranks, would rather have been a queen than Comtesse d'Urgel.

King Guillemot, informed of the dispositions of the princess, sent an ambassador with an authority to marry her on his behalf, and sent her at the same time a gilded belt, a packet of pins, a small knife and a pair of scissors—ordinary presents in those days. The marriage was soon concluded, and the wedding ceremony too.

The new queen requested that the king should come to find her himself and stay for a time in her estates before taking her back to his kingdom, but King Guillemot rejected that proposal and insisted that the queen come to find him.

The proud Urraca could not reconcile herself to such an absolute order, and the malevolent nurse, who had not received any present from the Guillemots, animated the mind of her mistress in such a way that they spent more than a year in that situation.

Comte d'Urgel, who had found means of seeing the queen without her perceiving him, had fallen passionately in love with her, and still continued to heap the nurse with presents, in order to be informed of the sentiments and the slightest occupations of the queen.

The pride of the princess left him nothing for which to hope, but his amour did not permit him to be disabused, and he believed that he might be able to achieve anything by means of the advice of the deceitful nurse. Although those early times were far from the corruption of the present century, Amour, who has always been subtle and full of inventions, inspired the comte to engage the nurse to introduce him to the queen's presence, persuading her that he was King Guillemot, who was coming see her incognito. That appeared to him to be all the easier because the queen had never seen her husband. He proposed it to the nurse, and presented her at the same time with a purse full of gold guillemots, which were then very rare.

The nurse, dazzled by such a rich present, promised him everything and they agreed together that the comte would dress as a page in King Guillemot's livery; that the page would bring a garland of flowers to the queen, and would tell her that, his council not having wanted to permit him to go to see her in the apparel of a king, he desired to enter her presence secretly, and had sent her to ask for her permission.

That project was carried out in its full extent, and the nurse did not fail to make much of the gallantry of King Guillemot, with the result that the poor queen found herself pregnant and gave birth after nine months to a beautiful princess without her having heard any further mention of King Guillemot. She nevertheless sent a courier to him to inform him of the birth of his daughter.

King Guillemot became very angry on learning that news, and wanted to put the courier to death, but his council prevented him from doing so, and sent him back with a very piquant letter against the honor of the queen.

As the race of Guillemots was very ancient had had for a motto *Rather death than dishonor*, the entire house was mortified by that insult, especially the king, who was inconsolable and threatened his subjects with allowing himself to die of hunger. It was a primitive century, in which husbands, less polished than those of today, had the simplicity of punishing themselves for their wives' faults.

King Guillemot, having nearly gone mad, was walking along a pathway one day when he heard a voice that followed him, crying *cuckoo, cuckoo*, which was in those days the greatest insult that one could address to a married man. The king flew into a fury, called his guards, and commanded that the reckless individual be hacked to pieces. In spite of all his threats, the voice did not stop. The king was informed, in order to calm him down, that it was a bird, but that only served to irritate him further, convincing him that the entire world was laughing at his adventure, even the birds, which were saying aloud what people were only thinking.

In his wrath, he ordered that all the birds in his kingdom should be exterminated. His vengeance not being satisfied by that cruel massacre, he also wanted them to be eaten. All the courtiers ate some, in order to be obliging, and found them so good that people have continued to do so ever since, although they had previously been horrified by any human who ate a bird, and the pleasure that King Guillemot had in avenging himself caused him to change the resolution he had made to allow himself to die of hunger.

While King Guillemot was exterminating innocent poultry, the queen, who was waiting the return of her courier, nursed the little princess herself, fearing that if she drank the milk of an ordinary nurse, she might also absorb any bad inclinations she might have. As the fays meddled with everything in those days, she sent word to a fay named Belsunsine, one of her friends, who lived in the Pyrenees, asking her to be godmother to the princess.

The fay, sensible to such a great honor, endowed her with an infinite number of good qualities and named her Meridiana. The queen gave a magnificent fête in order to do more honor to the fay, which would have continued for several days but for the arrival of the courier bringing King Guillemot's outraged letter. The poor queen, who had acted in good faith, nearly died when she learned that King Guillemot disavowed the child and as treating her with the utmost indignity.

In her despair, she found no better remedy than to assemble her council; she explained the entire affair to them as it had happened, assuring them that the nurse was a reliable witness to all her conduct. Then she demanded justice against the bad conduct of King Guillemot. It was resolved with a common voice that war should be declared, and although King Guillemot's estates were of far greater extent than Queen Urraca's, her subjects were so convinced of the perfidy of King Guillemot and the innocence of the queen that they all swore to risk their wealth and their lives for the reparation of the insult.

War was declared on King Guillemot, and troops were levied everywhere; serious preparations for battle were made and everyone debated such an extraordinary adventure. Those who knew of the simplicity of King Guillemot and his scant urgency for women judged that the

child was not his, knowing full well that he was incapable of making such a voyage or of performing a similar gallantry. The queen had the reputation of being the most virtuous princess on earth, the more her actions were examined, the less occasion was found, or even any pretext, for suspecting her conduct.

Several neighboring potentates wanted to involve themselves in mediation, but the Guillemots, jealous of the point of honor, rejected all the propositions that were made to him to recognize the child, and the queen, who believed that she had been abused under the faith of marriage, preferred to perish with all her subjects if King Guillemot would not admit the fact and beg her pardon for his perfidy.

Comte d'Urgel was one of those who pressed hardest for that element, and as he still loved the queen and did not think much of the Guillemots, he proposed, in order to spare the blood of so many people, to settle the matter in single combat, offering to defend the honor of the queen in the capacity of her champion.

King Guillemot would not accept that challenge, but Prince Guilledin, his brother, who had a courage worthy of the ancient Guillemots, begged the assembled estates of the realm to permit him to fight Comte d'Urgel. As it was a matter of nothing less than the loss of the kingdom, the estates permitted the combat, with great acclamations, and having rendered on the appointed day to the capital city of the queen's estates they found Comte d'Urgel there, who testified much scorn for a champion that he believed to be far beneath his courage.

The combat took place in the presence of the queen and her council, and either because Prince Guilledin was more adroit than Comte d'Urgel or because victory is always declared for the truth, the Prince felled the Comte with a thrust of his lance, which wounded him mortally.

The judges having run to him, he declared before dying that he had deceived the queen with the help of the nurse. The wicked woman was arrested and did not have the strength to contradict what the Comte had just said.

The unfortunate queen, enlightened as to a mystery that, in spite of her good faith, made her appear culpable, would have died of dolor if, on the advice of Belsunsine, she had not suspended her despair for love of Meridiana. She nevertheless ordered that the nurse should be handed over to Prince Guilledin, and that the gilded belt, the pins, the little knife and the scissors that King Guillemot had sent her should be returned to him.

Prince Guilledin returned victorious, and was received in his brother's estates with extraordinary applause. The nurse, imprisoned in an iron cage, was dragged through the streets for a long time, and then thrown into the sea. King Guillemot, who had refused Comte d'Urgel's challenge, was deposed and imprisoned, and Prince Guilledin mounted the throne.

Urraca, ashamed of her misfortunes, did not have the courage to suffer the sight of any of her subjects and retired, with her dear daughter and the fay Belsunsine, to a mountain in the Pyrenees, the highest of all, which is named the Pic du Midi. She put all her application into educating Meridiana well, inspiring her with scorn for all men, and teaching her everything she knew about astrology.

The young person in question was becoming more lovable every day, and already had more intelligence and reason than is usual for children of her age. Belsunsine loved her as tenderly as her own mother, and while Urraca made her party to her science, the fay revealed her supernatural secrets to her. She remembered everything she was told once, and had a nature so mild that she always obeyed without question everything that was demanded of her.

Meridiana's great beauty, her docility and the continuous progress that she made in the sciences and all the secrets of the fays consoled her sad mother greatly, but as all the happiness

in life is of short duration, another fay, whose name was Balbasta, jealous of the beauty and the extraordinary talents of the young princess, abducted her secretly. For fear that Belsunsine might discover her retreat she burned juniper and other berries in all the places through which she passed, and imprisoned the princess in a high tower in the Château de Pau, which is at the foot of the Pyrenees. She gave her the task of drawing water from a very deep well, putting it in a sieve, and then climbing five hundred steps, in order to take it to the top of a tower where the fay had a little garden that she made her water.

Queen Urraca, already overwhelmed by misfortunes, was unable to survive the loss of her dear daughter, and died not long after Meridiana's abduction, without the amity that Belsunsine testified for her, or all the assurances that she gave her of taking no repose until she had discovered her retreat, being able to console her.

Meanwhile, Meridiana, far from complaining about her difficult task, acquitted it with a great deal of success, aided by the secrets that Belsunsine had already taught her, without Balbasta ever perceiving it, with the consequence that every time the evil fay appeared, the princess received her very graciously, always begging her to order her to do something more difficult, assuring her that she would never be able to take enough trouble to please such a benevolent fay.

Balbasta, surprised by the rude labor and patience of the princess, nevertheless gave her new occupations every day, the latest of which were always more difficult than the previous ones, all the way to making her pick up a bushel of millet, one seed at a time, threatening to make her suffer horrible tortures if she missed a single one and if she could not tell her how many seeds here were in the bushel.

Meridiana always acquitted herself in the same manner, and never failed to thank Balbasta for her generosity. The fay, vanquished by the docility of the princess, finally wearied of persecuting her, and, having visited Belsunsine one day, whom she found very afflicted, she asked her the subject of her chagrin.

The good fay naturally told her the source of her affliction, exaggerating the beauty, the good nature and the admirable talents of Meridiana; she dissolved in tears in telling her the story. Balbasta, who was convinced of the princess's merits, allowed herself to be softened by her companion's tears, and promised her to discover her retreat and bring her back to the Pic du Midi, on condition that she engaged the charming princess to love her.

Belsunsine, delighted by the mere thought of seeing her dear Meridiana again, promised everything.. The next day, Balbasta returned to the Pic du Midi and presented the princess to Belsunsine, who almost died of joy on seeing her again. She tried to console her for the death of her mother, and the two fays, having embraced her tenderly, both promised her to serve as her mother and not to hide any of their secrets from her. They gave her, in advance, a ring that shielded her from any insults that other jealous fays might make her.

It was a long time before she was able console herself for the death of her mother. She built her a magnificent mausoleum on top of the mountain, and that death did not fail to engage her in further meditations on the unfortunate condition of mortals, who are exposed to so many different miseries, without great princes being dispensed from that fatal vicissitude. She was confirmed then in the resolution she had already made, which her mother the queen had so often inspired in her, to practice virtue, to renounce commerce with humans, to apply herself anew to the knowledge of the stars, and to profit from the goodwill that the fays had for her. Filled with those sentiments, she attached herself strongly to Belsunsine, who finished teaching her everything she knew.

Balbasta, who loved her no less than her companion, made her party to all her secrets; Meridiana attended several assemblies of fays, where she was much admired and applauded. As they remarked that she was informed of all their secrets, and that she was entirely detached from life, they resolved to receive her among the number of fays. She seemed touched by the honor that was being offered to her, but when, in the ceremony, it was proposed that she take the form of a dragon, in order to have the gift of illusions, and to be able to make a magnificent palace appear where there was nothing but smoke, she forbade it, and affirmed that she did not want to deceive anyone. Many of the fays murmured against that delicacy, but it was passed by a majority vote, because of her beauty and her high birth.

As soon as she was a fay she thought of nothing but using her power of enchantment to relieve a hoist of oppressed individuals. She chose for her dwelling a grotto in the Pyrenees, which she ornamented with a large number of beautiful statues, and which is known today as Meridiana's Espalungue. She traveled to all the countries in the world under the pretext of visiting her companions the fays, to whom she gave rich presents, although she only undertook the voyage in order to acquaint herself with the mores of all nations. She recognized, however, that there was malice, infidelity and weakness everywhere, and that the majority of humans had almost the same faults in whatever country they lived. She did not find any who were perfectly happy and did not desire anything more; that knowledge gave her a great deal of compassion for their miseries, and fortified her in the resolution she had made always to relieve the unfortunate.

Throughout her voyage, she never missed an opportunity to do good. Having arrived in India, at the home of the fay Mamelec, she remarked in her palace a young woman of surprising beauty, who was occupied in cutting stubble to make litter for fifty camels.

Judging that there might be something extraordinary in that, Meridiana asked her who she was. The beauty admitted that she was the daughter of the king of Monomotapa, and told her that her stepmother, seeking to avenge herself for the fact that she had not wanted to marry one of her brothers, had asked the fay Mamelec to abduct her, and that the fay had enchanted her for three hundred years, of which only two hundred had passed as yet. She started to weep as she finished speaking, and begged Meridiana not to distract her from her labor, because if she did not finish by the marked time, four old women who were her overseers would take turns to beat her; the first would give her fifty strokes of a rod on the soles of her feet, the second as many on her shoulders and the other two twenty-five each, half on her belly and half on her buttocks.

Meridiana, moved by the story of so many cruelties, tapped a stone with her wand, and the camel stables were furnished with litter in an instant. The beautiful Indian woman, astonished by that marvel, judged that Meridiana was a great divinity and implored her, her eyes bathed with tears, to have pity on her misery. The fay consoled her and promised to employ herself in her service; she spoke about her to Mamelec, and asked her with such great entreaties for mercy for the beautiful princess that it was granted to her with a good heart.

Meridiana ran to the princess and assured her, while presenting her with a white rose, that in an hour she would find herself in the room from which she had been abducted, in the same garments, with the same youth and beauty that she had had on the day of her abduction.

It is true that she arrived in the palace of her father, the king, but as the kingdom had passed to another house in such a long interval of time, no one recognized her. The king, who had several children, was very surprised to see the princess; her great beauty was admired, but as it was a matter of ceding the kingdom to her, no one dared declare themselves in her favor. The archives were examined, and it was found that it was true that a princess of the royal blood had been abducted by the fays, but what appearance was there that she had returned after two

hundred years? In brief, the king did not find it appropriate to get to the bottom of a question that might have cost him his throne.

As all peoples like novelty, and those of Monomatapa were very curious to see such an extraordinary person, the king was led to fear that there might be an uprising in favor of the princess, and he was told that, in order to set his mind at rest and assure his children of the crown, it was necessary, as a matter of good politics, to put her to death. Others, less cruel, suggested that he marry the princess to his eldest son, but the king, who was miserly and hoped to make enough money from the prince's marriage to marry his two daughters, rejected the latter advice and resolved to put the princess to death, accusing her of seducing his people.

She was arrested, but during her trial, the king's eldest son, touched by the charms of the beautiful person, went to declare to his father that if he put the princess to death he would throw himself on the same pyre that had been built to burn her. The king was so offended by his son's declaration that he hastened the execution of the unfortunate princess, but the fay Meridiana, who had foreseen what would happen, went to visit her in her prison and found her much more afflicted by the resolution that the prince had made to die with her than her own misfortune.

The fay approved of the gratitude she had for the young prince, and after having promised her never to abandon her, she told her that her father had hidden a rich treasure in a place that she indicated to her, assuring her that the reigning king would let her marry his son gladly if she revealed that treasure to him. Then she went to the king's cabinet, spoke to him in a menacing tone and called him cruel and a usurper, adding that he was very fortunate to be able to assure the kingdom to his children by means of the marriage of the beautiful princess, who had more treasure than all the other princes of India put together.

She disappeared after saying that, and the king, frightened by that vision, was agitated by a host of confused and various thoughts. His avarice prevailing over all those impulses, however, he resolved to obtain clarification from the princess herself as to whether she had treasure, and, judging that the queen would be better able than him to extract that secret, he charged her with that commission.

The queen, as cunning as all Indians, flattered her and caressed her, already addressing her as her dear daughter-in-law and exaggerating the strong passion that her son had for her, since he wanted to die for her service. The princess, who had already seen the prince several times and knew the obligations she had to him, assured the queen that she would be delighted to conserve that dear son, and told her that if the rights she already had over the crown were not sufficient, she would give her a treasure of inestimable price. The queen embraced her a thousand times, and, that treasure having been found in the place that the fay had indicated, the marriage was made with extraordinary magnificence and the reciprocal satisfaction of the two lovers.

Delighted to have finished such a great favor, Meridiana returned to her grotto in the Pyrenees. Her vigilance and her good heart did not permit her to remain tranquil for long; she was at the childbirth of all the queens, and, not content with preventing the tricks of other fays, she endowed the princess with an extreme beauty and the princes with great valor, and even sometimes rendered them invulnerable. The consequence of that was that in past centuries, the children of kings had no need of their sword to conquer several kingdoms. Meridiana's reputation extended throughout the world, and whatever envy the other fays had against her, she treated them with so much civility and was able to make them such agreeable little presents and speeches that she hardly had any enemies, and was greatly esteemed in all the corps of fays.

The help that she gave crowned heads did not prevent her from rendering services to people of mediocre condition, and if she found a poor shepherdess who did not have the strength to

defend her sheep against a hungry wolf, she flew to her aid and took her to a good pasture, which the wolves would not have dared to approach. If a sleeping woodcutter had lost his ax, she did not disdain to bring it back to him, and if a poor traveler fell into the hands of thieves she came to his defense and protected him from their cruelties. In sum, everyone who appealed to the fay Meridiana was sure of being helped promptly. It was by such actions that she won the hearts of persons of all conditions, finding all her pleasure in procuring good and preventing evil.

As there is no one who does not approve of good deeds, although not everyone had the strength to do them, the fays were delighted by all the good they heard said of their companion, and perceived with pleasure that the terror they had once inspired was turning to affection, that they were welcome everywhere and summoned to all the councils of kings, even of particular families. Belsunsine and Balbasta published everywhere the obligation they had to the beautiful Meridiana, and the other fays did not contradict them.

The ambition that slips into all sorts of estates caused the fays to judge that if they chose a queen their corps would become much more considerable, since that queen would be ranked among the other crowned heads. That project having been applauded by all the fays, they met one day in order to hold the election. Having rendered to the marked place, the affair was discussed. It was proposed that the power of the person elected should be limited, but, the choice having fallen on Meridiana, all the fays had so much esteem for her and so much confidence in her probity that they gave her a boundless authority, to the point of being able to interdict those who displeased her.

Meridiana was then crowned, in spite of her resistance, and notwithstanding the reasons that she gave the assembly for preferring Princess Merlusine to her. However, she did not abuse her authority, and had even more regard for the fays than she had had before. That good conduct charmed them to such an extent that they had no difficulty in obeying her.

The new queen having firmly established her monarchy, sent the fays away with the order to inform her regularly of everything that was happening in the different countries in which they lived, and she retired herself to her grotto in the Pyrenees, where she received several ambassadors on the part of a large number of sovereigns who had obligations to her, and who congratulated her on her new dignity.

Her elevation gave her new cares, and did not spare her any. Always eager to find, in all the places that she went, that she could be useful to someone, she suffered with impatience anyone thanking her for a benefit, assuring them that she had far more pleasure in giving it than they had in receiving it. She criticized the great for the scant attention they paid to the fortune of their inferiors, since it cost them so little; she excused the faults of everyone, and did not understand how one could resolve to return a bad deed or do any harm to anyone. In sum, there never was anyone who honored virtue more, or who had so much indulgence for human weakness.

She sometimes allowed herself to be seen in her grotto, sometimes on the Pic du Midi, and often in different places, where she listened to all those who wanted to speak to her, even making use of treasures that she discovered for the indigent, giving a princess to be married a bushel of gold as liberally as she gave a modest sum to a shepherdess to repair the loss of a ewe that had died.

A marquise who has been married for a long time without having children was finally fortunate enough to become pregnant; she chose a woman of confidence who had already served as nurse to her son. That nurse having very subtly exchanged her own child with the son of the marquise, the young man had inclinations so base, and gave a thousand chagrins to his supposed parents, to the point that the marquis accused his wife of infidelity, it not being possible that he

was the father of such a bad lot. The marquise, who had nothing for which to reproach herself, groaned and wept continually because, as the false marquis grew older, his bad inclinations were further revealed. She had heard mention of the Queen of the Fays and her marvels; that obliged her to undertake a journey to the Pyrenees to implore her aid.

The marquise threw herself at the feet of the fay, imploring her to enable her to die or to change the inclinations of her son. The fay lifted her up very graciously, and told her that she had no reason to lament either for her son or herself, since that son resembled her in body and mind. Mortified and shamed by a response that seemed so disobliging, the marquise was already disposed to leave when Meridiana embraced her and told her how her son had been exchanged by the nurse, how it was easy to prove that by means of a little yellow mark that he had on his left arm. The marquise remembered that immediately, and was impatient to quit the fay in order to go in search of her son. Meridiana, who perceived that, judged that the journey to return to her husband and tell him that good news would be very long, made her a present of two horses that could cover a hundred leagues in an hour, and sent her away very content.

The marquis, who could not console himself for having a heir so unworthy, nearly died of joy on hearing his wife's story. His first impulse was to kill the wicked nurse, but the marquise calmed him down and they went to see the nurse together, who lived on one of their lands. First they asked her for news of her son; she replied, weeping, that he was the worst son in the entire regions, that he had lost their flock, that he spent entire days hunting, adding that he would make a better marquis than a shepherd.

"Would you like to exchange him with ours?" the marquise asked her.

"You think you're joking," retorted the malign shepherdess. "Perhaps you'll do him as much honor as yours, but do better and take charge of both of them."

During that dialogue the young hunter arrived, laden with game, which he presented to the marquis with a politeness worthy of his birth. The marquise, who thought she was looking into a mirror on looking at the young man, who resembled her very closely, could not retain the impulses of nature for long and embraced him several times, her eyes bathed with tears.

"We're talking," the marquis said to him, "of making an exchange of you for my son. Would you be sorry?"

"If that could be," replied the young man, "without doing any wrong to your son, I feel that I have enough courage to sustain such an illustrious rank."

"Yes," the father continued, "but it's necessary, in order to be a marquis, to have a yellow mark on the left arm."

The young man immediately rolled up his sleeve and showed his yellow mark. The marquis and his wife, unable to doubt the truth, embraced him again, and the nurse, seeing the mystery discovered, did not have the strength to maintain her imposture and admitted everything.

It was by similar actions that the Queen of the Fays acquired the esteem and veneration of an infinite number of people. Her generosity was admired by all the fays, but very few were found who wanted to imitate her; on the contrary, the majority made use of their power to cause a thousand woes to humans, either out of envy or malice; they ordinarily devoted themselves to persecuting beautiful women, especially great princesses, which caused Queen Meridiana a great deal of pain. She would have liked to be everywhere, in order to remedy that. She tried several times to give them a horror of evil and inspire noble sentiments in them, but it was futile. There were old hunchbacks who only nourished themselves on the tears and sobs of persecuted princesses, and who would rather have died than cease their malice.

Seeing that bad habits had got the upper hand, and that the matter could not be remedied, Meridiana finally resolved to make use of her authority and the power she had to forbid them the use of their functions as fays for as long as she wished. She assembled them all and expressed to them the sensible displeasure she had in seeing that the fays, who might be honored as divinities if they applied themselves to good, were only thinking, for the most part, of tormenting illustrious persons; that humans were unfortunate enough, by virtue of their short lives, maladies, the lack of possessions and an infinity of unexpected accidents that happened to them on a daily basis, without the fays putting all their industry into persecuting them; that that seemed to her so unjust that she had resolved to prohibit it for three centuries, and only to allow them the liberty to do good, in order that they might have time to apply themselves to exercises of virtue and correct their inveterate malice.

She ordered them thereafter to come, in the final years of the third century, to the hall of the Château de Montargis, which was large and spacious, in order to render her an account of the progress they had made, promising to reestablish in their functions all those whose conduct had been benevolent and who had some good deed in their favor.

That fulminating sentence made the entire troop murmur, but it was necessary to obey. The majority of the fays abandoned the mountains and almost all of them retired to old châteaux, where they amused themselves spinning and waiting for the end of their interdiction, and since that time no more mention has been heard, of abductions or other similar vexations that the fays used to make, and the memory of them would have been lost if their tales did not remain to us.

Queen Meridiana, always applied to good, made a voyage to Fortunate Arabia, from which she brought back cinchona, sage, betony and several other herbs that have the virtue of prolonging life. She planted them in the Pyrenees, where they are still found today, and established a marvelous flower garden, garnished with all sorts of flowers, on the heights of the Pic du Midi, without time having been able to destroy that agreeable flower garden, which still subsists and which curiosity-seekers can see with pleasure. Then she devoted herself, for several years, to studying the crystalline waters that emerged from the Pyrenees, and, having perceived that those waters have several different virtues, she judged that if she could make them pass throughout the mines of gold, lead and sulfur that there are in those mountains, the waters would take on the virtues of those minerals, and would be a great help for the relief of humans. She examined their sources, caused them to flow through new conduits, and mingled them so well that those waters cure all sorts of maladies. It is to the cares of that illustrious fay that we owe the waters of Bagnères, for fevers and various other maladies; those of Bares, for all sorts of wounds; those of Cautères, for indigestions; Aigue-bonne, for ulcers; and Aigue-caure, for rheumatisms.

Although Meridiana was a benefactress for the whole world, she had a particular predilection for her homeland, and, thinking that the majority of kings in those times were cowards or imbeciles, she was touched with compassion by seeing people governed by such princes. The opinion she had that the people of her homeland were all borne to goodness, and the knowledge she had of their intelligence, often made her hope that a prince of Béarn might reign one day in the beautiful realm of France, but as she was an enemy of injustices and that could not be one without dethroning the legitimate kings, she deferred the execution of that project for a long time. Finally, she found an opportunity by virtue of the marriage of Antoine de Bourbon with Jeanne d'Albret, heir to Navarre and Béarn;¹ the fay disposed minds so well that the affair succeeded.

¹ Antoine de Bourbon married Jeanne d'Albret in 1548; their son succeeded to the French throne as Henri IV.

The queen gave birth to four different children, whom the fay, who had long views, abandoned to destinies, not finding that they had the qualities necessary to fulfill her project. But in the end, the queen having become pregnant for a fifth time, the fay endowed the child with a good mind and great valor, and then enabled him to be brought up without any delicacy, just like the children of commoners; and it was him who succeeded to the crown of France by virtue of his merit, and perhaps also the help of the fay.

That prince had a son whom the fay endowed with a great deal of intelligence, valor and justice, but having forgotten to endow those first two with a long life, and perceiving that humans had need of examples who would be present for a long time in order to excite them to virtue, she resolved to repair that fault at the first opportunity; in fact, she gave the son of the latter prince the justice of his father and the valor of his grandfather, and also added a great piety and a long life.

Satisfied with so many good deeds, and above all in thinking that the Béarnais, for whom she had a great deal of esteem, would have the opportunity in future to make use of their talents and their intelligence, by the favor of the kings that would be their compatriots, she wanted to efface from human minds the memory of the fays and retire to her grotto, where she would remain for several years without seeing anyone.

It was only about two years before the three centuries of the fays' interdiction would elapse when their queen, who had assigned them to the Château de Montargis, perceived that it was in too much disorder to receive such good company. Nevertheless, as the situation of the castle was very advantageous, there was a very spacious hall there, a charming view, a great forest and a beautiful river, Meridiana wanted the assembly to be held there.

Not wanting to make use of her art to reestablish it, however, she remembered that the great prince who was its master took his origin from the region of the Pyrenees, and she was informed that he was able to embellish houses with the same facility as he won battles. She made use appropriately of that knowledge and insinuated to that prince the desire to reestablish the Château de Montargis, which was executed with as much diligence as if the fays had done the work, with the result that the house, abandoned for several years, was soon in a state to lodge several great princesses comfortably.² Meridiana having arrived there, all the other fays, impatient to have their interdiction lifted, also went there.

The queen, having received them very favorably, testified the joy that she had in seeing them again, and was the first to render an account of her occupations during the three centuries of their absence. Her modesty caused her to pass succinctly over all the good things she had procured, and she only spoke about the impatience she had had to see them gain, convinced that each of her sisters had done well and had conducted herself much better than she had.

Merlusine, having made a profound reverence, assured the queen that she had never missed an opportunity to do good to those of her house and to many others, and although she had been living for a long time in the mountains of Dauphiné, she had ceded her retreat to the Chartreux and retired to the Château de Sassenage, where she did all the good of which she was capable secretly, without any other motive than the satisfaction that well-born souls find in practicing virtue. The queen treated her very civilly, and after having done her much honor and given her great praise, she lifted her interdiction.

An old fay, bleary-eyed and poorly-built, presented herself before the queen and told her that she had retired to the Château de Pierre-Encise, where she had prevented the prisoners

² The restoration of the Château de Montargis in the 1560s was actually carried out by Princesse Renée de France, the younger daughter of Louis XII.

receiving letters from anyone, and, none of them having escaped from that rude prison, demanded for recompense that the queen permit her to perform enchantments as she had before. The queen replied that since the employment of jailer was so much to her taste she ordered her to continue in it, without meddling in anything else. That judgment was applauded, and the poor old fay was jeered loudly.

Then a tall good-looking fay advanced before the queen and told her that she had chosen for her retreat the Château de Moncalieri on the Po; that she had found a duchesse in childbed, who was about to be on a par with queens, that she had endowed the little princess to whom she had given birth with a great deal of intelligence, solid virtue, the most beautiful eyes in the world, a beautiful complexion and even good conduct, very premature, because as soon as she was born she had destined her to occupy the most august throne on earth. She added that her confidence in the good qualities of that amiable princess had gone so far that she had persuaded the duchesse, her mother, to put her to proof for a year, assured that the better one knew her, the more one would love her, which had succeeded, as she had said.

The fay then wanted to talk about many other advantages that she had procured for her homeland, but the queen, seeing that she was entering into details that were too delicate, interrupted her and assured her that what she had done for the charming princess was more than sufficient to merit that she continued to employ enchantment with the same liberty that she had had before her interdiction, and in order to mark how much her conduct was agreeable to her she also lifted in her favor the interdiction of another fay, one of her friends, who had done nothing to merit that favor.

Another fay appeared who had a very composed manner; she told the fay that she had retired a long time ago to the Castello Ferrara; that she had prevented neighboring princes rendering themselves masters of it on several occasions and that her zeal for the religion had engaged her to make that beautiful duchy fall into the hands of the Pope. The queen, without entering into any detail, criticized her for allowing the house of the ancient Dukes of Ferrara become extinct, and dismissed her.

Then another fay presented herself who wore a black velvet toque on her head, and told the queen that she lived in the Château de Boussu in Flanders, and that in order to imitate the good deeds of the Queen of the Fays she had thought that she could not do better than to purge the world of a large quantity of libertines; that in order to succeed in that she had attracted to the château several thousand men of all sorts of nations, and had caused a large proportion of them to perish. The good queen was horrified by that great cruelty, and, having reproached her for the death of several heroes, she forbade her ever to appear in her presence again.

Another fay in hunting costume presented herself before the queen and told her that she had lived in the Château de Fontainebleau a long time before François I had augmented the building; that she had been exposed to an infinity of slanders; thus far, she had been made to pass for a phantom under the pretext that she sometimes hunted in the forest; that she assured Her Majesty that she had never done any harm to anyone, even avoiding frightening shepherds; and that she had had the satisfaction of being present at the first childbirth of a sage queen and had given her child all the virtues of a hero and, above all, a generosity similar to that of the queen, his mother, and that she saw with pleasure that the prince had never told any lie, whether his father had put him at the head of his armies, had summoned him to his council or charged him with other cares. The queen, who was very interested in the prince that the fay had just mentioned, lifted her interdiction and even praised her.

Another fay, who appeared after the one from Fontainebleau, threw herself at the queen's feet and told her that she lived in the Château de Chambord, where she had had almost no opportunity to do good or evil;³ that she had nevertheless had good will; and that, unable to do any better, she had often prevented the foxes from eating the pheasants; she even admitted that the only malice she had ever done was to present herself to a hunter in the form of a fox, made him fire several rifle shots and come back in the same form to ask the hunter whether he had seen two of her little comrades go by. The entire company laughed, including the queen. The fay begged the queen, however, to reestablish her prerogatives as a fay; the queen consented to that, but limited her to doing harm to foxes, wolves, cats and other animals that eat game.

Another fay, who had a very intelligent appearance, presented herself before the queen and said that she had retired to the Château de Chantilly, where she had contributed a great deal to the education of several great heroes; that in recent times she had taken particular care to embellish the house and gardens, and that she had had the skill to attract a princess there who was so charming that she alone, without the help of the waters and the gardens sufficed to render the château the most agreeable abode on earth. The queen, who liked actions in which virtue and industry appeared, permitted her to enchant as before.

A new fay presented herself, with rather extraordinary garments, and told the queen that she had once lived in Heidelberg Castle; that other fays, enemies of the house Palatine, had been at the childbed of the Electress and had given several nasty predictions to the princes and princesses born there; that she had only been here once, by chance, at the time when the Electress gave birth to a princess whom she had endowed with great virtue, a good mind, much probity and elevation and a very noble soul; that she had not even neglected to give her beautiful teeth and beautiful hair; but that princess having passed into other states and the electorate into distant branches, in which she did not know anyone, she was resolved no longer to return to Heidelberg, begging the queen to assign her another mansion for her dwelling. The queen, satisfied with the good faith of the German fay, reestablished her former privileges and assigned for the Château de Montargis and its forest for her ordinary dwelling.

Another fay, very replete, prostrated herself before the queen and told her that she lived in the Château d'Amboise and its forest, that once when she was bathing in the Loire she had prevented a boat from capsizing, and that that action alone merited the restoration of her privileges; but the queen remembered that the fay had been part of the conspiracy that had once been woven around the Château d'Amboise, and dismissed her without listening to her any further.⁴

The fay of the Château de Blois presented herself before the queen and told her that she had taken care to conserve in Bois fine language and fine cream, asking to be reestablished in her rights, but the queen, who remembered that she had given occasion to everything that had happened in the last estates of Blois and had a more recent memory of pernicious advice that she had inspired not long ago in a great prince who lived in the château, ordered her to work perfecting Blois cream, and forbade her to meddle in anything else.

Another fay was presented, simply clad, who said to the queen that she was one of the oldest fays in the world, that she lived in the Château de Pons in Saintonge, that she had seen it

³ After the death in 1547 of François I, who had it built as a hunting lodge but hardly used it, the Château de Chambord was abandoned until Louis XIV ordered its restoration in the mid-17th century, but he abandoned it in 1685.

⁴ The Amboise conspiracy of 1560 was an alleged Huguenot plot to abduct François II and seize political control of the realm.

change master several times, dolorously, and, dreading that it might finally fall into the hands of a bad master, she had procured its possession by a prince who was no less commendable by his intelligence and a host of good qualities than for his high birth.⁵ The queen, in favor of that good action, permitted the fay to continue to work enchantments as of old.

Another fay came forward, who told the queen that she lived in the Château d'Epagny in Bourgogne, of which she had procured the possession by a great princess, who, by virtue of her extreme beauty, her majestic air and her good conduct merited being compared to the Queen of the Fays, since her reputation was known throughout the world, to the point that peoples of the extremities of the earth had made her their divinity; the fay asked that her privileges be reestablished, and even added that she had never done other malice than once breaking the drawbridge of the château in order to retain for longer the most august company in the world, which she had attracted there. The queen found that she had good taste and lifted her interdiction.

One appeared who had a very serious expression, and said that she lived in the Château de Nancy, that she had seen with a great deal of regret the absence of her prince, that if anything had contributed to console her for that, it was the alliance he had made with a queen of august blood who had a great deal of virtue and piety; that she had abandoned the Château de Nancy for some time to attend the first childbirth of that queen and had endowed the child with a handsome face, great valor and a strong inclination to return to his estates; that, the prince having reached an age to be married, she had conducted his affairs so well that she had procured him a young princess who only counted kings and emperors among her ancestors, but much less considerable by her high birth than her docility, her intelligence and her noble manners. "I flatter myself, great Queen," the fay continued, "that in favor of that illustrious couple, you will reestablish me in my former rights, in the assurance that I give out that the first child born to that marriage will not fail to be endowed very advantageously." The queen started laughing, and lifted the interdiction.

Another fay presented herself, who spoke a corrupt French and told the queen that she lived in the Château de Ryswick, to which she had attracted by means of her skill the ambassadors of the greatest princes on earth, and after several conferences, had finally obliged them to conclude a good peace.⁶ Then she wanted to talk about the merit of the princes of the house of Nassau, to whom the house belonged, but the queen, who was fully convinced, told her that she did not need any other reasons to engage her to lift her interdiction. She praised her zeal highly and not only reestablished all her ancient functions, but accorded her the same favor for another fay, whom she could choose.

A very decrepit fay appeared before the queen, and told her that she had lived in the Château de Loches for a long time, where nothing had very happened against the service of the princess; that even the English, having besieged the castle, which they thought they would take by famine, and having reduced the besieged to the last extremity for want of food, she had imitated the squeal of a pig and started crying night and day on the ramparts, with the result that the English, convinced that there were still abundant provisions within the castle, lifted the siege. In addition, she had exercised such delicacy in the choice of governors of the place that she had only ever suffered persons of great merit and known probity, and that in recent times, when the castle no longer had a garrison or fortifications, she had never relented on the probity of the governor. The queen, who admired actions of honor, reestablished her privileges as a fay.

⁵ The Château de Pons was besieged and destroyed by Louis XIII in 1621.

⁶ The Treaty of Ryswick, signed in September-October 1697, can only have been concluded very shortly before the story, published in 1698, was written.

Another fay presented herself, who told the queen that she lived in the castle of Barcelona, that she had always loved fine actions; that in spite of whatever predilection she might have had for her homeland, she had been so touched by the extreme valor of the two princes who had attacked its ramparts that she had not been able to refuse them entry to her castle. The queen replied that all women were virtuous if they were touched by someone's merit, that since she had paid more attention to the valor of the two heroes than to her duty, she ordered her to leave the castle of Barcelona and go to that of Aner, where she could watch over the establishment of that house; she left her the liberty of all her former privileges for that.

The queen was trying to end the session when another fay appeared, dressed in the Turkish style, who said that she had lived for a long time in the castle of Andrinople, where she had often changed the condition of a slave into that of a sultana and that, in order to conform with the character of the Queen of the Fays, she had watched over the conservation of the Ottoman princes, and had even prompted the abolition of the barbaric custom of strangling they younger ones for the security of the eldest. By virtue of that, three brothers had ruled successively, and then the son of the first had succeeded is father and his uncles.

The queen lifted her interdiction, gave great praise to the vigilance of the fay, and said that it was to be wished that all fays had the same attention and watched continuously over the conservation of great princes, lamenting that none had been found to go into Spain to watch over the royal house; but the fays responded that they only chose old castles for their retreat and Her Majesty knew very well that there were no castles in Spain.

Several foreign fays then presented themselves, but the queen, who was convinced of great vexations that they had caused in the countries where they lived, did not want to listen to them, and after having made a very eloquent speech, to exhort those who remained under interdiction to apply themselves to virtue, she closed the session after having signed them to return in three centuries to the hall in the Château de Pau to render her an account of the progress they had made in the exercise of virtue.