

FLORINE; or THE ITALIAN BEAUTY

by Françoise Le Marchand

PART ONE

In Italy, before the birth of Romulus, there was a prince who made the delights of his subjects. Under his conduct they enjoyed a perfect tranquility, and his neighbors, fearing his valor, did not dare trouble that mild felicity.

The prince traveled continually through all the provinces of his estates to see whether justice was being rendered exactly there. On arriving at a castle at one of the extremities of his kingdom, the queen, his wife, who always went with him, gave birth successfully to a princess who was named Florine, and who made it known as soon as she was born that she would one day be one of the most beautiful women in the world.

Scarcely had they begun to savor the pleasures of that birth than the king was told that an ambitious prince, desirous of profiting from his remoteness, had invaded his estates. That obliged him to depart with his court and all the troops accompanying him. Before that departure he summoned a sage magician in order to render the castle inaccessible to all surprises and insults, for the conservation of the princess, who remained there.

Obedient to the king's orders, the enchanter performed evocations, traced characters, invoked the powers of the air and made sacrifices to them. With his wand he marked a circle around the habitation, putting it under the guard and protection of intelligences. He buried pieces of metal and precious stones there, on which talismans were engraved. After that ceremony, although the castle was open, it was impossible to enter it or leave it without the consent of those who were there, by order of the king.

The castle was situated in the most beautiful region of Italy. It was built in marble and porphyry, and was regarded as a masterpiece of antiquity. Its enclosures responded to that, with rich compartments of a surprising beauty in which everything was found, further augmented by the enchanter's cares.

Florine stayed in the castle under the conduct of a governess worthy to bring her up and to be her example, with several women to serve her. They each excelled particularly in one of the arts that are appropriate to a young princess. They found in Florine, as she grew, all the dispositions worthy to respond to their cares. Every day Florine gave them surprising evidence of it; nothing approached the vivacity of her mind, her questions and her responses.

At seventeen, the rumor of her perfections spread. Mauritanne, one of the princesses of the fays, was curious to see whether what was said about her was true; that obliged her to quit her court and disguise herself as a simple person, and to go to the castle where Florine was. Having arrived there, she obtained permission to enter and to see the princess.

Mauritanne was surprised to see that Florine was even more admirable than her published renown, and was constrained to admit that, although she was a very old fay, she had never seen anything as charming as that princess. Mauritanne was not one of those fays who protect virtue, but one of those who are ambitious and vindictive, and make use of everything to arrive at the objective of their evil designs. It was by that means that she had risen to the rank of princess and regent of the fays, which she held, by virtue of an unfortunate adventure that had befallen Feliciane, their veritable queen.

The sight of Florine ignited an extreme jealousy in Mauritanne's heart. She formed the design of abducting her in order to doom her, but, being forewarned that her art was useless in that place as long as

Florine did not go beyond the bounds of the castle, she sought a means of gaining the governess and introducing herself into the proximity of the princess, pretending to be useful to teach her embroidery work like the samples she showed them, which were imperceptibly woven.

The sage governess refused, not wanting to put a person near the princess who was unknown to her. Mauritanne was obliged to withdraw and seek other means of succeeding in her design. She thought that the emotions of compassion and generosity the princess had by nature for the unfortunate might produce the effect that she proposed.

Mauritanne remained in the vicinity of the castle, and one day, she saw the princess walking on one of the terraces of the wall. She adopted the form of an old woman, lamenting like someone overwhelmed by dolor. Having heard her, the princess sent a maidservant to see what it might be. The servant reported that it was an old woman lying on the ground, who seemed to be very poorly and who was asking for help. The princess ran there.

Seeing Florine outside the enclosure, Mauritanne seized her with one hand, and traced a mysterious circle around her with the other. Instantly, they were enveloped by a dense cloud, which hid them from the maidservant's eyes. Then Mauritanne took her away in an ebony chariot drawn by vultures, which, passing rapidly through the air, returned to her palace.

When she arrived, all the fays came to welcome her and pay their court to her. She descended from her chariot with Florine, who gave birth to contrary sentiments in the hearts of the fays. The good ones found her lovable and felt compassion for her, whereas those of Mauritanne's party could only look at Florine with angry eyes, and waited impatiently for the moment to torment her.

Mauritanne had the princess taken to one of the apartments of her palace, in order to consider what was to be done with her and the manner in which she was to be treated. Fortunately for her, that order was given to one of the good fays, who took her by the hand graciously, led her through superb apartments and conducted her to a place where the furniture was inestimably valuable.

Having sat her down in an armchair, the fay sat next to her and did what she could to help her get over her astonishment.

"Alas," said the princess, with a great sigh, "why have I been taken away from the pleasant abode where I was living tranquilly? What crime have I committed, to be removed like this and brought to a place that, agreeable as it seems, only makes me expect cruel pains?"

"The queen's jealousy of you is the cause of your abduction," the fay said. "She is in a humor to treat you badly if the good fays here do not oppose it and prevent her from taking her passion and resentment as far as she would wish. We know you and will not suffer that a person who has only ever done good should be treated as a criminal. I have felt sensible effects of that myself, and it would be the ultimate in ingratitude if I failed to give you all the help I can."

"How have I had the advantage of obliging a person like you?" said the princess.

"You will understand that," said the fay, "when you know who we are and our origin. Each of the stars that you see shining in the firmament has an intelligence that governs it. Those intelligences are omnipotent and entirely spiritual, and the influences that emanate from the stars only emerge in order to carry out their orders. Those intelligences have under their domination a large number of spirits that guide those influences in the atmosphere, in order that they are not distributed at random and that they are united intimately with the subjects for which they are destined.

"We are those spirits, and it is under our conduct that the influences are distributed. We have no bodies, and those we render visible are of a nature so pure that they ought to be taken for spirit rather than substance; we affect human form rather than any other because it is the most perfect. Our power is considerable; we dispose of the elements and all that they contain, and the perfect knowledge we have of them enables us to do things that humans take for prodigies because they are unaware of their veritable cause. As we are all knowledgeable in regard to the secrets of nature, we make use of them to do good or evil as we please.¹

¹ This account of the nature of fays differs markedly from the one assumed by the *contes de fées* produced by the original coterie of writers; it seems inconsistent with the motifs that the author has borrowed from those writers—

“We are not all benevolent; we retain the influences of the stars from which we emerge, which are good or evil, the good ones being given to recompense virtue and the evil ones to punish vice. We are not here forever; when each of us has passed the time on the earth prescribed to her, we return to the star from which we emerged, which causes some philosophers to say that we die, but that is not true; our death will only occur in the entire revolution of the universe.

“All these advantages are balanced. One day a week we are all changed differently, into a wolf, a snake, a bat or whatever animal pleases destiny, and if we receive mortal blows in that form, we really do die, without ever returning to our stars. One day, when I was a weasel, one of your maidservants was about to kill me. You forbade her to strike me. She obeyed you and I escaped, a favor for which I shall be grateful as long as I am a fay.”

As she finished speaking the fay embraced the princess, who was overjoyed to receive such a salutary consolation for an action that had seemed to her so trivial

The fay took out a golden rod that she had under her robe, with which she struck the parquet where they were, and a table appeared magnificently laden with beautiful fruits, which she presented to Florine. “They’re excellent,” she told her, “and you need them; you haven’t taken any refreshments since leaving your palace.”

The princess could not dispense with taking some; she ate them and found them extraordinarily good. Then the fay tapped the parquet again with her rod, and the table disappeared.

“It’s necessary,” said the fay, “To hide our amity from the others as much as we can, in order that I have more facility to serve you.” Then she made the princess a present of a phial of immortal eau-de-vie. “Keep that carefully,” she said. “It will be very useful to you; that liquid has the property of changing all poisons into the purest substance, and however much is taken from it, the phial will always be full. That’s the first help I can give you; other penalties to which anyone wants to subject you will furnish me with further means to testify my gratitude to you.”

Mauritianne assembled her council, to which all the fays belonged, and addressed them.

“The person you have seen descending from my chariot is a princess whose reputation is so great that mortals believe her to be a divinity; that rumor, having reached me, excited my curiosity. I went to see the princess and it appeared to me that she had all the noble external features that are rare in persons of the world. In order to discover whether what attracts the great honors rendered to her down here, which only belong to the fays, comes from the good usage she makes of the precious gifts with which the authors of nature have enriched her, or from impulses of ambition and vanity that are inexcusable, I judged it appropriate to abduct her and to subject her to proofs that can reveal the truth.”

The fays who were of the humor and the party of Mauritianne approved her sentiments and proposed to the assembly the most difficult trials, as if they were light and easy to do. But one of the fays, who had always been one of the principal counselors of Feliciane, the veritable queen, told them that Florine appeared very modest in all her actions and only had a passion for doing good; that the action of charity that was the cause of her being in the power of the queen revealed the impulses of her soul and that the lightest trials ought to suffice to convince them of it.

Having remarked that that argument appeared judicious to the assembly, Mauritianne thought that another, repeated with similar force, would overturn her designs. She said that order to avoid the tedium that speeches might cause, it was necessary to draw lots, and by that means, everyone could judge what it was appropriate to do. That advice was followed, lots were drawn, and poor Florine was condemned to spin the fabric that separates day from night. The order was given to one of the evil fays to go and announce it to her, and to deliver to her the materials required to contrive that masterpiece.

The fay in question was delighted to be charged with that commission; she went to where Florine was and did not neglect the slightest circumstance in carrying it out well. When she arrived, the poor princess was only sustained by the hope that the fay who loved her would not abandon her. Florine

especially the physical vulnerability associated with an obligatory periodic metamorphosis, previously employed by the Comtesse de Murat in “Anguilette”—and with the fact that Mauritianne has a seemingly-substantial son.

listened respectfully to what the fay said to her, and received what she gave her, which consisted of an ebony distaff, an ivory spindle, and spider-webs that were to serve as the fiber to spin the fabric that separates day from night.

“I have no doubt,” the fay said to her, “that you were born intelligent and know very well that before placing the fiber on the distaff it is necessary to prepare and beat it, in order to get rid of any dirt it might have picked up. Here is a little stick that you might use; we hope to be able to congratulate you on the beauty of your work and render you justice.”

When she had said that, the fay took Florine to the place that had been destined for her labor. It was a cabinet in which the floor, the walls and the ceiling were black marble and the furniture ebony, with a little bed of white damask where the princess would repose. The place only had one little window, very highly-placed, adjacent to the ceiling, which only gave sufficient light to render the place a little less frightful.

The fay left the princess alone in that apartment; she recommended her to be diligent in order to please them, telling that she shared her disgrace and would employ all her credit for her with the queen.

After having examined the place with a glance, Florine laid out her fiber.

As soon as she struck the fiber with her stick, she saw a quantity of large spiders emerge, and, on trying to continue, she realized that someone wanted to doom her. The stick she had been given was sorb wood, which has the virtue of reviving dormant venom.

The princess sighed, and, without succumbing to dolor, sought a means of getting out of the bad situation. She remembered the phial of immortal eau-de-vie that her friend had given her, which expelled poisons; she sprinkled it over her fiber. The spiders immediately disappeared and the fiber became as white as snow.

She took some and put it on her distaff, which she had rubbed with a little of the liquid. Then she started spinning, and covered her spindle with a thread of a delicacy similar to that of the most adroit fays.

The fay who had spoken to the council in Florine’s favor, chagrined by what had just been pronounced against her, went to ponder alone in one of the pathways of the garden. Prince Probus, Mauritianne’s son, having encountered her there, approached the fay and said: “Sage fay, dare I ask the subject of your sadness? If I can remedy it, I beg you to count on my amity.”

The fay felt obliged to reply naturally to such a generous prince; she told him that it was his mother, who had just committed an injustice. Decorum dictated that she make a mystery of it and dissimulate her thinking from it, but as she knew him to have an honest soul, she did not hide it from him that his mother, the queen, had abducted and was keeping prisoner at the court a beautiful princess whose merit was so great that it had attracted the respect and veneration of all humans. She told him that the queen suspected the princess of only having an artificial and studied virtue, in order to steal what only belonged to the fays, and that, holding her council, she had observed there an order so extraordinary and particular that, under an ornament of justice the pretext of discovering the truth, the poor princess had been condemned to spin the fabric that separates day from night.

“There isn’t a moment to lose,” replied Probus. “That poor princess is going to perish if someone doesn’t help her promptly. I’m on my way to salute the queen, who is waiting for me, but I’ll come back momentarily. See what we can do to render her in secret all the help she might need.”

The fay who had taken Florine to the cabinet of twilight in order to do what she had been ordered, returned there expecting to find her dead, or at least unable to breathe, but she was surprised to find the princess lying on her bed, having finished her work with the utmost perfection.

That first trap, which Florine had avoided so successfully, afflicted the fay, in the fear that she might do as much in the other proofs that might be given to her, and the disturbance and resentment into which that threw her only permitted her to say to Florine: “I’ll go and tell the queen that your work is done.”

The fay ran to the queen and told her what she had just seen. The queen was momentarily nonplussed. “Someone has given her the necessary advice and help,” she said. “There’s no need to seek information about that. Send her to me.”

That order was carried out immediately. The princess brought her spindle, which she presented to the queen. The queen received it with an expression seemingly replete with kindly sentiments; she praised her and solicited her to continue, assuring her that she would be one of the most eager to want to share her amity.

The queen held a new council and once again found the means to rule that Florine would go in search of the imperial rose without thorns.

One of the fays was delegated to take the princes to the entrance to the road that led to the mountain where the flower in question was found, and she gave her a seed in order to sow another, along with the other things necessary for her journey.

The fay took Florine to the road. "It's here, beautiful princess," she said, "that we must separate; I pray to heaven that the road will guide you fortunately to where you need to go. I've already brought several persons here; some have perished by virtue of their imprudence, and for want of having taken the advice of a fay that you will find on the way; but those who have taken it have accomplished what they were ordered to do. Do as she tells you, then, and I shall have the pleasure of seeing you triumphant, with the flower you are going to seek. After having embraced, they separated.

A few paces away the princess found a broad, straight road extending as far as the eye could see through a large wood of palm trees, orange trees and lemon trees. The ground was dotted with all that nature can produce of the sweetest and richest flowers. The ground was dotted with all that nature can produce of the sweetest and richest flowers. It was marvelously intercut by an infinity of little streams, which, by their different contours, formed as they fell a soft and charming murmur. By means of their concerts, the birds there inspired everything expressible of the most tender and agreeable.

Florine followed the road without anxiety, and eventually arrived at the end. There she found a huge portico, magnificently constructed, connected to a palace no less superb, where there was a very high tower that was the favorite abode of Rationtine, the fay who was to advise her.

As she approached the portico, the princess perceived the fay in question, who advanced to meet her. She made her many caresses, to which Florine responded as best she could. Rationtine took her into her palace and invited her to sit down on a very rich bed.

The fay only ever went out to meet people who went past her portico, in order to give them sage advice regarding the things they wanted to do. She asked Florine the reason for her journey, to which the princess replied that the council of fays had sent her to seek the imperial rose without thorns.

"You'll succeed in that," said the fay, "if you do as I say. Several have sought it before you; those who have believed me have succeeded; the others have, unfortunately, perished for not having paid attention.

"A little further on, you'll encounter individuals who will seem very agreeable to you, and who will make all kinds of entreaties in persuade you to stay with them. They will try to convince you that they alone enjoy the greatest pleasures of life, but refrain from believing them; they only intend to doom you like themselves; if you pay a little attention to them you'll discover their errors and lies.

"You'll find others who will come to you in order to persuade you of the same things, and are even more dangerous; avoid them promptly and you'll escape from them.

"Finally, you'll encounter other individuals, of a more delicate, insinuating and persuasive intelligence of an extreme finesse, who have the art of winning over and surprising those they see if they listen to them. My princess, as you approach those, imagine that you're entering a very subtle and contagious atmosphere; close all the paths to your heart in order to protect it from their deadly attempts, and convince yourself that in this journey, you only need the imperial rose. Don't take anything the inhabitants offer you; that would be enough to doom you.

"If you're obedient, you'll arrive fortunately at the foot of the mountain where the flower is and you won't fail to find it. I'll give you my son to serve as your guide; although he'll appear to you to be a child, he knows the paths and he'll prevent you from going astray."

"But Madame," said the princess, "Is it an important affair, then, to find this flower? Does it require such a terrible circumspection to succeed in that?"

"It doesn't require as much care as you think," said the fay. "It only requires an honest soul and a firm resolution; I believe you don't lack them, and that's what makes me judge that you'll succeed."

“I suppose,” said the princess, “that there are not many people who dare to attempt such an elevated design.”

“Don’t assume that, my princess,” the fay replied. “The adventure is within the range of everyone, and I’ve seen simple shepherds succeed in it better than kings and queens.” As she spoke she took Florine into a room that overlooked a garden of ravishing beauty, where a meal was served that left nothing to be desired of the most exquisite and best prepared.

The princess ate, and at the end of the meal the fay summoned her son to serve as Florine’s squire. After great civilities, the princess left in order to continue her journey.