

Stéphanie de Genlis: *The Isle of Monsters*
(*Les Jeux champêtres des enfant et de l'île des monstres, 1822*)

There was once a king and a queen who only had one daughter, the beautiful Princess Ernelinde, who was brought up by the ingenious Clairvoyante, the most celebrated fay of her time. As was customary, the princess was endowed at birth with the most brilliant and the most lovable qualities; she had many graces, intelligence, a good memory, a taste and talent for the arts, and generosity; in sum, almost all the gifts that render a princess accomplished.

By a strange fatality, however, there has always existed in courts and governments a forgetfulness of past events, which renders experience almost useless to kings and their ministers. For example, at all the births of princesses, they continually forget to invite one implacable and powerful fay, and in spite of the fidelity of thousands of historians on this point, that is what happened at the birth of Ernelinde. One punctilious and susceptible fay was forgotten, who suddenly arrived and who said, bitterly: "You have scorned my gifts; I shall annul all of yours; I give this child secret pride and presumption."

At that fatal oracle, all the courtiers protested that those two vices of mediocre minds would only be a just sentiment and consciousness of the extent of her talents and the strength of her genius; but the fay Clairvoyante lowered her eyes, sighing, and foresaw all the harm that would inevitably be attached to that kind of malediction.

The princess reached the age of seventeen with a superior mind, delightful talents and an education astonishing for her age. She was sensitive, generous and benevolent, but the deadly charm acted nevertheless on her character. She was accessible to all kinds of flattery, and, thinking that she knew everything, she became a stranger to the desire for instruction. Study no longer appeared to be anything but a superfluous effort for her.

In the end, she even neglected reading, thinking that it was impossible for her to find anything new in books. She had a particular liking for natural history, but she no longer occupied herself with it, imagining that the entire universe was represented by specimens in hothouses, museums and the king's palace menagerie. The scholars attached to the court had repeated to her so many times that she had a education infinitely more extensive than all the professors in the realm that she was convinced of it, and did not apply herself to anything. She delivered herself to vain dissipation and frivolous amusements, and gradually forgot what she had learned.

All the representations of the fay were futile; Ernelinde had lost any kind of docility and only had confidence in her own enlightenment. However, as she had always been as celebrated for her brilliant education as she was for her rare beauty, her hand was requested by the greatest princes in Asia, who came to her father's court to dispute her conquest.

The fay Clairvoyante, whom she did not consult, wanted nevertheless to direct her choice in favor of the amiable and virtuous Almanzor. If Ernelinde had only listened to her heart and her reason, she would undoubtedly have preferred that young prince to any other, but he was not a flatterer and his sincerity wounded Ernelinde more than once, so she ended up convincing herself that Almanzor did not have enough intelligence and enlightenment to be able to appreciate her superior merit. One of the prince's rivals, who lavished the most emphatic and the most extravagant praise on the princess, did not win her heart, but he seduced her pride. Nevertheless, she could not resolve to dismiss Almanzor in a positive manner.

As Ernelinde had intelligence and imagination, she became an author; she composed a play in the "romantic" genre—which is to say, neglecting all the rules established by reason and taste, and

consecrated by immortal masterpieces.¹ That play, which was a tragedy, was performed at court, and as no one was ignorant of the name of the author, it was applauded excessively. In the midst of that universal adulation, only Almanzor maintained a bleak silence.

That prince, who loved all the arts, had a superior talent for painting. Ernelinde had asked him to paint a picture for her, and three weeks after the aforementioned performance, Almanzor announced to her that the painting she desired was finished. Ernelinde promised herself secretly to criticize it severely.

That was an authorial vengeance that she was only too authorized in taking. Almanzor's painting, although brilliant, had a ridiculous falsity of color and a shocking bizarrerie. It represented a landscape whose skies were a bright pistachio green, against which trees were designed of a beautiful flax-gray with silvered trunks. The princess protested against the ridiculousness of the painting.

"Madame," Almanzor said to her, "I wanted to conform to your taste; you reject everything that is taken from nature; you disdain all plausibilities and routes frayed by great masters, and the desire to please and imitate you has made me invent this 'romantic' genre of painting."

The princess, suffocated by anger, withdrew, ordering Almanzor never to appear before her eyes again.

The fay tried in vain to appease Ernelinde. The latter, beside herself, got so carried away that the fay, in spite of the natural docility of her character, finally resolved to punish and confound the arrogance of her presumptuous pupil, and she made her this speech:

"It's time to put an end to your extravagance. You think you know everything; I have repeated to you in vain that there are inexhaustible sources of instruction in nature, and that an infinite number of things exist of which you are ignorant. There are even a large number that are before your eyes, and which you do not know, so inattentive and scantily reflective you are. I am imposing a penitence of twenty-four hours upon you. I shall transport you to the isle of monsters.

"That is not a fantastic land created by my art. It exists and it will make you aware by means of its extraordinary productions that you have very superficial ideas about geography, botany, natural history and many other sciences. In spite of the fear that will grip you, you will have nothing to dread on that marvelous island. I shall give you a sovereign power over all the ferocious monsters that you will encounter there."

With those words, the fay touched Ernelinde with her magic wand. The princess fell into a profound sleep, and when she awoke she experienced an inexpressible astonishment.

She found herself in a wood, all the trees and flowers in which were unknown to her. She was sitting on a monstrous tree devoid of leaves, the top of which was severed. She saw that she was so high above the ground that she dared not descend for fear of killing herself. She fixed her gaze on an extraordinary object placed opposite her; it was a very singular kind of grotto leaning against two or three small rocks; it did not appear to contain anything, and formed a sort of oval niche. Ernelinde could only discover the hollow—which is to say, the interior of the grotto, the ornaments of which she admired, for it was entirely lined with charming flowers that Ernelinde was seeing for the first time. Those flowers, more or less open, had all their leaves, buds and stems, and all the freshness of the most beautiful plants.

The princess, passionately desirous of visiting that pretty grotto, made a slight movement to let herself slide from her tree, and immediately found herself on her feet on sand strewn with large pebbles and enormous shells, which, instead of wounding her, seemed to flatten out under her feet like the lightest dust—a prodigy that she attributed to a particular generosity of the fay.

¹ Madame de Genlis (1746-1830), an enthusiastic educationalist who served as a volunteer professor to numerous aristocratic children, eventually became a vocal adversary of the *philosophes*, especially Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose theories of education she followed in part while opposing in detail. Rousseau had a powerful influence on the French school of Romantic literature, but this characterization of Romanticism is simplistic and misguided. She did not live to see the publication by Charles Nodier, the great pioneer of French Romantic prose and a keen amateur entomologist, of "Sibylle Merian (1833, but probably written considerably earlier) a story that is very similar to "L'Île des monstres," but which substitutes a real entomologist for the imaginary fay as a agent of enlightenment.

She was getting ready to go into the grotto when she saw two monsters approaching that caused her to recoil in astonishment and fear. One, the size of a sheep, had a head entirely covered with eyes. That new Argus had a stout, yellow and black hairy body, eight legs and two terrible hands of a sort terminated by claws in the form of pincers. The other monster, brighter and no less strange, as large as an ox, had a pink skin strewn with large pearls; its triangular head was ornamented with fringes; its feet were full of rings and pearls, and its toenails were cut up into festoons.

“Just Heaven!” cried Ernelinde. “If it’s true that these animals are not vain phantoms, how far I am, in fact, from knowing all that nature produces of the extraordinary. But they aren’t illusions, because the fay is incapable of lying.”

As she spoke, the princess hastened to enter into a thicket of flowering bushes that was on the other side of the large felled tree that she had just quit. Suddenly, she heard a small harmonious sound behind her; she turned round and saw a kind of enormous bird with large silver filigree wings stuck to the bark of the tree, which was singing a little tune as varied as it as melodious..

The princess had stopped to listen to it, but a new monster that was heading toward her, making prodigious leaps, forced her to flee. That animal, larger and more agile than a cat, had six legs bristling with spines and hooks; its back was scaly and its broad belly furrowed and hairy; its mouth as armed with a long, sharp trunk, still dripping the blood on which it nourished itself. Seized by horror, Ernelinde, seeing that it was about to reach her, tried—but without hope—to repel it with her feeble hand. Immediately, the animal leapt backwards and disappeared into the undergrowth.

Reassured by that success, Ernelinde continued walking, but she fell back into terror on finding herself suddenly surrounded by a multitude of animals that were equally frightening and miraculous. The one nearest to her, as long as her arm and flattened in form, was covered with a scaly and tiled skin; two horns were mounted on its head; it had fourteen legs and a long forked tail. Another, even larger, was bright green, with feet of a beautiful lemon yellow, and terrible sledgehammers on its head. Another bore charming ornaments on its head, which were two magnificent tufts of beautiful feathers arranged in bouquets that would have sat very well on the head of a pretty woman; furthermore, that animal, which was neither a bird nor a quadruped, had a similar panache placed on the posterior of its body.

One of the nastiest of those animals had a round and flat face, brown in color, which was exhaling a fetid odor. Among all those monsters, however, the princess distinguished two that struck her by virtue of the splendor and richness of their adornment. One, the color of seaweed, was ornamented with superb turquoises; the other bore a magnificent royal mantle sewn with fleurs-de-lys.

The princess, entirely hardened against those monsters by the idea that she had an absolute empire over them, decided to continue walking, although they barred her way, forming a great circle around her; she advanced, and saw with an extreme surprise that, although walking very lightly, she crushed and killed a rather large number of them.

Unable to doubt then the supernatural power that she had over them, she was about to continue her route when she touched one of the monsters in passing, which immediately made a noise similar to that of a firearm, followed by a thick sky-blue smoke that formed a transparent cloud around the animal; it did not stop there, for it unleashed a further twenty shots; that artillery caused the princess a considerable fright. However, seeing that no harm came to her, she gathered her courage and started running, in order to leave all those monsters behind.

She was suddenly stopped in her course by finding herself on the rim of a sort of gulf, but as pretty as a gulf can be. It was bordered and lined internally by a superb drapery the color of fire; a monster defended the entrance to it. That yellow, black and hairy monster appeared to be armed with a shiny lance; it seemed to be holding a triangular palette and bore four large brushes between its legs.

After having examined that new marvel, Ernelinde drew away in order to go in search of others. A few paces further on she thought she saw a large pile of dead leaves; she drew closer and, to her great surprise, she saw that the apparent heap was an animal which flew into the air, lifting its head toward the sky.

The princess perceived a quantity of birds of immense dimensions. She saw others less gigantic, of a dazzling beauty; some had heads covered with precious stones, other bore wings of silver gauze ornamented with golden and nacreous scales, and their bodies were multicolored.

“What variety and richness there is in nature!” Ernelinde exclaimed. “How were so many phenomena and treasures able to escape my knowledge?”

The princess saw many other miraculous things, but, fatigued by a journey that had lasted for four or five hours, she invoked the fay in order to ask her to produce by means of her art a spring or stream that could offer her a means of slaking her ardent thirst. Scarcely had she formulated that wish than she saw before her a mass of water contained in a crystal carved into facets, in the form of a cup, but gigantic, for the princess estimated that it was three or four feet in height. As the water came up to the rim, the princess advanced to drink from it, but in casting her gaze upon the water she saw that it was full of frightful snakes that were agitating in all direction below the surface. Her fear was brought to a peak on perceiving among those reptiles an infinite number of death’s-heads, all of which were moving!

Ernelinde recoiled, shuddering, and as she turned her eyes to the right a new prodigy came to distract her from her thirst; she perceived a long avenue of trees, so tall that their summits seemed to plunge into the clouds. The princess, who had a poetic turn of mind, compared them to columns made and placed there to sustain the majestic vault of the heavens. She launched herself into the avenue and soon discovered in the distance a palace in proportion to the immense height of the trees. As she was admiring its structure she saw a giant emerge from the pompous edifice, the sight of whom made her tremble, for in general, human monsters are the most frightful of all.

The giant, compared to whom the famous Goliath would only have been a dwarf, was holding a bow and carrying a quiver over his shoulder; he advanced toward the princess. At that moment, a new monster, more frightful and a thousand times more extraordinary than all the previous ones, suddenly appeared fifty paces away from the princess. She judged that it was twice or three times as big as an elephant; it offered no distinct form, and resembled an enormous balloon. It stopped in front of the princess and became motionless, staring at her intently and opening a terrible mouth.

For her part, Ernelinde could not help attaching her gaze to the formidable creature; she fell into a horrible state of stupor and soon experienced the most inexplicable sensation. She felt the effect of an incomprehensible attraction caused by the invisible supernatural power of ferocity over terror. The monster was attracting her; she could only resist with extreme difficulty the invincible force that was drawing her toward it: a redoubtable emblem of the infernal power that, in spite of our enlightenment, so often pushes us and precipitates us into profound abysses.

The horrified Ernelinde was finally about to launch herself into the hideous and menacing maw, which was opening to engulf her, when the giant, who was watching over her, took a sharp arrow from his quiver and launched it at the monster, which immediately rolled in the dust and fell dead. Disengaged from the frightful weight that was oppressing her, Ernelinde breathed in, blessing her liberator.

At the same moment a sonorous voice became audible; it was that of the fay, who pronounced these words distinctly: “Ernelinde has been cured of her presumption; she will know henceforth that the more one is instructed, and the more things one has seen, the more aware one becomes that an infinity of prodigies exists that feeble human reason cannot explain, and that the longest and most assiduous research and study are required for us to discover and know a multitude of curious facts that we have continually before our eyes, without our perceiving and suspecting them.

“In sum,” the voice continued. “Ernelinde ought to know now that one only ought to seek the extraordinary and the marvelous in nature, because everything can be found there, and that our imagination alone, without that necessary and sublime guide, can only ever produce extravagances. So, Almanzor, appear under your true features; there is no more need now, in order to please my pupil, to adopt false colors and gigantic forms.”

With those words, the enchantment ended. Ernelinde, who for several hours had only been seeing objects with microscopic eyes, recovered her ordinary sight; nature reappeared to her eyes in its everyday aspect; that which it hides from our gaze was veiled, as usual, and what it permits us to discern showed itself in its veritable dimensions.

Ernelinde realized that the terrain she had just traveled was only a large meadow devoid of trees, all of whose little plants, grass and moss had had offered her the appearance of a vast forest and an immense nursery composed of unknown trees. She found herself once again in the beautiful avenue of elms that led to her father's palace and realized with pleasure that the apparent giant who had caused her so much alarm was Prince Almanzor, who threw himself at her feet to await anxiously the first words to emerge from her mouth.

The fay appeared, and Ernelinde threw herself into her arms, saying to her: "You have returned me to reason."

At those words, the prince secretly recovered a little hope. They returned to the palace; the fay gave her pupil a little notebook written in her own hand, containing explanatory notes on all that she had seen in the course of that memorable day. Ernelinde recovered all the modesty appropriate to youth, and all the deference and regard due to those who surpass us in experience. Finally, she acquired the fortunate mistrust of oneself that preserves one from grave faults and great ridicule.

Having become a veritably accomplished princess, Ernelinde married the amiable Almanzor; that union was happy, as those formed by reason and virtue always are.

Ernelinde obtained from the fay the gift of the marvelous wand that gives eyes the property of a microscope; subsequently, she often made use of it to correct those who combined presumption with ignorance or superficial knowledge; almost all the courtiers made the voyage to the Isle of Monsters. The princess engaged them easily not to boast on their return; the secrets of humiliated self-esteem are always well-guarded. People were astonished, however, that all the lords of the court had suddenly become good naturalists.

However, as everything is discovered in the end, that mystery was generally known after a few years, and gave rise to a proverb that was in vogue at the court for a long time; when one encountered a proud and loquacious ignoramus, one said: "It's necessary to send him to the Isle of Monsters." That proverb was good for Asia, but did not catch on in France, for, inundated with new enlightenment as we have been for seventy years, one sees so many wise, modest, enlightened, eloquent and profoundly educated people—so many great men that they can be compared to the stars in the firmament—that no one can count them.