

The Little Fays in the Air

Not far from the forest of Broceliande there was a field of wheat and poppies, which, no matter whether it was spring, summer, autumn or winter, never ceased to be golden and crimson; if there were terrible storms, that did not prevent the poppies and the wheat from undulating as slowly and delightfully as they did under a breeze that scarcely brushed them. For that field did not belong to any lord or rich peasant; a dependency of the forest, it was the property of the fays.

Many singular stories were told about it: that amorous couples who bowed their heads there to unite their lips there at nightfall suddenly felt themselves seized by crazy laughter, which was ill-suited to the kiss; that if they went on—which is to say, if they contained the laughter within kisses—little sprites did not take long to appear, who made a game, not of taking them away from you, which might have been very useful, but of putting back, all the way to the neck, the garments you were in the process of removing. Worse still, young persons were seen who went into the field of wheat and poppies when August was burning the sky and the earth, with the blushing resolution not even to keep on the stockings that grandmother knitted, came out again clad up to the ears and higher, even with furs, which the sprites had added.

It is a strange pretention to want to prevent people from stripping naked when they want to do so, and without a doubt that field, although magical, would have been avoided carefully by all lovers endowed with any common sense, if the renown had not spread throughout the land of the prettier games, more amusing than anything that can be imagined, to which the fays delivered themselves when the lovers had departed, weary of being teased and dressed again.

What were those games? No one knew, but everyone agreed in saying that they were the most charming in the world; throughout the land it was a commonly said of a man full of wine: “Of course he’s content—but he’s not as content as the fays of the field of Broceliande.” What could they do to amuse themselves, then, the Ladies of the poppies and the wheat, that was worth more than the dream of a drunkard beating the walls under a black and rainy sky and believing that there are no more stars in the night because he had drunk them all? What had they invented, Abonde, Oriane, Meliandre, Fenilyce, Revelyne and Nigrane, and you too, Alaleine, the favorite of my rhymes, who, in the refrain of a popular song, blends with the name of the daughter of the Swan?¹

Now, no one wanted to surprise the fays’ secret more than little Vivonne.

It was not that she was without joy herself. Oh, no! It happened that she did not refuse her mouth to her friend-fiancé, whom she loved with all her heart. Oh, how wholeheartedly she loved him! And the young woman who gives her lips to a mouth that she loves has nothing whatsoever about which to complain. Soon, he would marry her. In the meantime, he kissed her lips, and also her teeth. Good. She had a heart full of a sweetness she could not have described. Yes, truly, her heart was so full of delight that it weighed heavily within her breast. And she thought that the fays were certainly not as happy as her. Even so, it was her desire to surprise their secret; and one evening, the moon being propitious—so a knowledgeable witch had told her—she slipped along the wall, leapt over a ditch and found herself before the field of wheat and poppies haunted by the fays...

Oh, how charming it was!

What she saw right away, over the entire field, in the moonlight, was muslin and gold, but it was quite possible that the muslin, instead of being fabric, and the gold, instead of being metal, were made of clouds and radiance, and that the radiance and the clouds, with their resemblance to muslin and gold, were little fays wandering in the air was also very probable. With the consequence that Vivonne, her head between the branches of a bush that, out of pity, had no thorns, watched the diversions that the ladies of the forest of Broceliande gave themselves in the field of poppies and wheat.

And you could not have imagined anything more exquisite than the fays’ games.

Some of them, in long trailing robes of yellow satin, were strolling through the wheat two by two, holding hands. Sometimes they stopped in order to salute one another ceremoniously, saying things to one another that seemed to be complimentary and entirely agreeable. Others, sitting on carpets extended by servants with butterfly

¹ i.e. Hélène [Helen of Troy], the daughter of Leda, seduced by Zeus in the guise of a swan. The names Fenilyce, Revelyne, Nigrane and Alaleine all appear to be improvised, and the popular song cited is untraceable. I have reproduced the name Fenilyce as it appears in the book, but cannot help suspecting, given that it surely ought to rhyme with Revelyne, that it is a misprint for Fenilyne.

wings, were playing chess, or knucklebones, or spillikins, and appeared to be taking an extreme pleasure therein. And what precious stones all of them had on their fingers, around their wrists and in their hair! There was not one who did not make, as she moved, a sound of rattling jewelry.

Seeing and hearing so many things, it was as if little Vivonne were mad with pleasure, with her head between the branches of the bush, which, although it had no thorns, nevertheless tickled her under her ears.

But what completed her surprise, admiration and envy was a troupe of little fays—they were blue, and as transparent as moonbeams in the form of women clad in gauze—who were leaping from poppy to poppy all over the field, above the wheat. Yes, from flower to flower, on the tips of miraculous toes, they were running, flying, returning, running again, flying again, but coming back, resembling women more beautiful than women, who might have had butterflies for feet. They were so light that not one stem bent and not one flower even trembled under the passage of the ardent dancers!

From time to time they paused, and then smiled, and laughed; and it was evident that they were taking an infinite pleasure in running from flower to flower. They imagined wagers as to which of them, leaping from poppy to poppy—without breaking a single one, it goes without saying—could arrive most rapidly at the ditch of the field. And there were a thousand giggles at every victory and every defeat.

Heavens, how agreeable it would have been for Vivonne to join in with such pretty games! She could not hold still any longer; she emerged from behind the bush and, showing herself, she said: “Oh, Mesdames the fays, teach me, please, how you dance like that on the tips of poppies! It must be infinitely agreeable, I think, and I’d dearly like to do as much!”

Abruptly, all the dances were interrupted, and almost all the fays cried: “Ah! Little girl, little girl, come here! How pretty you are! Come here, I beg you. You’re utterly pretty! Oh, truly, you’d like to dance like us on the extreme summits of the flowers? It’s very amusing, in fact, and not difficult. It’s sufficient to be light.”

“Oh,” said Vivonne, “light I believe I am. No boy has ever complained, while dancing, of my heaviness in his arms, and once, when a thorn had stuck in my heel, my friend-fiancé, without flinching—it’s true the he’s very strong—carried me from the edge of the wood to the farm. But as scantily heavy as I am, I couldn’t, I imagine, walk on flowers without breaking a single stem. You must have a secret that I’d very much like to know, for it would please me so much to flutter from calyx to calyx like the bees and the dragonflies.”

The fays, having paused momentarily, seemed to consult one another, and one of them, descending from a poppy, said to Vivonne: “What will you do with your heart?”

“With my heart?”

“Yes. It’s the heart that is heavy, because it is full of pities, ardors, amours and melancholies. It’s the weight of your heart that prevents you from walking, without bending them, from pistil to pistil. We have no hearts ourselves, because we’re fays. And we can walk, with gliding feet, over the colors and the perfumes of the meadows. Come on, little girl, be like us. Renounce having a heart! If you consent to that, a sprite very expert in operations of that sort will withdraw the heart from your breast; and, lightened, you can flutter with us between the corollas and the breeze. Come on, come on, decide quickly—is it necessary to call the surgeon sprite?”

But Vivonne burst out laughing.

“Fays,” she said, “you can walk without me in the fields of Broceliande over the poppies and the what. To be sure, it’s a pretty dance, your fluttering dance, but I intend to remain as heavy as I am, weighed down by a heart by means of which I love, and am worthy of being loved...”

Then, carelessly, she returned to the village where, by virtue of the pleasure she had in feeling her heart beat faster when her friend-fiancé appeared, she recognized that she had had done very well not to throw her heart to the poppies. And in the meantime, the poor little fays recommenced playing at the summits of the flowers, and pretending to take pleasure in being so light—oh, too light.