

## PART ONE: THE STATUE

### I

As a child he lived in an old château in a gorge in the Cévennes. He was as wild as a tercel; he climbed trees and walked barefoot.

In that château, in the depths of a flower-garden—a wretched flower-garden if it had been new, but a beautiful flower-garden because it was old—between two yellow marble vases full of apples and pomegranates, a stone woman who had only one arm wept over a round basin.

That woman was, it was said, a statue, but do not believe it; she was a real woman who wept by day and walked by night.

She was a real woman—I can answer for that—and the child loved her.

She was a real woman; by night she could be seen passing through the hornbeams and bathing in the pond. More than a hundred times, by night, she had been encountered on the dark stairway or in the long corridor.

By day, her tears filled three large shells and then fell in a cascade into a little basin, a pretty basin under tall linden trees.

Do you like linden trees, trimmed linden trees? And high hornbeam hedges? And lawns bordered by box?

The child loved them; but above all he loved the statue that only had one arm and whose feet were dainty, so dainty that speckled ferns grew between their toes.

He was jealous of the ferns, the child, but they went so well with the little feet that he watered their velvety leaves every morning.

He was also jealous of a yellow wallflower whose perfume rose as far as the pale woman.

Perhaps the child has become a man, but it might also be the case that his soul sometimes sleeps in the leaves of a fern or the yellow flowers of a wallflower..

I know which, but what does it matter to you?

He was, as I have said, as wild as a tercel, and as lazy as a lizard. Any unfamiliar face made him flee; every bed of moss attracted him.

How many good places there were under the service trees, near the lilac! Lying on his back, his hands behind his head, at the bend in the canal, how well-placed he was to see the gilded palaces of the clouds!

They were good times. Perhaps, today, he is rolling his stone in the hot sun; then, in the sage, alongside the crickets, under the tall lindens, when midday chimed, his eyes half-closed, his blouse open, he gazed at the serious face with the tousled hair in the water of the basin.

He gazed into the water because, in that water, the statue opened her casket full of charming jewels, of bracelets of pink anemones, or earrings of buttercups.

How the child loved her, that white woman with the sad smile!

But only the grandfather knew that.

In the sunlit vineyards where the cicadas sang on the twisted peach-trees; in the shady meadows where the glistening walnut-trees extended their roots into the depths of clear ditches, when the grandfather brought the child, the child spoke to him in a whisper about the white woman with the long lowered eyes.

“When you are grown up, never forget her,” he replied to him.

They loved one another, the child and the grandfather.

Those were good times. In the wooden bench of the great hornbeam hedge they chatted like two friends, and when the old man fell silent, the child pressed the large hand with swollen veins to his lips.

In the evening, by the fire of woodchips, the grandfather talked about what a man ought to believe: about sprites and fays, about Morgane and Merlin, the knights of Arthur and the peers of Charlemagne.

Then he said: "March straight and look upwards; too bad if you fall; the strong man who falls gets up proudly."

The grandfather is sleeping today in the little cemetery in the middle of the vineyards; the child has traveled so far that he is weary of it; he has seen so many men that he is saddened by them; but...

What does that matter to you? You only want to know why the child never stopped before the two sphinxes that warmed their granite rumps in the sun.

He did not approach the sphinxes lying on the sand, which guarded the door of the drawing room because one night, in a treble dream, he had seen the monsters crush the woman with lowered eyes beneath their claws.

"Was he dreaming?"

"If it had only been a dream, why was a marble arm lying between the smiling monsters, outside the drawing room door, the next morning?"<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps he was dreaming, though; he dreams every night.

As soon as he hides fearfully under the serge curtains of the big square bed, the stone woman leans over his beside, put a kiss on his forehead, and his soul flies away to strange lands where the flowers are alive, where the mountains sing and where blue gods bathe in rivers of milk.

"Is he still dreaming today?"

"Who can tell?"

## II

It is the night of the summer solstice. A bright fire is burning on the Plateau de la Madeleine and the mountain-dwellers are circling and singing: Saint John! Saint John! Girls, come and dance at the fire of Saint John!" Girls and boys are dancing in a circle.<sup>2</sup>

The crescent moon, as thin as a sickle, gazes eastwards. Tears are no longer falling from the eyes of the statue into the granite shells. The leaves are motionless, the nightjar is flying soundlessly, the silent owl is putting his head outside his hole and the guard dog lying in front of his niche is wagging his tail slowly.

The statue descends from her pedestal.

The violets open their wide eyes in the grass; in order to see better, the narcissi sand up on their stems; a rose who loves a glow-worm calls to her sleeping sisters; and the bells of the hyacinths say to the stars of the jasmine: "Look at the statue walking in the path alongside the hornbeam hedge; the old trees are saluting her and the snakes of the canal are making emerald and sapphire bracelets for her."

She is walking slowly, a diadem of ears of wheat retaining the heavy tresses of her ash-gray hair and a belt of vines tightening her green robe decorated with golden reeds.

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<sup>1</sup> Interpolated couplets of dialogue like this one, which sometimes extend to much longer exchanges, are one of the idiosyncratic features of the narrative. Because of the way that dialogue is signified in French texts, with a prefatory dash rather than quotation marks, it is not always obvious that the couplets are couplets rather than the following paragraph being a continuation of the second speaker's observations. As to who the speakers might be at any point in the narrative, readers will have to make up their minds about that on the many occasions when they are not clearly identified. It might be relevant to note that the protagonists of some other quasi-autobiographical stories by L'Estouille conduct dialogues with characters that turn out to be imaginary internal voices, notably the dialogue between Jean Philibert and the parrot in the episode in *Fusains* rewritten as "Hélène" in *Les Amoureuses*.

<sup>2</sup> The feast of Saint John the Baptist (23-24 June) replaced pagan celebrations of the summer solstice in the Christian calendar, but local celebrations often retained pagan elements.

Blackbirds are whistling in the ivy. The druidess has put on her fay's robe, her bright robe of the past.

On the sand turning pale outside the door of the drawing room, the two sphinxes extend their granite paws

"He has gone," says the more handsome, "the one who had a lotus flower on his brow. Is it necessary to follow him?"

"No," replies the pink sphinx, the one that has an asp with an inflated neck on its forehead.

But the fay came down from the high hornbeam arbor by the path bordered by box.

"Shut up, maidservants," she says, touching them with the tip of her sickle. "It is to carry my bed, out there on the banks of the Ganges, that his chisel carved you in the formless block.

On the reddened sand the monsters stretch out under the golden sickle, blood having flowed from their porphyry flanks.

Leaning on the perron, the grandfather listens to the sound of the carriage descending the avenue. He says:

"The old man will die alone; the child has gone. It was time to make a man of him.

"These old hands will no longer hold yours, child, but this old heart will beat faster tomorrow in a broader chest, for loving you more."

The mountain-dwellers are singing in the depths of the valleys: "Saint John! Saint John! Bring faggots of broom and holly to the fire of Saint John to chase away the evil spirit."

The fire goes out and the stone woman, the fay of the round basin, emerges from the great beech wood.

She is as white as a daisy, as blonde as an ear of wheat, as supple as a rush and as beautiful as a rose.

Her sickle lowered and her eyes upraised, she stops before the extinct fire.

"Have you pardoned the proud man?" she says, with a sob.

Under the fir trees a voice responds: "The man is the master of his destiny; you have not wanted to die."

The druidess collapses and her tears fall on to the still-warm ashes. In the depths of the valleys the mountain-dwellers sing: "Saint John! Saint John! Come and dance, Fayolles at the fire of Saint John; midnight is about to chime."<sup>3</sup>

The tears of the druidess fall on to the still-warm ashes; as she watches the sparks rise she says: "Die! I haven't wanted to die? Oh, yes, but he wanted when he awoke to find my soul in a body similar to the one that he loved. Forgive the proud man, Master.

"Your people, like germinating wheat carrying in its leaves the mud of the earth, was born under the sun of India under flowers with intoxicating perfumes, but it went to die, blinded by the sun, asphyxiated by the flowers; wanted it to carry ears of wheat; you put your billhook and your hoe in the hand of the Potter.

"You said to him: 'Like the plants they are living, like the flowers they are loving; to the laws of matter alone they are submissive, and in the tender arms of matter their souls have gone to sleep; awaken them by crying my name to them.'

"Your name had too many letters for the tongues of children; the syllables were cut up and each of the syllables became the name of a god, but in pronouncing them, all were pronouncing your name.

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<sup>3</sup> Les Fayolles is a mountainous region in the vicinity of the commune of Roanne in the Monts de la Madeleine, where L'Etoile was born; the term is being applied here both to real imaginary inhabitants, with an element of wordplay, more evident in English than in French, that links the Fayolles of the story with the alternative spelling of *fées* (fays.) employed in Medieval romances featuring Mourgue la Faye (L'Etoile's Morgane; Morgan le Fay in Malory).

“In the granite of Elora he carved them, colossal, vague and monstrous.<sup>4</sup> He put flames in their hearts and poems on their foreheads. Master, pardon your worker, who, in an hour of folly, after having given a body of bronze to your poem, wanted to give a body of mud to his song.

“Pardon; when, your people having grown, you wanted to show yourself to him in your dazzling unity, you said to the potter who as dreaming up above in his luminous pantheon: ‘Get up!’ Free, he responded: ‘I am your slave; command.’

“And he said to me: ‘Before us the road will be long; it will require an ax, and no longer a chisel; you shall be the Voice and I shall be the Arm. If life reunites us we shall love one another as we love one another today; if it separates us, we shall find one another again at death.’

“And without complaints and without regrets we have closed our eyes to the light from above, and your hand has thrown us into human darkness

“Pardon your soldier! Pardon your druidess!

“But you have pardoned; you have enabled him to be reborn near me, and during his sleep my soul talks to his... He is your worker; what have you commanded him to do? I don’t know; but he has come because you have sent him. Let me help him; I am still the druidess and I will not forget my oath.”

A breath of wind passes over the ashes; sparks spring forth and smoke rises.

The smoke dissipates... Where is the druidess? Who is that pale child with golden hair and lowered eyes?

The mountain-dwellers are singing in the depths of the valleys: “Saint John! Saint John! Dance at the fire of Saint John, Fayolles, midnight is chiming.

Like dry leaves over the flowery heath a breath of wind carries them away, the white Fayolles; midnight is chiming.

Like swallows around the great rock they are twittering. Listen! “We were druidesses when the woods talked; we are Fayolles among the baptized. Priestesses without altars, widows without fiancés, we are the beloved of the heaths, the incense of the forests.”

The fire revives. On its ashes the child sleeps; like a flock of swans they circle. Listen! “The flame revives, the druidess sleeps; we have divined. The prison is open, the sin expiated. In the hollow oak let us hide the sickle that injured his hand; widows without fiancés, we love those who love one another; priestesses without altars, we bear all the way to the Master the incense of kisses.”

Around the broad heath their dance unwinds; the child sleeps. Listen! “Forget, the Master forgives. Forget the starry belt that only death can untie. Forget the golden sickle that only death can break. No longer be, on awakening, the queen of the Ganges, the beloved of the great potter.”

The sun rises. Like dry leaves on the flowery heath, a breath of wind cries them away, the white Fayolles.

Over the canal a blue vapor floats. Slowly, it rises all the way to the branches of the lindens, whose crowns are silvered; then, abruptly, like a falling veil, it falls on to the flower-garden.

In their niches in the hornbeams, one might think that the marble vases were leaning over on their granite pedestals, and that the two sphinxes were standing up.

The Orient is reddening, the mist falling.

They are no longer two monsters on watch before the drawing room door but two women smiling on their granite pedestals.

The crowns of the linens quiver. Three sunbeams tint the plain crimson. The mist flies away. The vision vanishes.

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<sup>4</sup> The reference is to the carvings in the subterranean temples in the caves of Ellora in India; in L’Estaille’s imaginary prehistory they represent the primary Indo-European culture whose migration to Europe originated the culture herein originated by “the Celt” (he had previously called them Gaels), one of whose subdivisions became the Gauls.

Is she not pretty, with her wide eyes open and her hair tousled, the child that the foresters bring to the grandfather?

“We found her on the ashes of the fire of Saint John.”

“She does not have eyes like our women; she has the eyes of the women painted on Egyptian sarcophagi, eyes that give the impression of having seen the commencement.”<sup>5</sup>

“She speaks a language that we don’t understand; what is it necessary to do with her?”

“Leave her with me. I understand her. She is from a long way from here. Go, lads, and have a drink in the kitchen.”

“Where do you come from, child?”

“From a land where the flowers talk, where the mountains sing, and where the blue gods bathe in rivers of milk.”

“When did you leave that beautiful land?”

“I don’t know. I awoke up here, next to a fire that was going out.”

The grandfather smiled. *When the child comes back*, he said in his soul, *he’ll no longer find the statue that he loved on the edge of the basin, but on the wooden bench of the larger hornbeam hedge, I believe he’ll find the love of the past.*

“Do you know your name, child?”

“I’ve forgotten it.”

“If you like, we’ll call you Alauna.”<sup>6</sup>

“I’d like that very much.”

Look at her, but a little further on. As wild as a swallow, she will be fifteen years old tomorrow.

“Is the statue no longer on its pedestal?”

The gardener said: “It has been stolen for the messieurs from Paris.

“And the arm that was found one morning outside the drawing room door. Between the two sphinxes?”

“That has been stolen too.”

“Ah!”

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<sup>5</sup> Roanne has an important archaeological museum, nowadays known as the Musée Joseph Déchelette, in which many Egyptian artifacts are juxtaposed with ancient artifacts excavated in the locale; it was inaugurated in 1844, and L’Estoille surely visited it as a boy.

<sup>6</sup> Alauna was allegedly a Celtic river goddess, although the name is derived from the Latin, where it was applied to the river Aulne in Bretagne by Roman colonists. The Romans also applied the name to a fort in Cumbria, in association with which it was sometimes Anglicized as Alona, the name given to the equivalent character in “Symphonie.”