

# These Mortals



*Margaret Irwin*

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By MARGARET IRWIN

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ROYAL FLUSH\*  
*The Story of Minette*

THE PROUD SERVANT\*  
*The Story of Montrose*

THE STRANGER PRINCE\*  
*The Story of Rupert of the Rhine*

THE BRIDE\*  
*The Story of Louise and Montrose*

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*The Love Story of Mary Queen of Scots*

THE STORY OF ELIZABETH TUDOR

1. *YOUNG BESS*
2. *ELIZABETH, CAPTIVE PRINCESS*
3. *ELIZABETH AND THE PRINCE OF SPAIN*†  
(† *In Preparation*)

\*

STILL SHE WISHED FOR COMPANY\*

THESE MORTALS\*

KNOCK FOUR TIMES\*

FIRE DOWN BELOW\*

NONE SO PRETTY\*

MADAME FEARS THE DARK

MRS. OLIVER CROMWELL

\* *Issued in this Uniform Edition*

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LONDON

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Clarke, Irwin & Co. Ltd.  
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# These Mortals

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# 1

## *The Enchanter*

THERE was once a powerful Enchanter of the name of Aldebaran, who had wearied of playing with the lives of men and retired to a palace he had built at the edge of the sea. The palace was of black marble with a green vein, which made it appear as though green serpents were crawling over it. But this slightly unpleasant impression was corrected by the beautiful shape of the palace, which rose in domes and minarets like a cluster of pomegranates, of black pomegranates, green-veined, each one barbed as with a crown.

It is a popular superstition that all enchanters are old, crooked, and hideous, and it is true that many of them do not attain their highest powers until they have outworn all that makes power worth while. But Aldebaran was of such dignified stature and ageless appearance that it was held, first that he was a King who had abnegated his royal power for one yet more extensive, and second, that he had discovered the Elixir of Eternal Youth. He admitted this last, but with a gesture towards his daughter, Melusine, for he had discovered that in her, more than in all his spells, lay the secret of eternal youth.

Melusine could remember no other home than this palace by the sea, where she saw no other human being than her father, except an occasional decrepit enchanter who would pay a flying visit in his dragon chariot in order to assure himself that Aldebaran was bitter and envious in his retirement, and when disappointed of this would fly away still faster than he came.

She had received an excellent education from her father in the higher mathematics, so high that she could calculate how many peacock's feathers, placed end to end, it would take to reach the moon; in languages whose names are now forgotten; and in the lighter spells suitable for feminine accomplishments, by whose aid she could dance as the leaves dance in a wind, and sing as the mermaids sang on that rocky shore. From the moon-maidens that inhabit moonbeams, she learned the secret words that they

murmur, inaudible to mortal ears, as they kiss the roses in the garden or flatter the nightingale into song. She also acquired the power of becoming a moon-maiden herself whenever she wished, invisible and intangible to mortal senses, and able to pass on a moonbeam through a window or over water or on high places. When she had shown industry and application at such tasks, Aldebaran would, as a reward, tell her about the world of ordinary mortals, which to her sounded like the most extraordinary of fairy tales.

One day when playing on the shore with her three chief friends, a Cat, a Raven, and a Snake, she found a small open shell and bent over it, admiring its colour and shape. At the same moment her black cat, who was large and usually bore himself with dignity, was chasing a white rose petal that had been blown from the palace garden on to the shore and was now dancing towards her. She caught the petal, and drawing a silver pin with a pearl head from her dress, pierced it and stuck the pin into the shell.

The Enchanter was walking behind her in his long robes and high domed hat that resembled one of the minarets of his palace.

“Look sir,” she cried to him, “I have made a little boat.” Now the Enchanter was bored that day with the passive philosophy that had led him to leave men’s lives alone, or perhaps he would not have done so foolish a thing as to put power into the hands of a woman, and that woman the daughter whom he loved. But, weary and idle, he was suddenly annoyed at what had hitherto rejoiced him, that his daughter was still a child playing with toys, although the beauty of her white skin and black hair and slender silver-clad body was such as to make any man love her as a woman.

He took the shell and regarded it critically while she watched him with some apprehension lest, to amuse her, he should turn it into some priceless jewel. Frequently for her diversion he procured a new colour effect in their garden by turning the trees white and the flowers black, and the grass golden or blood-red, a trick that she secretly disliked.

But this time his fancy took an unusually simple and obvious turn, for he asked her if she would like to go for a sail in the shell that he held in his hand.

“I should like it above all things,” she replied.

The Enchanter touched the shell in three places with his long cold fingers, placed it in the surf, made a sign to the East of it and to the West, and said:

“Little silver boat  
On the silver sea,  
Grow, grow, grow,  
That you may carry me.”

As he finished the words, the shell expanded, its masts and sail shot up, until there in the surf was a small boat that was yet large enough to hold Melusine and her attendants. But it was still only the shell, grown large, its sail a white rose petal, its mast of silver, surmounted by a huge pearl.

She stepped into it and sailed for a little way along the shore, and as the Enchanter watched her he wondered for a moment as to the wisdom of what he had done. But she came back to the shore even before he called her, for she had remembered that it was time for her to return to her father's study in order to determine the exact number of demons that it is possible to congregate on the point of a pin. And at the sight of her docility Aldebaran again felt a prick of exasperation as though he were as unreasonable as an ordinary mortal instead of the most powerful and philosophic of enchanters.

“Will you please, sir, make my boat a toy again?” she asked, and he did so by reversing the signs he had previously made, and saying:

“Little white boat  
On the water blue,  
Shrink, shrink, shrink,  
That I may carry you.”

As she took the now tiny boat from his hands and put it in her pocket, he fancied that he might lay the world at her feet and she would only ask him to make it into a toy of a size convenient for her to carry. He reflected that he had himself attempted, and with some success, to put the world in his pocket, but that it had in the end proved both too large and too powerful for him. He could conquer all human beings by his magic, but he had not been able to conquer humanity in himself.

He followed his daughter with slow and pensive step into his study, and gazed upon her as she sat at her task concerning the calculations of the demonic bodies.

The study was long and low and already so dark as to require lamp-light; this was furnished by the enormous eyes of many spiders who hung motionless from the ceiling on their cobweb chains. Their round and staring orbs shed into the sombre room patches of red light, and in one of these sat Melusine on a low stool with a book open before her; the shining surfaces of



her silver dress were turned to rose colour and the shadows in it to deep pools of amethyst, the purple poppies that formed her girdle were changed, some to crimson and some to black, and the smooth blackness of her hair reflected the glow so that each particular hair was outlined with red fire. The book before her was supported by four goblins on their outstretched arms and sunken heads, from beneath its pages they wagged their black tongues and made hideous grimaces, but these antics were too familiar to distract her attention from the numbers of the demonic bodies. Behind her on the ebony wall were suspended a human mummy and the dried carcasses of a crocodile and a devil fish; at her feet reposed her Cat, her Raven and her Snake; two appeared as carved blocks of polished blackness, the third a gleaming heap of jet and fire.

As the Enchanter gazed, a strange doubt stole into his mind; it occurred to him that in his careful upbringing of his daughter he had perhaps omitted some things that were, in their own way, of importance. He looked at the beasts at her feet, at the goblins and the spiders. "These are not, after all, her natural playfellows," he murmured.

His daughter looked up and remarked:

"Sir, I have concluded that the number is nine billion, seven million, three hundred thousand and three. As each of these is a mystic number——"

She ceased to speak, for the Enchanter, while regarding her intently, was plainly inattentive to what she said. In fact, when he replied, it was to something else which nobody had said; she supposed he must have entered into conversation with some spirit invisible and inaudible to her, and therefore returned to her book.

"But what now can be done?" he questioned, and the spirit doubtless was unable to answer, for he presently continued: "You have uncommon beauty, and an inquiring mind. I have given you an excellent education and powers that should enable you to command what you will from ordinary mortals. Yet I doubt if these advantages are such as would best fit you for happiness and ease in the society of your fellow creatures."

By this time Melusine understood that he was addressing her, or rather his thoughts of her; in any case her attention would at once have been attracted by the potent charm of those words "ordinary mortals." Springing from her stool in such haste that she overturned her book and its attendant goblins, who at once executed a somersault and remained standing on their heads on the top of it, she ran to her father and took him boldly by the arm.

“Dear sir,” she said, “I care nothing for happiness and ease. I have had them all my life, as you have frequently pointed out. I do not mind in the least whether or no I am fitted for the society of my fellow creatures; all that I desire is to observe for myself the strange habits and inconsequential behaviour of this mysterious race. I beg you will now tell me something of their customs, or even,” with a sigh, “as you generally prefer it, of their laws.” Since he remained silent, she continued hopefully though not quite so eagerly, “I could listen by the hour to your accounts of their municipal governments, their police and their drainage systems.”

She rubbed her head coaxingly into his shoulder, her hand caressed his long sleeve, running her finger up and down the mystic symbols of terrifying power that were woven into it in threads of black and silver. He listened to her artless request with a look of tenderness mingled with pity. He seated himself in a chair of chalcedony and she sank happily beside him on to a footstool composed of a gigantic living toad, her hands on his knee, her face upturned to his with a look of childish eagerness.

“Now,” she said, “please, sir, begin.”

But he dismissed drainage and municipal government with a wave of his hand.

“All the intricacies of their laws, their societies, their towns, their nations,” he said, “amount only to this: that each individual human being dreads solitude and tries to circumvent it. From the moment that you enter the world (should you ever have that misfortune), your immediate concern will be to find a companion, and when you have done so you will believe that you have found yourself. You will discover a hitherto unimagined interest and value in all your actions, thoughts and memories, since you think to share them with another. Only gradually will you discover that it is impossible to do this wholly; that speech often obscures and sometimes conceals our thoughts; that the fictitious contacts of the flesh give an ecstasy which is poignant chiefly in that it reminds us of the incommunicable solitude of our souls.”

These rather discouraging words of preparation to a young girl hopeful of entering society, did not depress Melusine unduly, for she paid them very little attention. She did not see why her father should speak of solitude, which she had never known among her many companions, and her eyes roamed affectionately from the severe beauty of his profile to the playful contortions of the goblins who were now standing on each other's heads.

And surely among companions of her own race she was still less likely to know it. She spoke with easy confidence.

“I am sure that I do not dread solitude,” said she. “It often amuses me to play by myself without even my Cat and Snake and Raven. Indeed of late I have liked to be alone when I am doing nothing at all. I stand and look at the sea and think of nothing in particular, but I am quite happy so.”

“Then why,” asked the Enchanter, “do you wish for that world of which our wisest fairy has observed, ‘Lord, what fools these mortals be?’”

But he regretted his question, for her face awoke into a look of soft ecstasy, and her hands forsook his knee and were clasped beneath her chin, and her eyes opened full on him and never saw him.

“I am happy,” she replied, “because there is a world of mortals, and I do not care if they be fools or no if I may one day see them.”

“You had better go to bed,” he said with sudden and unreasonable severity.

She went obediently and her Cat and Snake and Raven went with her.

The Enchanter rose and walked the length of his study and then back again, and so again and again. In the light of the spiders’ eyes, his grey robes were shot with dull crimson, and the silver threads in them were ripples of fire. He paused by a table made of a single carbuncle, and opened a book at random which caused the earth to quake and the seas to shrink. He glanced at the page and absent-mindedly pronounced a word which convulsed Etna and threw Vesuvius into an eruption that destroyed seven cities. The spiders regarded him anxiously but dared not move and so withdraw their light. The goblins flung themselves flat under their book. The vast room waited for his next utterance in a terrifying silence. But when at last he spoke, his voice was mild and his eye resigned.

“My love for her,” he said, “is as weak and helpless as that of any human parent. It is but a continuous egoism, a prolonged struggle to find the happiness we desire in another since we have not found it in ourselves. But the desires and needs of another can never be the same as our own. All our lives we try to contradict the fact that we are alone, and know in secret that it cannot be contradicted.”

Since this was no word of magic from a mighty Enchanter but a common truth uttered by a perplexed parent, it touched nobody. The spiders glared their impassive light, the goblins were asleep. The Enchanter went to the window and looked out on his garden in the luminous dusk. Two small

owls sat huddled close upon a branch in attempted contradiction of his statement, a nightingale called long upon his mate, seeking to disprove it.

In an upper chamber on the other side of the Palace his daughter found no need to contradict or disprove; she was not alone, for she was with her Cat and Snake and Raven and she was looking at the moon.

## 2

### *His Daughter*

THE moon was rising over the edge of the sea. From the edge of the sea there gradually came a rippling path of light, nearer and nearer to Melusine's window, like a ribbon unrolled towards her by an invisible hand from over the edge of the world. It presently reached the ripples on the shore below her window, and there it remained, dancing backwards and forwards, but always in the same place on the water. The ripples curled over, making a hushing, sighing, sucking noise on the sand, a noise like the rustle of secret laughter, and each ripple as it curled over, beckoned to her with a crooked finger of gleaming spray.

Whenever the moon had shone over the sea, Melusine had stood thus at her window watching the path it made towards her, wondering where it led. She supposed it must lead to the moon, but when she looked at the moon she thought always of the world of ordinary mortals, since to her that world was as strange, as romantic, and as inaccessibly remote.

"My window is at one end of the moonpath," she told herself, "but what is at the other end?"

But never before had she asked this question with a shell in her pocket capable of carrying herself and her friends up that path. She took it out of her pocket and looked at it, and the Cat, the Snake, and the Raven all looked at her. But they did not speak, although they were able to do so, for they were inclined to ignore this power, which the Enchanter had bestowed on them for his daughter's amusement, as a childish and even irksome accessory.

With the boat in her hand, she walked out of her window on to the edge of the cliff, and down the narrow winding path that had been cut in the cliff to the shore, and the Cat, the Snake, and the Raven followed her.

She touched the shell three times with her long cool fingers, placed it in the surf, made the sign that she had seen her father make to the East of it and to the West, and said:

“Little silver boat  
On the silver sea,  
Grow, grow, grow,  
That you may carry me.”

There was the boat in front of her, rocking on the moonlit ripples. The moon shone through the sides of the shell, making a faintly coloured shadow on the water; it shone through the translucent sail, showing the thin veins of the rose petal in a dark network against its light; the pearl at the head of the mast spun round it a soft radiance of its own. The boat seemed built of light, and of transparent shadow, but it was strong enough to carry them over the sea.

The Cat sprang on to his mistress's shoulder, the Snake coiled itself round her arm, the Raven perched on her head, and Melusine stepped through the cool surf into the shell. A wind that appeared to have been waiting for this, sprang up and caught the sail, drove the frail boat up that broad path of moonlight so that it swerved neither to the right nor to the left, and blew her straight black hair out behind her in a long cloud.

They sailed so fast that soon the Cat, curling itself round on Melusine's shoulder into a more comfortable position, saw behind them only a small dark mound on a grey line where the Enchanter's palace had been. Then even this disappeared, and there was nothing all round them but the sea, and in front of them the moon path.

But Melusine never looked behind her. The boat sped on at the end of that broad silver ribbon, as though it were being drawn by it over the sea rather than driven by the wind. They sailed for so long that Melusine thought they must soon reach the end of the world and look over its edge. Still the moon path stretched away before her, to the uttermost edge of the sea.

And what amazed and discomfited her was that the edge of the sea appeared as far away from her as ever. “This,” she thought, “is a stronger magic than my father's.”

### 3

## *The World*

**A**T the end of the path, on the very edge of the sea, appeared a moonlit cloud, which as they approached gradually turned into a palace of white marble. Immense and shadowy arms of rock now stole silently out of the sea from behind the palace and stretched away on either side of Melusine in her boat. She could presently perceive that they were sailing into a large bay and that the palace was built at the end of a long tongue of land that jutted out behind it from the mainland.

A flight of broad and shallow steps descended into the water; on either side of them stood a row of statues which appeared to waver slightly, as though they were living beings. It was not until she had come quite near that Melusine understood that they were pages clad in white. At sight of her boat one of them departed, running, and presently a company of halberdiers in silver armour came clanking down the steps, carrying torches, and hailed the strange boat in the name of the Emperor, Eminondas.

But when it drifted to the steps, they were so much impressed by the peculiarity of that frail barque and the beauty of its occupant that they forgot to demand her business and hastened only to assist her to land, while the Court Usher, who had come with them to conduct any ceremony that might be necessary, ran to inform the Emperor of her arrival.

He hurried into the State room, where a ball was in progress, blew a trumpet, and announced that a princess of surpassing beauty had but just landed from a boat made of a shell, a rose petal and a pin.

“What is her name?” asked the Emperor.

“Sire, in my haste, I did not stay to inquire it,” said the Court Usher. “But I observed her hand to be as white as moonlight, her hair as dark as night, and her eyes as green as the sea. Her robes are of silver and her shoes flash with white fire. She is attended by a snake, a raven, and a black cat.”

“She is probably a fairy,” said the Empress with a faint sigh, for she had found that fairies, and especially their attendants, were apt to make difficult

guests. But their wealth is enormous, and money is everything nowadays. “If only she would take a fancy to Blanchelys,” she added hopefully, and began to pat and arrange her daughter’s hair.

The Court Poet shut his eyes and gasped, as he always did in the throes of composition, for he realized that here was an occasion for an impromptu ode.

At that moment Melusine entered the hall and all faces were turned towards her. She had been accustomed to crowds of black-faced elves, witches whose noses were a foot long, and giants who conversed with her from heads that they carried under their arms in accordance with the habits of that eccentric race.

But now, wherever she looked, she saw eyes staring at her from faces that had a vague resemblance to her father’s or her own, and she felt as though she were looking into a thousand distorted mirrors. Yet these faces held no meaning for her. They looked at her, and whether they smiled or raised their eyebrows or merely stared, they remained as vacant for her comprehension as rows of cyphers. For the first time in her life she felt alone, and this was so strange that tears rose to her eyes and she wanted to scream in terror for her father, as though she were a very young child.

But fortunately, before she could execute this wish, the Emperor had descended from his throne and come forward to greet her, and now stood before her, leaning on the arm of the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal.

“Welcome, fair Princess, to our Imperial Court,” he said. “Will you so far favour us that we may know your name?”

“I am Melusine, daughter of Aldebaran,” she replied, with a grave decision which no one could have supposed to be the result of swallowing her tears.

“Alde——? Who is he?” inquired the Emperor of the Lord Keeper, in a whisper that was distinctly audible owing to his habit of hissing his words through a gap in his front teeth.

“The most learned Enchanter in the world, sire,” the Lord Keeper answered with a greater discretion of voice.

“The daughter of the most learned Enchanter in the world does us great honour,” said the Emperor, bowing again, lower than before, and wishing that he had not left the side of his Empress, who possessed an infinity of social tact. This she showed as soon as he began to lead his visitor to her on the dais.



“I declare they are too sweet for the whole world,” she announced while still at a little distance so that Melusine did not know but what she referred to herself, the Emperor, and the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal. “Do you always take such original pets about with you? Blanchelys, do you not yearn for a raven and a snake? And so you are the daughter of *the* Enchanter. It is the tragedy of my life that I have never met him, for I adore learned men. You must pay us a long visit and interest my little dunce in your father’s subject. I am sure you know all about it. I am positive you will be great friends. Come, Blanchelys.”

Melusine had looked at the Emperor, who had not appeared so very different from the elderly enchanters that had occasionally visited her father. She had seen a small stoutish man with a stoop, a long and ragged beard, and little dull eyes that frequently blinked. Even his gorgeous crown and robes were not more impressive than the coronets of green flames and goats’ eyes, the trailing cloaks of bats’ wings supported by goblins, that the more showy enchanters liked to wear. And he snuffled as he spoke. She was indeed a little disappointed in her first Emperor.

But the Empress and her daughter were such as she had never seen before, and the rolling, affable, creamy drawl of the Empress’s tones such as she had never heard; and all the time that she chattered on, Melusine could look no higher than the arms of the two great golden thrones and observe that they were carved into the stern faces of lions, which she, in her strange emotion, desired might enlarge and open and swallow her up.

But when the Empress ceased speaking, she had to raise her eyes, and she saw a large and imposing woman whose robes flowed round her majestically, but she did not see that her face was obstinate and self-complacent.

Then she looked at the Princess Blanchelys and saw a tall girl, rather plump and very pretty, whose hair stuck out round her face in fair fuzzy curls and who stared at Melusine with very wide-open blue eyes. She did not see that her face looked as blank as a wax doll’s, nor notice that she said nothing in welcome to the new guest; she only saw that the Princess Blanchelys was a girl of her own age such as she had always longed to meet, and a girl with golden curls such as she had always longed to have, and as she looked at this mysterious and radiant being that the Empress had magnanimously offered to her as a great friend, a deep humility filled her heart, so that it seemed natural and inevitable to go on one knee and kiss the plump, well-tended hand that was at last extended to her, after due prompting from its owner’s mother.

A murmur of appreciation filled the room at this naïve act of homage from one beauty to another.

“The Moon makes her due obeisance to the Sun,” whispered the Lord Archbishop, loud enough for the Princess and her mother to hear, but not, he hoped, loud enough for their visitor to do so. To avoid that possibility, the Empress went on talking hastily.

“Dear Pharamond will certainly die of disappointment at his unavoidable absence this evening,” she declared. “Affairs of state occupy all his leisure moments, but I always say it is invaluable for a young prince to have a sense of duty. But then, he has been excellently brought up. I may be old-fashioned, but I consider a mother of even greater value than a sense of duty. Indeed one can hardly have the one without the other. And who was your mother, my dear?”

“I have never heard,” said Melusine.

Her voice was as low as a ripple on the shore of a pond, but like that ripple, it circulated to every nook and cranny of the pond. There was a perceptible pause in the general conversation, which became evident to the visitor and made her wonder if anything were amiss. The Empress considered mothers of high value. Had she seemed to slight them by her negligence to inquire as to hers? Then it would be better to disclaim the privilege altogether.

“Very possibly,” she said, “I never had a mother.”

“That is hardly possible,” the Empress commented dryly.

“I may be an invention of my father’s,” Melusine sought to explain. “Or perhaps I was hatched out of an egg. The Lady Helen of Troy, whom my father has occasionally called up from the dead to show me the achievement of female beauty, has told me that she was hatched out of an egg. Yet now that I think of it, that egg was laid by Leda, after Jupiter in the shape of a swan——”

“Eminondas, why have the musicians stopped playing?” demanded the Empress with unnecessary emphasis.

The Emperor, who had been listening with close attention, sighed and gave the command for the music to strike up. Prompted again by the Empress, he called for refreshments to be brought for the visitor, conducted her to her seat himself, and commanded a young man beside him to pour out her wine.

This young man, whom he addressed as Sir Oliver, struck Melusine as the most magnificent of the mortals she had yet observed. His tall and erect stature, the noble stupidity of his lofty brow, his calm gaze, untroubled by any shadow of a thought, impressed her profoundly. She considered that with such a rock of integrity and loyalty beside him, the Emperor must feel safe from all his enemies, and she sighed with a melancholy that surprised her, for surely she should not envy the Emperor for what he must need more than herself.

“Why do you sigh? A man sighed in desire for he knew not what, and you appeared.” The whispered words fell into her ear, rising and falling in a sweet and slightly monotonous rivulet of sound. Melusine turned her head to see behind her a young man of striking elegance whose delicate hand displayed with some care a ring in the shape of a shamrock leaf of emeralds. His searching gaze and air of sad detachment made him appear like some gentle ascetic among that noisy, that vigorously smiling and grimacing throng. She instantly felt that he knew all her thoughts, her fears, even that irrational tremor that had lately shot through her admiration of Sir Oliver, and looked gratefully at the one being in this crowd of strange monsters who could understand her sentiments, even though she had been unable to detect any meaning in his words.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I am Sir Diarmid, an exile from a land of sorrows.” And he looked again at his ring.

She perceived the cause of his melancholy and longed to lighten it.

“Can you never return?”

“Never,” he replied firmly, and at once continued on his former note of tender intimacy, as he flicked a glance at Sir Oliver.

“Let me beg you, in the interests of Cupid, not to go wasting your time on that gentlemanly ox,” he said, astonishing Melusine by his perception, which led her to ask in what school of magic he had studied. “In that of sighs and glances,” he replied. “I am of greater importance than any magician, politician, soldier, priest, or even Emperor at this barbarian Court, for I am the fashion, and if I say a thing at all, it is so. I am also known as the Prince of Lovers. My claim to that title is so well established that I can now live on my reputation and no longer make love, but only permit it.”

“Why then are you sad?”

“Love is a serious occupation. I have come between more happy couples than anyone at Court; that flattens a man. You observe that I am slim. I had to make slimness the fashion; where royalty is inclined to stoutness, another would have found this an insuperable difficulty, but I at once accomplished it. Your sympathetic nature can have no idea how hard I work, but let me find reward in working for you. What will I say of you? Would you be known as the expression of unknown desire?”

“But what is that?” she asked.

“Madam, how can I say? You have not as yet, alas, expressed yourself to me.”

“And how am I to do so?”

“Ah, madam, let me defer that explanation to a happier moment. In the meantime I am at your feet and burn to do your service. How then would you be known?”

She thought, anxious to discover what she was expected to say.

“But,” said she at last, “I cannot see how I can be known except as what I am.”

Sir Diarmid bowed more in sorrow than in anger.

“I offer you my condolences, madam,” he said, “for I cannot see how you can be known at all at Court.”

He walked away. Melusine longed to cry after him, to ask how she had offended, but to do that might be to offend again. She looked for support to that rock of integrity and loyalty who stood on her other side. But the rock was looking at a lady who went past them on Sir Diarmid’s arm, a gracious lady in shining satin whose down-dropped eyelashes lay on her white cheeks like two dark half-moons. Melusine felt a strange small prick that made her fear lest some enemy had made a wax image of her and stuck a pin in her heart.

“Who is that?” she asked.

“The Lady Valeria.” From Sir Oliver’s rapt and worshipping tone, she thought at first he said the Lady Venus. But that lady’s air of divine repose appeared troubled at sight of him, and Melusine heard her declare that the heat was insufferable, and ask Sir Diarmid to lead her to the balcony.

Meanwhile the Empress, on an unguarded impulse of hospitality, had given orders that three stools should be placed on the dais for the Cat, the

Snake, and the Raven, thus promoting them to the rank of the highest nobility and the Princes of the Blood, who are alone permitted to sit on stools in the presence of royalty. This offended all parties at Court. The lesser nobility complained that foreign animals of unknown pedigree had been given precedence over them, and the Princes of the Blood refused to avail themselves of privileges that were henceforth to be shared by a Cat, a Snake and a Raven. Discontent and disloyalty were murmured by mouths that smiled as though gaily gossiping; whispers of revolution were fluttered to and fro beneath painted fans; but the general alarm and anger became an almost open agitation when the Cat, discovering as so many had done before him, that the stools appointed for the highest nobility were hard and uncomfortable, stepped down from his with a contemptuous yawn, deliberately approached the throne and settled himself in the middle of its cushioned seat. But presently another sensation diverted even this catastrophe from their minds.

The musicians were playing a gay dance tune, the Emperor had given his hand as in duty bound to the Enchanter's daughter, and led her to the centre of the ballroom. The Emperor danced abominably, but nobody regarded him. His visitor danced as no human being had ever danced before. Her flashing feet scarcely touched the floor, her hair became a night cloud driven in the storm, and her girdle of purple poppies turned crimson and then white in the ecstasy of her motion. This was not because they had faded, for flowers picked in an Enchanter's garden never fade.

All the dancers forgot to go on dancing and fell back to watch her as she danced. Sir Oliver admitted that she had strange eyes—and the Lady Valeria that she had still stranger manners. Her sidelong glance at him made him forget both Melusine's eyes and manners; he asked her a question to which she replied "Perhaps;" he felt for her hand and found Sir Diarmid's, which pressed his warmly.

"Good luck to you," whispered that resourceful leader of fashion, "I know she adores you." Aloud he said, "I find this new girl too terribly obvious," and looked to see who heard him. The Lady Valeria did, and smiled at him. All else were too much engaged in watching Melusine to perceive that she was not the fashion.

"The Prince is a young fool to miss her dancing for the sake of a gipsy who walks on her hands on a soup plate," said the Lord Chief Admiral.

"Chacun à son goût," said the Lord Archbishop. "Why cast pearls before—princes?" And he smiled discreetly so not to show his lack of teeth.

“She dances indifferently well in her way,” said the Princess Blanchelys, “but Mamma, what did she mean when she said that Leda——”

“We must contrive for her to give you some lessons, my darling,” said the Empress, hastily.

“May disease crawl upon her and corrupt her beauty. May she dote upon a toad, a reptile, or a foolish and ungrateful man,” said the Court hunchback between his teeth and very low.

Only the Court Poet did not see her, for he was too busy thinking of rhymes to commemorate her beauty.

## 4

### *The Young Lady*

THE PRINCESS BLANCHELYS had been told by her mother to conduct the guest to her room in company with her maid. As soon as she had entered it, she dismissed the maid, sat on the bed, swung her legs and chattered as hard as though her tongue had for the first time that evening been put into her mouth for the purpose.

“I knew it,” said she, “as soon as I saw there were strawberries in the champagne cup. Did you observe Papa fishing for them with his fingers, and Mamma’s efforts to stop him? He had a shocking education, you know, for there were several heirs between him and the throne, and so they sent him to a farm to be out of the way until he was quite grown-up and now it is too late to do anything with him, but I always say it is best to point out these things oneself and then people cannot suppose one is ashamed of him. But it makes me feel quite violent about democracy, for I think volumes about politics and serious things like that, when I see that a man like Sir Oliver, who is the tallest man in the Army and from one of our oldest families, is only a knight, while the Emperor is a scrubby object like Papa.”

Here she paused and looked tenderly at the bedpost, but her guest was so ignorant of the duties and delicacies of feminine friendship that she neglected to make any remark or question that could lead her to continue the conversation about Sir Oliver, and this was the greater pity, as Melusine herself desired intensely that she should so continue. But she dared not confess that she had had the boldness to admire what Blanchelys admired, therefore she remained stupidly dumb, and Blanchelys, in the lack of encouragement, owed it to her self-respect to change the subject.

“Ugh!” she screamed, “I detest that snake! And in the bedroom! I am devoted to bulldogs myself, the uglier the better, and let them climb all over me. There is a sweet portrait of me with one, which everyone calls ‘Beauty and the Beast,’ and he is the sweetest angel in the world, quite unutterably hideous, for his nose is so squat he can scarcely breathe, and his chest so wide he cannot walk, and altogether he is so highly bred that he can barely

exist. Now a snake is such an unnatural pet. But the world is monstrously unjust. His wife, you know, would only be Dame Something, even if she were an Emperor's daughter. Sir Oliver's, I mean. It is a shame there is not the Salic Law in this country, or else there is, I am not quite certain which, but it means, I believe, that the daughter inherits the title instead of the son, or else my brother Pharamond might abdicate, you never know, and he detests inspecting jam factories. Now Papa enjoys it and always tastes every kind of jam. I may have too high ideals, but that is not my notion of an Emperor."

Here she sighed, and as her guest was again obtuse, she wandered to the window and addressed her remarks to the moon as a more encouraging confidante. "I adore the moon," she said; "it somehow makes me feel there must be something beyond. I like to imagine, for I have a multitude of odd fancies, that she understands me. That, after all, is the most important thing in the world. Life is so complicated. My father actually wishes me to marry a sulky barbarian King, a rude Viking, a sea-robber, whom he has taken prisoner. I have never seen him, but I am certain it would break my heart. What does he care for that? Parents are all alike. They cannot understand true love; they have been married too long. Did you observe how the Lady Valeria made eyes at him over the back of her neck in that positively distressing manner? Sir Oliver, I mean, not Papa, who can never be observed with any lady, but gets there all the same, as I know, and Mamma knows, though she affects ignorance. Of course he took no sort of notice. Sir Oliver, I mean. And now she is making up to Sir Diarmid too. How women can, I can't think. Of course he is the fashion and has the Celtic charm, so full of feeling, and the way his eyelashes curl upwards is really rather sweet. But I am unconventional and think Sir Oliver more of a man. You will have to dye your hair, you know, to make it more like mine. Everybody tries to, and black hair is simply not worn now. And you dance differently. I suppose you have learnt ballet dancing, but that is no use at all for the ballroom. You must take lessons from my dancing master, who is the best in the world. Papa offered him an enormous salary; I forget if it were in millions or hundreds, but it was certainly something immense, and he refused it. Absolutely. Until, as a prodigious favour, he consented to give me a single lesson, and then, you know what these artists are, he went to Papa and said, 'I stay. Not because you are an Emperor, but because your daughter is a genius.' Just like that. No 'Sire' or anything. And he waved his funny little hands about as though he were going to hit Papa in the face. Papa said only a true artist could be so rude to him. I will say Papa can appreciate merit. He



prefers geniuses to treat him as one of themselves. Are those Spanish paste or merely glass?"

Here she drew breath to stoop and examine the diamonds on Melusine's shoes, remarking almost immediately that the Lady Valeria also wore mock diamonds all over her shoes, but that for her part she thought them flashy. Melusine did not answer her, for she could think of nothing sufficiently interesting to say to this brilliant being whose conversation trickled in her ears like the sparkling drops of a fountain in the sunlight. Moreover, she was overcome with confusion when Blanchelys stooped to examine if the diamonds on her shoes were genuine, because such a gesture seemed to express a delicacy of condescension, a tender yet unobtrusive intimacy which she was altogether unworthy to receive. At the Princess's amazed and almost indignant discovery that her shoes were sewn with Brazil diamonds of the first water, she was sorely tempted to take them off and beg her hostess to accept them and thus crown her with undreamed-of happiness; but she thrust the presumptuous thought from her, and trembled to think how it might have offended. Who was she to offer her shoes to such as Blanchelys? And besides, they were at least three sizes too small.

So she stood beside her bed, which was the size of a small room and covered with tapestry, wondering if she might dare to place herself beside Blanchelys, who had resumed her seat upon it; but, deciding that it was better not to do so until she was asked, stood, hearing her chatter, but no longer listening to it, since she had been long since lost in a maze of incomprehensible allusions and phrases; stood, growing more and more unhappy as she began to perceive that never, never should she be capable of companionship with this dazzling denizen of a strange world.

She still stood by the bed after Blanchelys had left her, for she had been too much dazed even to see her hostess to the door, and now the recollection of this omission swept over her in a deep, quiet flood of despair. She stood there, her head sunk, her hair drooping round her like the branches of a weeping willow, and the reflection of her shining robes on the polished floor dwindled and grew dim. She, who had never known pain or sadness or an ordinary mortal, now knew them all, and also desire, for her desire, blinding and deafening in its force, was that time should roll back three short hours and place her safely in her shell again on the open sea. There let her be overwhelmed by the waves or crushed on the rocks, before ever she arrived on this alien shore and fell under these mysterious and fatal spells worked by a stronger magic than her father's.

The Snake glided up the carved bedpost and put out his tongue at her with a faint hiss, then, finding she paid no attention, he thrust his head out yet further and his cold scales touched her neck. The simple and homely affection of this familiar friend woke her from her trance, she flung herself beside the bed and buried her face in the tapestry. The Snake glided down the post and over her hair, until it encircled her head.

The Raven perched on her elbow and pecked gently at her arm.

But it was the Cat who abnegated the dignity of his expressive silence for something better adapted to the clumsier comprehension of humans.

“You require distraction,” he said. “Why not indulge in one of your simple pastimes, such as a ride on a moonbeam? It is a fine night. I had thought of going for a stroll myself.”

Melusine went to the window. The moon shone clear and it amazed her to look on it again and recollect that it was still the same moon in the same night as when she had left her father’s palace to follow its path over the sea.

She found that her window did not look towards the sea, but on to the tongue of land which she had observed behind the Palace. It was wider than she had supposed and covered with irregular straggling buildings. The masts of ships appeared above the roofs, in some places she saw patches of bright light, and from them, now and then, came the distant sound of husky unmusical singing. Yet in spite of this occasional sound, the scene appeared remote and strange, as though the sleeping town lay under a spell.

The Cat jumped on to the window sill, then down on to a parapet below, where he arched his back, gave a long plaintive cry like a call, and disappeared. Melusine promptly became invisible. Where she had been standing, there was now nothing but a patch of moonlight. Then that too disappeared, for she had glided out of the window and along the Palace wall that hung above the drawbridge and above the narrow, straggling streets of the seaport town.

*The Old Gentleman*

THE EMPRESS usually composed herself as early as possible for sleep, but to-night prolonged the Royal Couch to a late hour in order to attend to an inquiry into the lineage of their new guest and the possible identity of her mother. Propped on pillows of crimson taffeta, between curtains of purple velvet, she lay in a becoming attitude of repose beside her royal spouse, with one plump and jewelled hand extended to her angel Bijou, a snub-faced spaniel that sprawled embedded in the satin sheets and ignored the gracious attentions of his royal mistress.

In a close group round a table of gold and ebony at the foot of the bed, stood the Lord Chief Councillor, the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, and the Lord Archbishop. Their heavily robed figures obscured the light of four tall candles on the table; it shone out from behind them in strips and patches, revealing pools of colour on the sombre sheets and counterpane. The brightest spark of light glittered from the spectacles of the Lord Chief Councillor as he bent over a volume of Debrett's "Peerage of Fairyland" which he had taken in his arms from a pile of massive books upon the table.

"It is practically conclusive, Madam," he said, "that she must be descended from the Fairy Melusina, Lady of Lusignan. As this famous and powerful lady has frequently appeared after her supposed death, it is just possible that she is even the mother of your honoured guest."

"Has there ever been mention of a post-mortem marriage between the Fairy Melusina and the Enchanter Aldebaran?" inquired the Lord Archbishop severely. But the Lord Chief Councillor had perceived the Empress's wish to discover a favourable account of the young lady's family and proceeded hastily with Debrett, happily unaware of the fact that his hooked and spectacled nose was being horribly caricatured by his shadow on the wall. "Melusina," he pronounced, "was of both royal and fairy blood, being the daughter of the Fairy Pressina and the King Elinas of Albany. Some of the noblest families in France are eager to prove their descent from her."

“Yet there was something fishy about her,” murmured the Emperor from the empurpled gloom of the bed curtains. “What was it?”

“Her tail, Sire,” said the Lord Archbishop. “The best authorities are agreed that the Fairy Melusina occasionally wore a fish’s tail.” He had received his appointment from the Emperor, and the Empress had snubbed him for his adherence to the Broad Church party.

“Pharamond is a sporting young man,” came the growling voice from the shadows of the bed. “I consider him quite unsuited to marry a mermaid.”

“My love,” said the Empress in a patient, sighing voice, as though only with a great effort could she exist in this dense atmosphere until the end of her sentence, “you jump with unnecessary haste to conclusions. Bijou—my sweetest angel. I regret to point out that the Lord Archbishop has been misinformed. I have already assured myself that the Fairy Melusina’s tail was not a fish’s but a serpent’s.”

“Tails up!” sniggered the Emperor into his pillow.

The Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal had been busily stooping over the pages of the Fairies’ “Who’s Who” which lay open on the table, to the imminent peril of his wig in the proximity of the candle flames. He was always quick to concur with the opinions of his royal master, in which he showed his lack of far-sighted policy, since the Empress seldom permitted her husband to hold them above a week.

“I observe,” read the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, “that the Fairy Melusina made it a condition on her marriage to Count Raymond that her husband should never see her on Saturdays, nor inquire where she went nor what she did. This had disastrous consequences.”

“I should think so!” The Emperor’s tone had risen to one of pleased interest. “What? Every week?”

“Every week-end!” echoed the Empress, but on a deeper note. “I call that licence.”

“At best, it sounds a painfully modern arrangement,” said the Lord Archbishop. “I employ the word in its worst sense.”

“And what *did* she do on Saturdays?” inquired the Emperor.

“Sire,” read out the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, “she became, from the waist downwards, a serpent of about eight feet in length. Owing to her husband’s discovery of this fact, the marriage did not turn out as happily as might have been expected.”

“That is a pleasant ancestress, perhaps even a mother-in-law, for Pharamond!” grunted the Emperor. “The girl clearly takes after her. Her eyes are as green as emeralds, and look at that snake following her about. It may even be her mother. We cannot have things like that in the family.”

“I am relieved it was no worse,” said the Empress. “I admit her conversation is occasionally peculiar, and I should not care for Blanchelys to see too much of her, especially alone, but a little matter of upbringing can always be remedied by a judicious and tactful treatment. As to this habit of her ancestress, or possible ancestress, of becoming a snake on Saturdays, well, I confess I am an unconventional person, and as long as there is no harm in it, I am all for people expressing their personalities in their own way. My Lord Chief Councillor, there is, I suppose, no reason to believe that the offspring of the Fairy Melusina and Count Raymond suffered in any way from this idiosyncrasy of their mother?”

“Ten fine sons were born to her,” read the Chief Councillor, from Debrett, and the Empress nodded triumphantly into the shadow beside her. “The eldest was Urian; his ears were large as fans.”

“Oh!” said the Empress.

A chuckle issued from the shadow, and an order to the embarrassed Chief Councillor to continue.

“The second was Odon; whose nose was a trumpet; he became King of Cyprus.

“The third was Guyon; who had one eye set over the other and married the daughter of the King of Armenia.

“The fourth was Anthony; whose hand was the claw of a lion. He married the Duchess of Luxemborg whom he had delivered from her enemy, the King of Anssay.

“The fifth was Regnald; who had but one eye, in the middle of his forehead, and became King of Bohemia.

“The sixth was Geoffrey; who had a tooth like a boar’s tusk, so that he was ever called Geoffrey with the Tooth. He was kind and true though he was ugly, and slew many giants and Saracens and in due time became Lord of Lusignan.

“The seventh was Freimond; the one perfect and beautiful son born to Melusina and Raymond, but he was most unfortunately murdered by his

brother Geoffrey with the Tooth, who immediately repented of his deed and built a cloister on the place of his death.

“The eighth was Horrible; who had three eyes and was as wicked as he was ugly.

“The ninth was Raymond; who had one lip that descended to his waist while the other curled back over his head.

“The tenth was Theodoric; whose face was in his belly. He was afterwards Lord of his mother’s Manor at Partenay.

“These were the ten noble and illustrious children of the mighty Fairy Melusina and the Count Raymond.”

A slight pause followed the Lord Chancellor’s reading of the list. The Empress hoped that her husband was asleep. At last she murmured as she stroked her lap-dog’s head with a finger that flashed fire from its many rings, “I do not see that it need always follow.” But the Emperor was not asleep. He showed his opinion of the ten expressive personalities born to the mighty fairy by a loud and vulgar snort.

“We will continue this inquiry later,” said the Empress, assuming a massive dignity that converted the nuptial couch into the throne room.

One after the other, the sombre figures knelt beside the Emperor to kiss a hairy knuckle thrust out from behind the curtains; then traversed the dais and touched with their lips a hand that was as soft, as smooth and as gently yielding to their impression as a lightly poached egg.

The Pages of the Bedchamber drew the curtains and snuffed out the candles, enclosing the royal couple in a thick darkness that smelt of velvet and rustled with satin. It rustled more emphatically than usual to-night, for the Emperor was struggling with his inclination to remark that for this once anyway he had been proved in the right.

But in refraining from speech he achieved only an immense bitterness; it became clear to him that he was always in the right but that Adelisa would never recognize it. She had grown steadily larger and more important ever since he had married her. She had been modest then, a little prim, and agreed always to everything he said; yet he had somehow come to rely on her, to find he could not do without her, until now she did not give him a chance, she crushed all his ideas, his humorous criticisms, his astute and penetrating judgments. And her silence was the most crushing of all. The darkness was full of it.

He turned restlessly and caught a jagged finger-nail in the satin sheet, for he had never got over that bad habit of biting his nails; so that his teeth were set on edge and he wanted to scream, to bite off the offending finger-nail, to strangle that unseen, that oppressively passive yet hostile figure that weighed down the feather mattress at his side.

Bijou, disturbed by the crackle and swish of satin, yawned in annoyance, changed his position, then suddenly began to whimper and crept into his mistress's arms. The foolish animal had doubtless been perturbed by a glimmer of moonlight that had penetrated a chink between the curtains. The Emperor was about to call angrily to the Pages to draw the curtains properly and see what window shutter had been left ajar, but before he had begun to do this he discovered that it was not unpleasant to have that thin shaft of light to look at in the dense obscurity.

The moonlight shimmered on a point of satin, turning it to a watery grey. The Emperor was suddenly reminded of an orchard in which the moon shone through the boughs of an apple tree. He could remember the grey leaves and fruit against the sky, each outlined with a faint rim of silver, the lowing of a cow in the next field, the damp delicious smell of the dew. In the patch of moonlit satin before him, its smooth round surface and dimpled shadows, he fancied he could trace a resemblance to the face of the farm girl, Glawn, who had at last come to him under the apple tree, through the long grass, in and out of the black shadows, moving slowly towards him.

All the women later, the blondes, attended by negroes, the flashing-eyed foreign brunettes, the pearls, the robes, the absence of robes, the languishing airs, the perfumes, the wines, the incidental music, not one of them had given him a sensation comparable to that uncertain hour of tremulous and fearful ecstasy, when as an exiled youth he had waited in the wet grass for a girl with a snub nose covered with freckles and a mouth that laughed from ear to ear.

He had offered a reward of ten thousand crowns for her after he had come to the throne, and he had found her, but he did not recapture that sensation. "It was not she; it was youth, it was calf-love, it was enchantment," he had told himself. Since his disappointment at recovering her, it had not seemed worthy of his remembrance; but now so poignant was the memory that he wept to himself in the darkness.

"How little pleasure I have had in my life," he thought. "I have a nature framed for love, but love was not made for me. Women have loved me only

for gain, all except Glawn, and she changed, she had become coarse and blowsy. Women are all alike. They change. Look at Adelisa.”

He remembered how he had ridden at the muster of the horses and how Glawn’s pride in him had made her face grave and almost beautiful so that he had felt himself a god to inspire such love. A dreadful suspicion swept over him. Had he too changed?

At this his reflections became unbearable, and he longed for someone to reassure him that he was the same as he must once have been, gallant, gay, a generous and inspiring lover.

“You surely need not sniff when you have a pocket handkerchief,” came a heavily languid voice out of the darkness beside him.



## 6

### *The Gods*

WHEN MELUSINE had left her window on a moonbeam, she had no other object for her expedition than idle curiosity. Her upbringing had been necessarily defective in teaching her the common observances and reticences of hum in society, and she had therefore no scruple in passing in her invisible and intangible state through the windows of the Palace rooms when the occupants caught her attention.

She passed by several in which people lay asleep, and came to a window at which she stopped in a delight that brought the Princess's face before her eyes and a warm and comfortable security into her heart. For in the room, walking up and down with precisely regular steps, as though he were performing some military exercise, was that soldierly and steadfast-looking young man of the Princess's rambling discourse. It had informed Melusine's admiration of him with a new and almost guilty significance, since it made a secret bond between herself and the Princess.

She observed with ardent attention how Sir Oliver stopped in his walk before a clock, which he examined with extraordinary intentness, as though he expected to see some complete alteration in its appearance since he had last looked at it a moment ago. Once he went to the door and opened it cautiously and stood there listening, and then with a sigh he closed it again and went back to the clock and began to mutter to it like a man who grows distraught with his own thoughts and must share them with someone, if only a clock. So he whistled and hummed in time to its ticking and told it: "She is always late now. She was very pale to-night. She was restless. She says I never notice things, but I noticed that. She even broke her fan. And she is usually so calm. What should make her change? Perhaps she will not come at all. Will she come? Will she not come? Valeria, will you never come, Valeria?" To all of which the clock replied "Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock."

His feverish anxiety was so acute that for all her interest in Sir Oliver on her own and the Princess's account, Melusine found it painful to watch him, and passed to another window.

There she saw two men drinking from long mugs and rattling little boxes out of which they dropped small square objects and then remained a moment stooping over them, their eyes fixed and glazed. She began to perceive that it was some very simple game, but their faces were so red and hot, and their remarks so full of unintelligible emotion, that she became affected with discomfort in their presence also, and passed on.

In another room, to the side of a single window, she saw seven candles, all tall but of different heights, burning before a beautiful mirror. They were as bright within the mirror as without it, so that there seemed a small army of pointed flames tapering upwards, each trying to out-top the others. The frame of the mirror was carved with festoons of painted fruit and flowers and it was supported at the base by Cupids, whose heads were turned to gaze upwards in rapture at the reflection in the mirror. This reflection was so still that Melusine had at first taken it for that of a life-size picture. But a slight updrawn movement of the head, improving the position, and a rearrangement of the fingers that rested lightly on the long and slender hip, showed her that it reflected no picture but that singularly elegant young man who had introduced himself to her that evening as Sir Diarmid. He himself was hidden from where she rested on the window sill, and some reason that she did not trouble to consider prevented her from entering further. Though there could be no one there beside the young man and his reflection, it seemed there was no room for her. The candle flames, the Cupids, even the serene and confident beauty of the young man, all seemed to breathe in expectation of some supreme moment that should complete and attest their perfection.

Somewhere in the room Melusine heard a door open and close softly, and the reflection of the young man walked out of the mirror, whose Cupids continued to gaze in ecstasy into a vacant space. But now he returned into it, bringing with him a lady whose face and head and whole person were wrapped in an impenetrable black veil that cloaked her to her feet and trailed upon the ground. The young man kneeled beside her, and slowly raised the veil from the ground, revealing a pair of sparkling shoes that Melusine, with less penetration than the Princess, thought were sewn with diamonds like her own. He lifted the veil further, showing her satin dress, which he raised to his lips, and so remained, kneeling, before that dark shrouded figure with the shining feet. Then he rose and unwrapped the veil from all her figure, so that the sheen of soft satin was first seen gleaming here and there between the darkness, and then flowed all over her like water, and the light of the candles bathed her shoulders and curved arms in a pale golden glow. Last of all he

lifted the veil from off her head, but held it still behind her, and her mirrored face swam out of its obscurity as the moon out of a cloud.

Neither spoke, and so silent were his movements that Melusine wondered if any living people were in that room, and if she were not indeed looking into a magic mirror that reflected something that had happened far away or long ago.

She watched, as she would watch the working of a spell, and saw how the down-dropped lashes of that lady's eyes rested on her cheeks in two dark half-moons, saw how they trembled and raised themselves, slowly, inevitably, to the reflection, not of her own face, but of the young man who stood beside her and still held the veil behind her head.

And at that the supreme moment must have come, for Melusine could not bear to watch the mirror longer and see it pass. Instead, she herself passed on.

She was inexplicably affected so that she did not know whether to laugh for joy or weep as at a tragedy, and in her perturbation she was glad to drift into the Palace garden, which lay before her in the moonlight, and glide over its still and pearl-white lawns. On a high grass mound, beside a small temple that enshrined a statue, there spread a syringa bush whose waxen white and heavy scented flowers reminded her of the drooping fluttering lids of that lady's eyes. A passionate melancholy fell on her for which she knew no cause, for she had quite forgotten the Princess Blanchelys.

She saw a moon-maiden sitting on the syringa bush and looking at her with the hollow shadows that they have for eyes. "Strange playfellow," said the moon-maiden, "I saw you when you visited the Palace of the Moon and danced with us. Dance with me now, each step on a syringa flower."

Melusine looked at her and through her at a black yew tree that was clearly visible behind her vague and glimmering shape. It had never before struck her as a disadvantage when she could see through her companions, but now after a glimpse into the magical and mysterious world of ordinary mortals she was irritated at such transparency. A moment earlier she had felt oppressed, homesick, even afraid, but now she knew that never would she willingly leave this world for the humdrum society to which she had been accustomed. She politely refused the moon-maiden's invitation and returned to the Palace.

"Why," she asked herself, "should these beings be called 'ordinary mortals'? They are indeed more like gods, since there is a divine power and

mystery in even their slightest actions.”

And she glided into a room wherein the Princess Blanchelys was seated before her dressing-table with all her jewels arranged round her head like a crown. A plain and haggard maid yawned constantly behind her, standing first on one foot and then on the other.

“And no one can persuade me that green eyes are not hideous,” said the Princess.

“Yes, Your Royal Highness,” said the confidential maid.

“And I consider she showed deplorable meanness over her old shoes which I was so kind as to admire.”

“Yes, Your Royal Highness,” said the maid.

“Not that I should have dreamed of accepting them. I should think not, from a mere Enchanter’s daughter. But of course birth is nowhere nowadays and wealth is everything. I do think it is so vulgar.”

“Yes, Your Royal Highness,” said the maid.

“How stupid you are. I believe you are asleep or thinking of something else.”

“Yes, Your Royal Highness,” said the maid.

The Princess threw a hairbrush at her. Melusine passed on.

She no longer felt delight and curiosity in the affairs of human beings. She wished to return to her room but did not know which of the many windows in the Palace wall was hers. As she was looking for it, she saw the Court hunchback sitting on the floor close to a window and staring up at the moon. She had observed him in the ballroom and thought at first that he was one of the dwarfs whom her father had often taken her to visit. It had been a favourite treat of her childhood to be taken up to a little door in the hillside, to tap three times and be admitted by a tiny man with a long beard whose head reached to her knee, to enter a dark passage, stooping low so as not to bump her head, and to arrive finally in a magnificent though gloomy cavern in the heart of the mountain, where hundreds of little men showed her their treasures of gold and jewels, feasted her to the accompaniment of gruff songs and hoppety-jiggety dances, and always sent her away with some pretty present such as a picture book where the people in the pictures told her the stories, or a doll’s theatre, where the dolls acted a play by themselves like living people.

But she had soon perceived that the hideously misshapen hunchback in the ballroom was not of that cheerful and kindly race. He was human, though so different from the humans round him, who always became very merry when he approached them, though he was not merry. But the angrier he looked, the more they laughed. Now he sat on the floor with his legs stuck straight out before him and his dull brooding eyes staring up at the moon.

It was the only face at which he liked to look, but then it was not a human face.

He had not been born deformed, but in his infancy a lively young lady of the Court had insisted on dandling the pretty baby in her arms as she walked in one of the galleries, and on seeing her lover on the steps below her, had playfully called to him to catch the child, which she threw to him as though it were a ball. He had missed the catch, and the baby fell on the steps, with the result that his growth became so stunted and distorted that he was considered worthy of the position of Court hunchback. The circumstance, however, which had often been jestingly recounted to him, had given him a malevolent dislike of women, especially such as found their pleasure in dancing, laughter and love. This was increased by the fact that he was naturally susceptible to beauty, a susceptibility rendered unnaturally sensitive by his deformity and the derision it aroused, so that a lovely face was more frightful to him than that of the Gorgon or the Basilisk. Only the face of the moon could give him pleasure, that face on which he could look for ever, without it ever looking at him.

Melusine did not know any of this, but there is something in the quality of a moonbeam that gradually establishes an intimate and pervasive contact between its invisible occupant and the person or object on whom it shines. Anyone who doubts this has only to watch a familiar face, a branch, even an old broken bottle in the light of the moon, and observe how that light seems to penetrate and transform it, to become one with it. Melusine had by now remained long enough with the hunchback as he sat staring through her to understand how different was that stare from the furious look he had thrown her in the ballroom, to remember that he had bestowed that look on all the other women; and she could do this the better because she was now passionately inclined to share his feelings. Since her last visit through a Palace window, she had decided that women were cruel and incomprehensible, beautiful as goddesses but dangerous as monsters.

“Could she not have asked for my shoes?” she had been saying to herself in endless repetition. “She must have known that I would walk barefoot

through the world, on sharp ice or on hot ploughshares, to give her an instant's pleasure. Yes, she must have known, but she did not like me enough to ask me for them, nor to accept them if I offered, and so I can never give her my shoes."

Thus she shared the humiliation of the hunchback until in time the sense of his companionship made her feel that there might yet be other human beings with whom she would not be utterly alone. He, too, experienced an oddly genial and hospitable sensation, as though he had been entertaining company unawares. He thought that, though awake, he must have been dreaming, as he sometimes did when asleep, of himself as a gracious prince, six feet in height, whom all women flattered and adored. On this fancy he fell asleep.

Melusine passed on into a room as large as a hall where there was a bed as large as a room, and slid through the velvet curtains into a stuffy and miserable obscurity. So active and intense was the silence in this satin bed, that she became aware of two people in it who hated and yet remained bound to one another, not merely through circumstances but through some mysterious and inward bond that she could not guess at nor imagine, but supposed to be some cruel enchantment. If these mortals were as gods, she now considered they could also be miserably helpless.

The man's silence was the more bitter and complaining of the two, and she tried to exercise a power that the moon-maidens had taught her, of bringing dreams to the people she visited. It was difficult, as he was not asleep, and his head was full of angry thoughts that chased each other round and round like a company of murderers pursuing their victims in an endless circle. Nor did she know what dream he would prefer. So she tried to make him think of the happiest hour of his life, but when she had succeeded, she found that he was weeping.

*The Philosophers*

MELUSINE had left the Palace. On her moonbeam she slid across the drawbridge and into the town where the tops of the houses overhung the dark and narrow streets and even her light could scarcely penetrate the tiny, deep-set windows. At the end of many of the streets could be seen the gleam of a light on dark water; they were empty and silent, but as she passed further into their intricate mazes she heard again that noise of husky and unmusical singing or shouting that she had noticed when she leaned from her window in the Palace.

She followed this sound over the roofs until she came to a house at the end of a street which descended in a flight of slippery wet steps into the sea. The door of the house stood wide open and from it a murky red light came out in a broad fan-shaped patch into the street, and little broken reflections of it danced up and down on the water beyond the steps. The noise from the house was very harsh and discordant now she was near it, and the voices that issued from the open door were so unlike the human voices she had already heard that she wondered if she were approaching some den of trolls or goblins. She saw dark forms pass to and fro within the house, obscuring the light from the doorway; they jolted up and down in some apparently meaningless and horrible ceremony while a strange instrument jerked out a buzzing, intermittent tune.

Presently a young man stood in the doorway, spilling the light on each side of his figure, which appeared black against it. He stretched his arms and emitted a gigantic yawn; the sound of it rent the air like the crack of thunder, and it appeared as though the doorway itself were but a lesser yawn. He then came in a succession of slow and deliberate steps, punctuated by long and thoughtful pauses, down to the water stairs and there sat with his head in his hands, groaning. The common misery of the human lot had again begun to impress itself on Melusine, when he suddenly threw back his head and laughed in an inane but engagingly artless fashion.

Another man followed him from the house with slightly stronger and more regular steps, and sat down beside him in the full light of the doorway. He was older, dirtier, and more disreputable-looking than the first, who was indeed quite richly dressed, though he had a rent in his cloak, evidently recently made, and several dark stains on his clothes. The older man looked sideways at him, and his mouth also twisted sideways in a smile that gave him the appearance of eating something acid.

“Seneca,” he said, “has rightly observed that ‘as often as I go among men, I return the less a man.’” His voice was hoarse but distinct and sonorous, with a certain rich gravity. It was in fact an admirable pulpit voice, though Melusine, who had not yet heard a sermon, could not tell this. But she was struck by his quotation, which her humiliation by the Princess inclined her to apply to herself. The deeply lined and haggard countenance of the speaker, colourless except for the fiery beak of the nose, his dull and weary eyes, and the bitter melancholy expressed in the folds of flabby skin about his mouth, made her believe that he was some severe ascetic whose studies and lofty standards had led him to disillusionment and harshness of judgment.

“May the devil—split that—bitch,” the young man replied to him, “I shall return the less by—a hundred pounds.”

He spoke as he had walked, in a succession of slow and deliberate steps, stopping in between for no apparent reason.

“If I may so express my matured consideration, Your Royal Highness was a damn fool to trust her with the purse,” said the older man.

“We’re all damn fools,” said His Royal Highness.

This remark also impressed Melusine, not alone by its reflection of universal experience, but by the fact that it coincided with the opinion on these mortals which her father had quoted from the wisest fairy. She sat down beside the two men on the steps, an unseen third in their conversation, which, however, then ceased to interest her, as it referred to people and events she did not know, and was expressed in terms she did not understand. She wished to recall it to the subject of men, and with this purpose she became visible.

The Prince was the first to observe that they had another companion. His light blue eyes bulged from his head, his lips moved but could make no sound, he clutched his neighbour’s arm, and pointed at Melusine. The older man gave a thin, faint scream, and even in the patch of warm light that fell



on him, it was apparent that his nose had changed colour from red to purple. Melusine saw that she had startled them.

“I fear, sirs, that I have intruded too suddenly on your notice,” she told them, “but it was in my eagerness to join in your conversation, to which I have already been listening.”

“The deuce you have,” said the Prince, after a moment, and in a much more distinct pronounciation. His companion remarked that as a young lady no doubt she had enjoyed it.

“Thank you, yes,” said Melusine, “especially when you spoke of the characteristics of men and women.”

“Chiefly women,” said the Prince. “Get me a drink, Salacius, for God’s sake.”

“Your remarks on them were rather obscure,” she answered the Prince, and added with hasty politeness, “to one who has not had the same opportunities for judging them as yourself.”

The Prince stared so hard that his eyes seemed to stand out from his head like those of a prawn. He looked round for Salacius, but Salacius had gone for his drink. Then he gave a roar of laughter.

“Here’s a sport,” he shouted, and extended a large hand towards her in a movement which he suddenly arrested, so that it remained clutching at the air. “Are you a sport?” he asked in a hesitating, feeble voice. His idle hand returned to clasp his head. “After all, I have had enough for to-night,” he said. “God, how it aches.”

“Is your brain tired with study?” asked Melusine, who had seen her father in a like condition after prolonged concentration on the mysteries of the seventh dimension. Salacius answered her in his sententious and melancholy voice as he carefully returned from the open doorway with a large pot full to the brim in either hand.

“Many men,” said he, “work harder at their play than a galley slave does at his oar.”

“Listen to him,” said the Prince in genuine admiration. “It takes a defrocked priest to talk like a prayer book after committing every vice that’s known.”

“And employing his spare time with research work in those still unknown,” continued his companion with some complacency.

“You are then a philosopher, sir?” said Melusine, who had heard of these disinterested seekers into the nature of good and evil. But the faces of the two men were buried in their pots and it was some time before she obtained an answer. Salacius, who finished first, assured her that he would teach her the results of his philosophy, for which she thanked him, and, flattered by this tribute to her understanding, was anxious to show that she would not be altogether unworthy of it.

“I have already observed,” she said “that ordinary mortals are the most extraordinary beings. They shout or scowl with bloodshot eyes over their pleasures, and when they think of their happiest hour, they weep.”

The Prince spoke with a deep reverberating sound from the depths of his pot.

“Is this girl balmy?” he inquired.

“More probably corrupt,” said his companion. “I have found, in both my capacities as priest and pander, that only the most vicious women are ever capable of philosophy.”

Melusine accepted this decision with the conviction of its penetration and veracity that she had bestowed on all their utterances. But what concerned her more immediately at the moment was that the Prince was again groaning with his head in his hands, since he had laid down the empty pot. It became distressingly evident that its contents had not agreed with him, indeed, she soon had reason to fear he had been poisoned, yet his companion remained strangely indifferent to his sufferings. It occurred to her that she might have that power in her hands possessed by her father, so she dipped them in the sea water, then sat beside him and, removing his hands, placed her finger-tips on his forehead and passed them slowly upwards into his hair with a slight but firm and even pressure.

Salacius, who had been sullen and suspicious in his manner ever since Melusine’s appearance, now got up, and remarking that there was clearly no further use for him where he was, went back through the open doorway.

The Prince’s head felt hot and sticky under her hands; the throbbing pain in it ran in little currents up her fingers and into her arms, and after some time thoughts followed them, throbbing and painful, that had detached themselves from a seething molten mass within his head. At last all pain and all thought were withdrawn from it and he lay quiet, with his head on her knees, while she sat oppressed with a burden of unknown cares.

She thought he was asleep, but presently he sat up and said in slow dazed tones that with her help he thought he could get back to the Palace. They returned together, the Prince leaning heavily on her shoulder and occasionally losing control of his legs in a manner that convinced Melusine of what she had already suspected, that he was in some way enchanted.

*The Young Gentleman*

NEXT day, Prince Pharamond was formally presented to the Enchanter's daughter in the presence of the Court.

A hush of interest preceded his arrival, that is to say, several people could make themselves heard without actually screaming. Everyone was certain of the Empress's intentions with regard to her son and her visitor, and was certain of the exact dowry that the visitor would bring, what illustrious but inconvenient guests from fairyland would have to be asked to the wedding, and what rank and status in the kingdom would be taken by those interlopers, the Cat, the Snake, and the Raven. Their absence from this ceremony, for their three stools were empty, was looked on as the worst possible sign of arrogance, amounting to an open contempt of the Imperial house.

Prince Pharamond entered, preceded by two of his gentlemen-in-waiting. In his hunting dress, which was cut in a manner becoming to his rather full figure, he appeared a most presentable prince, a trifle pale and heavy-eyed, but that, as many of the Court ladies decided, gave a tender interest to looks that might otherwise be considered almost too conventionally handsome.

He was visibly startled at first sight of Melusine, a tribute, it was thought, to her beauty; but quickly recovered and bowed and kissed her hand with a correct gesture that some indeed found almost too reserved for the occasion. But the fair visitor, while showing an equal decorum in her look and manner, was heard by all to say as she curtsied: "I trust Your Royal Highness has recovered from the sad condition you were in when we met last night."

"Last night——" stammered Prince Pharamond.

"Last night!" exclaimed the Empress.

"Last night——?——?" murmured all the Court behind hands, behind fans, beneath arched eyebrows, through pursed lips, one and all restraining a terrible inclination to whistle or wink in a vulgar and uncourtly fashion.

There was one unmistakable hoot of mirth but it came from the royal dais, to be precise from the stool where the Princess Blanchelys, in virginal white, sat at her mamma's feet.

"What the devil is this about last night?" asked the Emperor.

"Sh—sh," said the Empress, "our little friend has the strangest fancies. You have already seen Prince Pharamond in your dreams, my dear? I knew it. The moment I saw your eyes, I said to myself, 'She is psychic.'"

Melusine accepted the accusation as she had done that of corruption. These mortals evidently knew more about her than she did herself.

"You *are* psychic, are you not?" said the Empress hungrily.

There had certainly been some mistake. The Prince was frowning at her and making peculiar actions with his lips and eyebrows. Everybody was staring at her and looking as though they wanted to laugh. And the Empress was most anxious to insist that she was psychic. Perhaps it was the sort of thing an Enchanter's daughter should be.

"Yes, Madam, I am psychic," she replied obediently.

It appeared to relieve the situation. The Court looked quite disappointed but that unnatural tension among them had slackened and they were certainly easier. The Prince had stopped making faces at her and was wiping his forehead with an exquisite lace handkerchief and a thankful expression. The Empress beamed upon her like the sun.

"A very happy omen," she declared. "What a quaint child it is. Pharamond, you must be enchanted with your compliment. To think that she has been dreaming of you even before you had met!"

"It would be more of a compliment to dream of him after it," said Melusine.

"There! She is determined you shall not feel too much flattered. She is taking you down a peg. What have you to say to it, Pharamond?"

Pharamond had nothing to say to it. He disliked these flirtations by proxy through his mother. She had tried them on him before when she had wanted to get him off with the Princess of Pallegula, a plain girl with a stoop who quoted Pythagoras to him. Now she was plumping for money but he was not going to be caught yet. This girl was not bad looking, but there was something fishy about her, distinctly fishy. He had been too much occupied with his headache to consider it before, but now that he had discovered who she was, he asked himself with great suspicion what she had been about,

while roaming the lowest quarter of the town after midnight. And now here she was trying to give him away before everyone, even at the expense of giving herself away too. Salacius was a damned sight too clever and gave himself airs, but Salacius had been right in his opinion of her. She might be fun in her own set, though he somehow doubted even that, but it disgusted him to have to treat as his mother's guest a girl who had talked in a cool and unagitated manner with him when he was dead drunk and was not abashed at meeting him next day. That sort of thing was not done, not by one's mother's guests. But his mother was so pig-headed that if she had made up her mind to thrust the girl on him, she was sure to believe nothing he told her. She consistently failed to understand that he knew a great deal more of the world than she did.

He felt injured, but comfortably aware that the sense of injury did credit to his best feelings, as he led that slippery-looking, green-eyed adventuress down the Palace steps. There was to be a hunt in honour of the illustrious guest. A black Arab horse, harnessed in silver, had been brought her from the Imperial stables, and he had to hand her to her saddle and mount his cream-coloured charger beside her. All the Court rode through the little peninsula, on which the summer palace was built, into the forest on the mainland. They rode two and two in a long rainbow of colours through the narrow streets, under the overhanging houses, under flags and handkerchiefs that the loyal occupants waved from the windows, over cobble stones that rang and clattered from the silver hoofs of the horses, and treacherous piles of soft filth that concealed deep holes. Little ragged boys ran before them, shouting and looking back, and blowsy, laughing girls stood pressed back against the doorways out of the way of the horses, screaming like seagulls in their excitement. The Princess Blanchelys held a jewelled pouncet box to her nose, and most of the other ladies made haste to follow her fastidious example. "Faugh!" said they, "how intolerable! The summer palace could not be worse situated." Each was anxious to say it first so that a gentle current of refined disgust flowed through the air above the torrent of noisy acclamation.

Melusine, who rode beside the Prince at the head of the procession, saw a crouched figure regarding them from a grimy doorway with a smile that twisted his mouth sideways into an expression of bitter severity. She waved her hand to him, but he turned without any sign of response and disappeared into the recesses of the hovel in an instantaneous movement that resembled a rat returning to its hole at sight of danger.

"Good God," said the Prince, "what will you do next?"

“Surely you knew your friend,” she said, “even though he has so strangely ignored us.”

“It does not do for either of us to know Salacius,” he replied in a solemnly virtuous voice. She would have liked to know why it did not do for them to know Salacius, or what difference it made whether it did for them or not, since the fact remained that they did know him. But the Prince looked so cross that she could not risk his further disapproval. If he, as well as the Princess and Salacius and Sir Diarmid disliked her (and there were signs of it in all of them), then it would indeed show to a distressing certainty that she had better have visited fairyland or the mermaids under the sea or journeyed to the moon, than have presumptuously hoped to find companions among the mysterious beings of her own race. So she looked anxiously into the Prince’s sullen, down-dropped eyes and remarked that it was a very fine day for the hunt, having just heard this statement made behind her. Prince Pharamond yawned.

Far in the depths of the forest the woodcutter’s second daughter Gillian was gathering sticks into her striped petticoat. She was a rough little creature with shaggy hair that fell over her eyes, which were large and glossy like those of a deer. She wore a necklace of coloured beads and her feet were bare. Through the trees, she saw a stag stand at gaze, then suddenly bound away. She thought she must have disturbed him, but then she heard, very faint and far away, the sound of a horn, and knew that a royal hunt was in progress in that part of the forest.

Her married sister had once been to the town on a market day and had seen the Prince. He had rings on every finger, and the pearls on his cloak were loosely sewn so that they might fall now and then as largesse to the crowds that cheered round him. Some of the people were killed in the press as they fought each other for the scattered pearls. He shone with gold like the Blessed Virgin in church on Christmas Day, and her sister had told her that, like the Virgin, a golden light played round his head.

She dropped the sticks out of her petticoat and ran in the direction of that distant horn. She ran for some hours, deeper and deeper into the heart of the forest, where neither grass nor flowers grew beneath the branches, and only very rarely a sunbeam penetrated the mighty trees and revealed a quivering green brilliance in the surrounding darkness. But everywhere the forest was silent, and she fell at length exhausted, and lay where she fell a long time, panting and dazed with weariness.

There came a crashing sound quite near her, a yelping and hallooing, and then out of the dim greenness and silence, into a patch of sunlight, burst the stag. There came a helter-skelter of baying hounds, the jingling clatter of harness, the rustle of silks and ladies' laughter, the triumphant blast of a horn, and the huntsmen riding by. Then all was quiet again in the forest, and the intruding sunbeam gleamed only on the leaves. But she had seen the Prince.



*The Outsider*

THE hunt had not been following the stag half the day, when it led them out into an open clearing in the forest and down a slope. At the bottom of it flowed a wide, shallow and swift-running river, and the hopes of the hunt became a certainty as they saw their quarry run, desperate and panting, into the river which it was now too much exhausted to swim. The clamour from the hounds became hideous as the hunt poured down the slope on to the stag, who turned at bay, lost its footing in the shallow rushing stream and rolled over. Even the ladies yelled in their triumph, but at the very moment that the hounds splashed through the river on to their prey, it turned into an otter and swam with ease to the opposite shore. The hounds were baffled and put off the scent, even the superior intelligence of the humans took some moments to understand exactly what had happened. On the further bank, however, the stag resumed its former shape and trotted gaily into the forest. This removed all shadow of doubt from its pursuers, who furiously charged into the stream. A horse slipped in the current and knocked its rider senseless against a boulder, a hound was carried away and drowned, and the ladies' long robes and the gentlemen's flying cloaks got drenched. But as the Princess remarked in a loud voice, it made it all the better sport. Her maid had looped up her skirt on silver chains.

The stag led them out into another clearing, but this time there was no forest on the other side, only a high cliff that descended abruptly into the sea. It ran along the side of the cliff, the abyss close at its feet, and flung back its head and snuffed the air, as though seeing that there alone could it escape. The hunters could hear its heavily laboured breath. Soon the hounds had surrounded it, but it turned on the very edge of the cliff, caught the foremost on its antlers and sent it yelping into five hundred feet of space. A dozen hounds were now upon it, dragging it down, when it turned into a seagull and soared out of their reach. This time it was perfectly clear what had happened. The hounds yelped upwards at the air, the huntsmen swore, and the ladies declared it was a shame.

“This is becoming impossible,” said the Prince.

“What else can you expect,” said his sister, “since you have that impossible girl with us?”

“What do you mean? Do you believe that she is capable——”

“Of anything! She is an Enchanter’s daughter, is she not?” and the Princess shrugged her shoulders but not very well, for she had a short neck. “That is just the sort of thing that sort of person does, you know. It is not their fault, I suppose. They are brought up like that.”

She exercised great control in her speech, for Sir Oliver was listening and she knew he did not like catty women.

“I should never have believed,” said the Prince in a voice that more closely resembled the Archbishop’s in his sermons, “I should never have believed that a woman who is supposed to belong to a more or less decent set of people, could behave in so thoroughly unsporting a manner. After this I should not be surprised to hear that she had trapped a fox.”

“It is all very sad,” said the Lady Valeria.

“For us,” said Blanchelys, who would have liked to slap her for her tender, sympathetic tone.

“I shall take good care not to have her in the hunting field again,” said Pharamond.

“I doubt if she has ever been in it before,” tittered Blanchelys.

Their accusations were only too well founded. Melusine was guilty. She had enjoyed the chase until the moment when the stag had no possible chance of escape, and she could not then resist the temptation to provide it with one that was impossible. Her father had warned her that magic was not to be used lightly since it was apt to offend against the common codes of human and religious law. But the pointed politeness of the Court to her, pointed as with steel darts, made her perceive obscurely that she had sinned not only morally but socially.

There was quite an uncomfortable feeling at the al fresco banquet that night when the royal hunting party supped under the trees in the light of coloured lamps of perfumed oil slung on the branches. The gayest music of the musicians, who were concealed in the bushes to give an air of mystery to the proceedings, the most comic antics of the jester as he hopped over the picnic baskets and upset the dishes and tripped up the pages, could not

divest the occasion of a certain judicial solemnity as of the ecclesiastical law courts, which was bound to spoil the festivity of the best arranged picnic.

The Emperor and Empress, who did not care to hunt, had arrived for the banquet transparently disguised as Muscovite dancers. The Empress had always enjoyed dressing up and thought it an excellent device to impress the Court that though they no longer hunted they were as gay and young in spirit as any of them. The Court played up by jostling them, ordering them to dance, and throwing them small coins, at all of which the Empress smiled broadly and benignantly till her flushed face in the rosy glow of the lamps looked like a foolish wintry sun. But Blanchelys and Pharamond were nervously self-conscious about it. It was all very well for their mother to play the fool like this, but there was that question of their father's unfortunate upbringing—would his subjects think he assumed the clown too easily?

That he certainly did not. He looked bored and anxious, for Adelisa made such a point of this tomfoolery that it was better not to disappoint her. She was a wonderful woman. She knew what she wanted and she got it, a quality that he had always appreciated in her even when he suffered from it. It was with obvious relief that he stopped whirling round on his heels and bowing to the audience and settled down to the business of eating and drinking too much. It was the only pleasure in which his mind felt entirely free, for it was the only activity in which his Empress had never tried to restrain or guide him, since she could fear in it no rival to her influence.

Yet the more he ate and drank, the more shrivelled did he appear, while she sat beside him swelling in a self-content and pride that were sharpened by disgust at his gluttony.

As she looked at them through all the din and clatter of the feast, Melusine became conscious of that active and intense silence between them that she had encountered in the enormous curtained bed in her wanderings on a moonbeam the previous night. But this time it was the woman whose silence was the more hostile. She had not known before that that man and woman in the bed were the Emperor and Empress; now she knew, for there could surely be no two couples in the world who existed in such an uncomfortable condition. And she wondered again what cruel hidden enchantment it was that kept them slaves to each other.

In her isolation, for Pharamond kept his back to her and did not speak, she watched the company and thought that many must be enchanted. Sir Oliver looked constantly at the Lady Valeria, and when she gave him a

down-dropped, lingering glance from under her waxen eyelids, that stalwart young man shivered and turned pale as at the touch of a magic wand. But though he looked so often, he never seemed aware that she was tied as if by an invisible string to Sir Diarmid, and that when Sir Diarmid's sad eyes lit suddenly into sparkling laughter, all her body was pulled into attention by that same string. And Sir Diarmid, who looked to right and left and searched so many faces with that perceptive gaze, in reality saw nobody at all, but stared always into an invisible mirror which held his enchanted vision in a narrow cell.

So clear was this that Melusine now felt certain that what she had seen last night was a magic mirror which held Sir Diarmid's spirit captive and, attached to it, the Lady Valeria's.

As for Blanchelys, she must know herself to be bewitched, for at the end of the banquet she seized Melusine's hand, Melusine whom she disliked, and hissed in her ear, "That woman is a Gorgon. When I look at her my heart turns to stone within me." And her round blue eyes followed the Lady Valeria's slow glance at Sir Oliver with an expression so unlike their usual bold placidity that it was evident she was for the moment translated. "Of course I may be very foolish and innocent," continued the Princess in her more usual voice and manner, "but I consider it is unnecessary, to say the least of it, to leave the hunt and to slip away into the forest with Sir Diarmid for a whole hour together. Why make it so public? And he does nothing to encourage her. How women can, I can't think."

She left her guest to take another hand and speak as low and urgently into another ear, pursing her lips and rolling her eyes as she did so.

"There goes one whose virginity rattles in her head like a withered pea," said a rasping whisper. Melusine turned to see the hunchback behind her, but did not see that he stood amazed at having spoken to a woman.

"Are they all under spells and crosses?" she asked.

"They are all in love," he assented.

"Even the Emperor and Empress?"

"With their bonds."

"Even Sir Diarmid?"

"With himself."

"My father said that everyone is alone but that everyone refuses to believe it. Is that why the Emperor and Empress hold so fast to each other?"

“They have done so for thirty years. If they had ever let go they would have murdered each other.”

“Do you then prefer to be alone?”

“No. Nor do you.”

She would have liked to offer herself as a companion, and feared rejection. But at this moment they again shared the companionship of the previous night, that perfect sympathy of heart that is best accomplished by a common hatred of the same persons.

Her resentment showed her that education was of some use, after all. She had mastered the simple A B C of transforming a stag into an otter or a seagull, but if she had never been idle and inattentive to her kind father’s lessons, she might now have the far greater satisfaction of turning all the present company into gorillas, or of fixing black puddings at the ends of their noses.

“But,” thought she presently, “what would be the use? since it would not make them like me.”

“And,” thought she later, so quickly was she growing wise in the ways of men, “what would be the use? since if they all had black puddings at the ends of their noses, they would only consider it correct, and laugh at me as an uncouth monster for being without that necessary and becoming appendage.”

This was the more evident since all seemed unaware of their grotesque behaviour in the condition that the hunchback had described as “in love.” Yet her immunity did not elate her as it should. She had grown so far to resemble ordinary mortals as to feel a sense of deprivation in that she alone did not wear this particular black pudding at the end of her nose.

Since no one was speaking to her, she looked up at the sky and saw the moon, whose light had been hidden by that of the coloured lamps. The simplest thing for her to do was to escape on a moonbeam from this company that she embarrassed by her presence. She did so, and when the company discovered that their guest had vanished in the air, they told each other that it was just what you might expect.

But Pharamond had ceased to disturb himself with the unseemly behaviour of this girl that his mother actually expected him to marry, for he had strolled away from the banquet and discovered the woodcutter’s daughter; and the woodcutter’s daughter discovered that even if the Prince

did wear a golden halo on market days, he was much the same as other men, only rather more so.

# 10

## *The Prisoner*

**T**O glide over the leaves of the trees and feel them shiver beneath her touch, to dance on the topmost twig of the highest tree in the forest, to lie on the surface of the river pools and look down into an abyss of darkness, or lean against the waterfalls and turn them to silver, these familiar occupations Melusine still found could please, but thought how much more they would do so if she could share them with a companion. She wondered if the time might ever come when she should instruct the Princess Blanchelys in her arts; but she felt despondent of this and certain that the Princess would find her pleasures too simple and commonplace to wish to share them. As for Sir Oliver, she liked to imagine him as a heroic figure always standing just behind her and the Princess, gentle to them and stern to their foes, but it never occurred to her to wish him to join her in her rambles on a moonbeam.

“Your voice is the enchantment that calls forth the moon,” she assured the nightingale in the language she had learnt from the moon-maidens, and he burst into renewed song, but it was in praise of his mate and did not answer hers.

“I know the songs of the mermaids,” she told the tall white flowers, but they stood shut and asleep, their perfume spread around them, enclosing them in an invisible cloud.

“Tell me for whom you stand waiting, here in the forest?” she asked the trees, but they bowed their branches in a courtesy more aloof than that of the Court, and whispered their secrets only to one another.

“I may as well go to bed,” said Melusine, and she went there.

It was very late. No lights were left in the town nor in the Palace. She passed along the Palace by a part of the wall that she had not seen before, when suddenly she slipped through the earth. She had fallen some way, and found she was in a black hole underground, which she took at first to be a cave. The light of her moonbeam shone only on one small spot of trodden

earth, and on that in broken portions, for the opening through which she had fallen was very small and barred across with iron. It took a little time in that gloomy place for her to see that it was very narrow and rather long and that at the furthest end there sat a figure that appeared gigantic.

Then she understood that she must have fallen into one of the dungeons beneath the Palace, for her father had told her of the human custom of interring prisoners in holes under the earth. Its occupant sat so still that she thought he was asleep, but presently he stood up and came slowly towards her, his feet dragging a heavy chain. Although she knew herself to be invisible, Melusine trembled as she saw his eyes in the darkness look straight through her. But they looked not at her but at the grating which let in the air and her broken light. Nor, if she had been visible, could she think afterwards why she should have trembled, for this man, though much above the common stature of the men at Court, was not ugly nor dreadful, like many giants she had seen. Yet she was glad that he could not look at her, although she continued to look at his face as it showed faintly through the darkness.

She thought afterwards that it must have been his eyes that had made her fear him; they were light and keen, in colour like a hawk's, and the fierce sorrow in them hurt her as though it were her own. She had no wish to share that sorrow; she wished to escape and know herself to be alone as before. But as though they saw and spoke to her, those eyes, unconscious of her presence, held her, and she could not escape.

At last he spread his leather cloak on the ground and lay down with his head just beneath the grating, so that her light fell on his hair and on his cheek. He shut his eyes and she was now free to observe that his stretched form was mightily built, but that the sharp lines of his bones showed through his clothes, which had once been rich, but were now worn and stained with the damp of the dungeon. His hands, strong as they looked, were like claws, with the flesh fallen in between the knuckles. His cheek, too, was worn and showed deep lines and hollows, and the sallow skin lay stretched on his jawbone like that on the mummied head in her father's study. But she did not see how discoloured and cadaverous he was, for the memory of his eyes held her as their actual gaze had done and bewitched her vision. As long as she knew those eyes to be there, awake and conscious, even though they looked only into the darkness of his closed eyelids, she was not free to go away. She wished him to sleep that she might escape.

“Can you not sleep?” she whispered.



“I cannot sleep,” he muttered in his arm. He alone had answered her, when the nightingale, the flowers and the trees had ignored her silent speech. It gave her a great pride that he should have answered her, though he did not know that she had spoken. He was speaking again, and it seemed as though he directly addressed her, for his eyes were now open and looked up through her at the grating.

“Cool,” he was saying. “Your light is cool as water, and my eyeballs are of red-hot iron.”

In her light, she could see that his eyes were indeed bloodshot and rimmed round with fiery red as though they had been scorched.

“Sleep,” she whispered.

“Sleep,” he repeated. “Aloof, implacable Sleep, you stand there afar off, looking at me. Will you never come to me?”

She touched his eyelids and found them hot and dry, like those of a man who is dying of thirst in the desert. But he did not know that she had touched them.

“You should come with me to the moon palace,” she said. “I once visited it, all by myself. It is cool there and no one needs to sleep, for no one is quite awake. The walls of the Palace glimmer like a moonlit cloud, they are soft and unsubstantial, yet your hand cannot go right through them. The moon-maidens dance through the halls in shimmering troops, you can scarcely see where one begins and the other ends, for they are all alike, and their silvery hair and clothes melt into the air. Indeed you can see through them, but they are none the worse for that, though it is sometimes considered a disadvantage. The moon queen sits on a white throne in the heart of the palace, and her crown is of sparks of pale fire. Otherwise all is empty and monotonous, for there are no events and no days. When I returned, I did not know if I had been away three hours or three weeks.”

The prisoner could not hear a single word, but her light lay like a gentle touch upon his eyelids, and his thoughts followed hers among softly shifting forms in an endless, empty space. Wishes and plans and regrets and fears and hot red rages melted away in that monotony. And as soon as he had ceased to desire her, sleep came from where she had stood afar off, and kissed his eyelids again and again, wooing him, till he yielded to her charm and fell deeply into her power.

Then the moonbeam in the dungeon quivered as though it were coming to life, and gradually in its midst appeared the transparent shadow of a girl’s

form. It took on the substance of flesh and blood and stood there looking at him. But when the moon slipped down through the sky, she grew faint and misty again until the black wall of the dungeon could be seen behind her, and then she melted altogether into the moonbeam, which stole out through the grating and left an empty darkness.

*The King*

THE morning broke in a grey drizzle of rain. Everyone was tired and cross after that disappointing hunt.

The Princess Blanchelys breakfasted in bed on ortolans stuffed with larks' tongues and truffles stewed in champagne.

Prince Pharamond found that he could not face any breakfast.

The woodcutter's second daughter gave herself airs and demanded an egg for breakfast, instead of porridge, which she was used to share with her young brothers and sisters; after this she refused to pick up the sticks and talked darkly of a coach and six and satin petticoats.

The stag who had been turned into a seagull disliked its breakfast.

And the prisoner in the dungeon under the Palace examined a crust and half-empty jug of water, and decided that as the warder was likely to remember him again by to-morrow, it might be safe to finish what remained of yesterday's breakfast.

He had had such an unusually good night that he felt quite cheerful, for since happiness is only a matter of comparison, a few hours' sleep towards morning were of far greater value to him than the countless excellent nights he had never had occasion to notice. He considered that he must have had good dreams to make him feel so well refreshed, no doubt he had dreamt that he was at home in his kingdom, but then he grew certain that he had not, that if his spirit had left this dungeon, it had been to visit some country altogether strange to him and to all other human beings.

"A vast white place," he said aloud, for like most people in his situation, he often talked to himself, and indeed loneliness had made him talk more than any company had ever done. He remembered that place as a void, a solitude, and yet there were people there, dancing. But they were not human beings. And someone had taken him there, but he could not remember whom. It becomes important to remember whom you meet in your dreams

when you do not meet anyone anywhere else. He sat as far as he could from the grating, for the rain was pouring down through it into a wide pool, and he munched his crust as slowly as he could to make it go further, and stared at the rain and tried to remember.

The rain was silver as it came through the grating and then it turned black in the depths of the dungeon. It fell in such long, straight lines, it was like the black, straight hair of a girl, it was like the slender, shining form of a girl, almost he could see it taking the shape of a girl who stood there under the grating and looked at him with eyes that shone cool and green through the silver and black that surrounded her. And then he remembered.

“She stood there last night,” he cried aloud. “She grew out of a moonbeam and stood there looking at me. I can remember everything, even the wreath of purple poppies she wore as a girdle. It was she who took me to the Palace of the Moon, that was the white place I dreamed of, though indeed I do not know if she took me there or only told me of it. It does not matter. She was here in this dungeon, under that grating, but it was only a dream.”

This seemed to him an intolerable injustice, and he thought that when he escaped, as he certainly should one day, and returned to his own kingdom, he would make it a law that all dreams should be made actual for the full possession of their dreamers. But this fancy was that of a powerful and arbitrary prince, and the difficulties of such an enterprise soon occurred to the half-starved prisoner. He called to mind the courtesan Lamia who brought a law case against the young Roman for having possessed her in a dream when she had denied that pleasure to his waking senses, but it seemed to him a notion not lightly to be followed. He laughed aloud at such attempts to bring Morpheus within the common law, and the sound was so strange in that place that the spiders ran down the walls and the rats peeped out of their holes to see what unknown creature had appeared among them. But they saw only their familiar companion dragging his chain up and down, which was a foolish, aimless habit of his and not to be encouraged, since there were plenty of useful occupations for him to follow, such as catching flies and placing them in the cobwebs for the spiders.

Suddenly he stopped and stood staring down before him. For on the pool of rainwater under the grating there floated a purple poppy.

He lifted it from the water and a faint peculiar scent came from it, very different from the usual strong smell of poppies. He looked into the deep and dead black of its centre, black as his dungeon at night, black as her hair

in the moonlight, and he grew hot with anger. No dream could have left this poppy. She had been here in his dungeon, standing by him, watching him, and all the time he had slept soundly. On other nights he had lain awake, staring into the empty darkness, until, at last, morning had crept with cruel reluctance through the grating. But on this one night he had slept, when a visitor had come to him.

All that day he thought of what he would have said and done had he awaked to find such a visitor beside him.

At night he sat in the driest part of the dungeon and placed the poppy in his doublet next his heart. Almost immediately he fell asleep.

The rain had stopped at last and the moon shone out. A thin stream of light poured through the dungeon grating, it quivered and shook as the moonlight is broken on moving waters, and in its midst appeared the visitor of the previous night. But she did not remain under the grating, she approached the prisoner and bent over him to gaze at him, and in his dream he knew that she was there close to him, looking at him, but he could not awake. Though she stood in the darkest part of the dungeon, she made a silver shining in that gloomy place, and her eyes drew him out of it away on to wide green seas. There they sailed together in a boat made out of a shell and a rose petal and a silver pin; they sailed up the moon path to the very edge of the sea, and when they had reached it, there was the edge of the sea again, as far away as ever.

But just before the moon set, they came back to the dungeon and she stood beneath the grating and melted into the moonbeam. Then that too disappeared.

At dawn the prisoner woke to see a purple poppy lie glowing on the dungeon floor in the red flush of sunrise. It lay nearer to him than the first had done, but that did not console him. Yet as the long day drew to its close, he was so much charmed with its beauty and perfume and the memory it brought of its wearer that he placed that also in his doublet next his heart. And on the next night also he slept through the fair stranger's visit, and not all the pleasure of his dreamed adventures with her could comfort him when he waked and knew her to be gone.

This happened every night that the moon shone, and every following morning a purple poppy lay on the floor, always a little nearer to where the imprisoned King was lying.

One morning, he found a poppy at his feet; the next, one lay upon his breast. The next night she came, there were only two left, and she dropped one in his hand as it lay open by his side. She had grown paler of late, and to-night her eyes looked at him through deep shadows.

“All but one of my poppies are gone,” she told him; “I will come twice more and then I too must go.”

The next night she wore the single poppy in her breast. She kneeled beside him and wept, and said,

“I will come to-morrow and then never again.”

Her fingers touched his head and it was the first time that he had known them do so. He thought she kissed his forehead, but when he woke in the morning he found that a poppy lay on it, and knew it was that that had felt like a kiss.

That day he raged in his dungeon as a tiger does in its cage. He had been taken prisoner most foully and discourteously, not worsted in fair fight, not fooled into a trap, yet here he was being worsted and fooled night after night, and as he thought of it he knocked his clenched fist against the dungeon wall until his bruised and bleeding knuckles gave him something better to think of than his fury.

For he forgot that his visitor had brought him calm sleep and hope of great happiness, that night after night she had led his spirit out of that foul dungeon into a distant, sweet enchantment. It seemed to him that she had come only to mock and torture him and he told himself again and again that he hated her, and that the whole cause of his wish to see her was that he might express that hatred to her.

# 12

## *The Entrance*

THE COURT began to observe a certain change in their guest. Shortly after her arrival, to be precise, just after that unfortunate affair of the hunt, it was noticed that her eyes had grown brighter, her checks more frequently flushed, and above all, that her manner had lost its air of aloof constraint and become careless and happily free. She no longer paid close attention to what was said by other people, nor to the consequences of what she said herself.

She found Sir Oliver dull and Prince Pharamond absurd and Sir Diarmid's sympathetic melancholy and flashes of sarcastic gaiety equally unreal, but she regarded them all with a greater affection than she had yet done. She loved the hunchback with a new tenderness that hurt her when she encountered his savage and piteous gaze; but he looked sourly now on her, and their hidden companionship was destroyed. Even this could not really distress her. She laughed much more often and sometimes without any very apparent reason, but as the Emperor indulgently remarked, "It's good for gals to giggle." He liked her a great deal better, and the Empress agreed that the visit to their Court had done wonders for their little friend.

"I have always said," she declared, "that she only needed a little animation, a *je ne sais quoi*, to bring out her vitality."

Melusine did not know why she should be so happy. It did not even occur to her that she might be happier. As long as the prisoner slept in the power of her poppies, she could enjoy his presence and their dreams each moonlit night, untroubled by hope or fear. If he were awake, she might annoy him as she had done Prince Pharamond and Salacius; he might even dislike her as much as did the Princess Blanchelys. She told herself this later, but the stronger reason was that she did not wish to feel again the pain and fear of pain that had filled her that first night when she had seen the prisoner awake and looked into his unseeing eyes. That night it had been she whose spirit had been caught and drawn out of herself, unwilling as it was, into the power of those fierce and sorrowful eyes. But each night since, it

was she who held the power, stood actual and visible before him and drew his spirit out of his sleeping body to come wheresoever she chose to lead him. It was this thought that sometimes caused her to laugh without any very apparent reason.

It was soon forced upon her notice that since she enjoyed this free exercise of her power, she began to have power over others too. For now that she cared nothing for Pharamond's approval, he began to pay her attention. He pointed out to her that the quietest of her sex were apt to be little devils when you came to know 'em; that he might inform his parents, if he chose, of a few trifling but inconvenient facts about her, but that she was not to feel alarmed on this account since his motive was merely to remind her that they shared a secret; and here he slipped a hand round her and squeezed her arm.

To Melusine it seemed that they shared nothing, not even the "fictitious contact of the flesh" of which her father had spoken, since that contact so obviously gave each of them an entirely different sensation. That Pharamond should derive pleasure from what gave her distaste, made her again acutely aware of that sense of solitude in herself and others that she had lost ever since her first sight of the sleeping prisoner. She had believed that she had only to wake him to find that she and he were not alone; now a cunning doubt intruded itself; she knew it were better for her that he should never wake, than wake to contradict that belief.

But so great was Prince Pharamond's solitude, that during her reflections he grew yet more confident of her response.

"You understand me," he said; "it is the most important thing in the world after all."

"To me or to you?" she asked.

He looked puzzled, since a thing that was important to her could not obviously be of the same importance as a thing that was important to him. It was easier to continue than to answer, and he told her with a frankness that should have assured her as to his earnest intentions, that he had not at first been in love with her, had not even wanted to hold her hand. A fellow wanted mystery in a woman he supposed, but he was sick of all that. "There is not a scrap of mystery about you, thank God. Though I did wonder at first if you were a queer customer. Now I know all about you, I can read you like a book."

After a pause he added, "Better than a book."



The Court followed the Prince's example. They read her like a book, like a sonnet, like an ode, like a modish love song. Melusine suddenly became the fashion. Two of the Court ladies dyed their hair black. That night the Princess Blanchelys consulted her maid concerning poisons.

People began to notice that her poppies were disappearing one by one. People began to talk. They said that she gave a poppy in token of her favour every night to some fresh gallant. This supposed that a considerable number of the Court must be her lovers, and a delightful game ensued of guessing who they might be; they called it Poppycrack. Those who were anxious to claim that distinction in the past or aspire to it in the future, had a purple poppy embroidered on their mantles with an inscription in threads of gold: "In thine arms no poppy can give sleep." Even Sir Diarmid found he must follow where he had not led, and had his cloak entirely covered with poppies. When asked its significance, he made a gesture of reserve. But nobody made the deduction that he hoped.

These rumours should have proved disturbing to any matrimonial projects for Melusine, but the Empress always remained deaf to anything she did not choose to hear, and the cause of Melusine's animation persistently remained to her a "je ne sais quoi." While Prince Pharamond, though annoyed by all that Blanchelys felt it her sisterly duty to inform him, certainly found that his interest was thereby quickened. It appeared that there was some mystery in their visitor after all. How was it that so many men were attracted by something which he, who knew all about women, had failed to notice? And, far deeper mystery, how was it that she, who could bestow her favours on so many, had yet neglected so far to observe his own claim to them? She was quite pleasant and friendly, but she positively did not seem to notice it when he made love to her. He grew quite worried about it.

"I must have got on the wrong side of her somehow," he confided to Salacius.

"There's only one way to get on the right side of a woman," said Salacius.

Pharamond thought it over.

But as her poppies dwindled in number, it began to be seen that Melusine was growing paler and more silent and that she would suddenly look sad without any very apparent reason. Then people began to say that there had been a mistake (not theirs, for they had divined it all along), and that all her favours had been bestowed on a single man who had begun to

wearied of them, and that was why she had been gay, but now was so no longer. Pharamond felt much more annoyed at this than at the former reports, for it was an insult that he should have bestowed so much time and trouble on a girl whom another man had jilted. It was clear that so far from being mysteriously fascinating and dangerous, she was only a fond fool.

He therefore fell out of love with her as quickly as he had fallen in; for he had no emotions but such as were dictated by his vanity.

The Court followed suit, for each man loved according to opinion, and opinion had declared that Melusine was not after all a woman to inspire love.

But she did not know of this change; she was too much occupied in counting her poppies. The charm of each lasted only for each following night, and she had determined she would not come when it had lapsed, for she knew, without knowing how or why, that from the time when she entered that dungeon without the protection of her spells, she would enter another world, an unknown and terrifying world, in which she might come to wander lost and starving.

Those who judge her as unduly timid must remember that an Enchanter's daughter is apt to suffer from her peculiar protection from the contact of humanity. This fact was also, doubtless, the cause of her hasty and ill-considered judgments, for she vowed that since the prisoner could not break down the barrier she had herself erected between them, he must then be unwilling to do so, or weakly incapable. In this she showed herself more ignorant and foolish than any ordinarily mortal woman, who would surely never be so unreasonable as to expect her lover to prevent the consequences of her own actions.

Yet what her lover could not do, her friends accomplished. It so happened that on the night when Melusine left her last poppy in the prisoner's hand, the Cat returned late from the town where he had been engaged on some private business peculiar to himself. Passing by an obscure part of the Palace, hitherto unknown to him, he walked close by the wall and perceived a small grating just before him. He was walking round this when he heard a soft sound from beneath him which he at once knew to be uttered by his mistress. He mewed in his own unmistakable fashion but met no response. He tried to jump down through the grating, but the space between the bars was small, and since his arrival at the Imperial Palace he had been fed on cream five times a day. It was not to be done. He craned his neck through the bars and saw his mistress kneeling on the floor of the dungeon

beside a sleeping man. She was laying the last of her poppies on his forehead, and as she did so she wept. This was a thing that the Cat had never before seen her do, and the spectacle made him so uncomfortable that he stalked away with a very stiff tail. But success in his own affairs had put him in a mood to be both perceptive and indulgent to lovers, and as he walked he came to the conclusion, first that his mistress had put the young man to sleep; secondly, that she would be better pleased if he now woke.

He consulted with his colleagues who agreed with his deductions, especially as they knew the peculiar nature of the poppies. After due consideration they decided to say nothing to their mistress who was likely to be even more unreasonable than any ordinary mortal when in love, but rehearsed carefully a light and careless conversation in the human tongue that they might hold as by chance in the prisoner's hearing.

The next evening, as the daylight faded, it grew suddenly so much darker in the dungeon that the prisoner thought a storm must be brewing. But on looking up through the grating he saw that it was obscured by three animals that had settled just on the top of it. He was about to shoo them away, but was struck by the oddity of their combination, for it is not often that one sees a cat, a snake and a raven in such close company. His surprise was increased when they began to speak, in clear-cut, precise sentences as though they had learned their conversation by heart from the phrases of a copy-book. At this he listened attentively, for he knew from the fairy tales that when three animals talk together in human speech in the presence of a young man, it is because they wish him to learn something to his advantage.

"For my part," said the Cat, "I believe our mistress to be in love, for it is a common ailment among the humans and causes them at first to be gay and then to grow pale and silent and to ignore their friends, even as she has done."

"If she be in love," said the Snake, "why does she not declare her passion and so find happiness?"

"Because," said the Raven, "she has learned from humans that insane desire for self-torture which they call pride."

Here he ruffled his feathers, the Snake gave a little hiss, the Cat licked his whiskers, and they began again.

"Do you understand," said the Cat, "why the young man that she loves should sleep all the time that she visits him?"

“Because,” said the Snake, “the poppies that she leaves each night have come from an Enchanter’s garden, and if anyone who is not an Enchanter’s child should wear them next his heart, he must sleep the whole night through.”

“What a pity,” said the Raven, “that he does not know this, for in that case he might omit to wear them, and so would see our mistress.”

They then quickly departed, purring, hissing and croaking to each other in self-congratulation for the easy and natural manner in which they had introduced the subject.

The ensuing night when Melusine entered the dungeon in her moonbeam, the prisoner was lying on the ground as before, but when she stole into her own shape, she saw that his eyes were open, looking at her. And at that, so far was she from the reason of any ordinarily mortal woman, she began to cry softly and to wring her hands; and so pale was she and so deeply shadowed were her eyes that it appeared to the man as he rose and stood before her that she was still transparent to the dungeon wall.

“Where is my poppy?” she moaned in a voice that scarcely could be heard. “You have thrown away the last poppy that I gave you.”

“No,” said the prisoner, “I have kept them all, but to-night I have not worn them. They have done their work long enough.”

But she trembled at his voice, and she hid her face in her hair away from his eyes. He took her hands, but then she raised her head and spoke calmly:

“It is of no use to try and hold me here,” she said. “If I wish, I can melt into moonlight in your hands.”

“And do you wish?” he asked.

He dropped her hands as he spoke, and she turned away to beneath the grating, and as she did so, her body wavered and became both more shining and more indistinct, and it was now clear that the dungeon wall could be seen through her. But she knew that he was looking at her, and she had to look back once at him before she vanished from his sight.

She looked, and her eyes were held more strongly than her hands had been. She looked, and her form grew clear and distinct in the moonlight. She looked, and all strength was drawn out of her by a magic stronger than her father’s.

It drew her hands slowly out to his, and her steps towards him.

*The Lovers*

THE immediate result at Court was that Melusine again became the fashion. It was seen that her eyes shone, that she seemed to walk on air, and it was rightly concluded that she must be involved in a more than usually successful amour. And once more every man wished to enjoy what another had appreciated. Everybody talked or betted on the identity of the Fortunate Unknown, and commended his discretion but sourly; for discretion is never applauded unless it has been broken in strictest confidence to oneself. And besides, it caused discomfort, for each man tried to look happy and confident, while glancing in deep suspicion at his neighbour.

Ten more Court ladies dyed their hair black, and the run on silver cloth was so great that it became necessary to open a new factory for it. The cloth of gold makers were ruined and had to close down their chief factory, whereupon the work-people smashed up the new cloth of silver factory and thus exactly doubled the number of men thrown out of work and halved the amount of unemployment pay issued to each. But with the usual indifference of people in her condition to public affairs, Melusine ignored the disastrous effect of her amour upon these industrial questions; and failed to understand how much more important that effect was than the cause.

It began to be observed by those mathematicians specially skilled in putting two and two together, that only on moonless nights did the Enchanter's daughter remain till the end of any festivity; that on the nights when the moon rose early, she appeared late or not at all; and that on the nights when it rose late, she was apt to disappear with an abruptness which did little credit to her manners or discretion.

She would then escape from the glittering festivals of the Court as from a prison, and hurry to the deep and awful dungeon where her lover had waited for her hour by hour. There she discovered that she was of an importance that she had never imagined any being could possess. Everything that happened to her, everything she thought, everything she

remembered, was now of moment. She found herself to be a person; it was no less surprising than that her lover thought her to be a goddess.

And in finding this, she straightway forgot it, in her discovery of someone who was more herself than she was.

These more important discoveries were made before they had asked each other's names.

He told her that he was Garth, King of Astrador and Stiorn and the Northern Seas, that he was also known as the White Wolf, from his ship of that name in which he had fought his fiercest battles. The ship had been wrecked on this coast and he himself, all but drowned, fished out of the water and clapped into the Imperial dungeons. That was Eminondas' way. King Garth had proved a dangerous neighbour and "finding is keeping," he said. Also there are more ways than one of making a match, and Blanchelys was never likely to get so good a chance again, for he had a shrewd eye for royalty and knew that these self-made mushroom empires, such as his own, went for nothing nowadays. King Garth, however, had preferred to remain in prison rather than accept a proposal of marriage so discourteously proffered. He forgot even to mention the matter when telling Melusine of his capture; they were apt to leave what they were saying unfinished.

And there were so many more important things to tell, now that he could speak to someone beside the rats and spiders. She heard of marvels greater than any she had learned before; of his voyages to the ends of the world, though indeed it had no ends, for, whatever the learned might say, it must be round like an apple; you could see a ship coming up over the edge of the flat sea, first the mast and then the hulk, as though it were climbing a hill; that proved it. He had been to the other side of the world; his largest ship, weighing as much as a hundred tons, had sailed the Western Ocean, on and on towards the setting sun, until at last they came to a land of green vines and scarlet birds and men whose faces were the colour of burnished copper, and the flowers in their gardens made of gold and precious stones.

And he had sailed the Curdled Ocean of the North so far that he outstripped the night, for darkness never fell there and the sun shone after midnight; bright flowers grew on ice-fields, but there were no trees, and the people lived in houses made of snow. Yet once that land had been warm enough for elephants to tramp there, for they had found a huge curled tusk embedded in the ice. There was, he said, no land uninhabitable nor sea unnavigable, as he had proved when rocks of ice as high as mountains had come floating over the sea, gleaming like sapphire and emerald, and all but

crushed his ship, no bigger than a walnut shell beside them. One of his ships was lost; a year later they found it lying under solid ice, its painted dragon prow and blue and golden sails, the familiar forms and faces of its sailors on the deck, all clearly to be seen, preserved as fresh as if in life, far, far down in their crystal coffin.

But that he could not bear to remember, and broke off to tell her of his men and the great days they had had together, their friendship and faith to each other, their jokes and laughter even in their worst adventures, as once after shipwreck when for many days they drifted on an open raft pursued by sharks, and fed only on the fishes that in those parts fly through the air. He told her of a treaty he had negotiated with a Prince by taking him a cruise in rough weather so that the sea-sick landlubber agreed to everything if only he were instantly put ashore; of a mutiny that he had quelled by lifting the ringleader in his two hands and holding him over the side of the ship; “that brought them to their senses”; and how afterwards he and his men had laughed as much over the one incident as the other.

He told her of the difficulty of keeping weevils out of biscuit, and of preventing scurvy. Of his sea-fights he did not tell her, for he had no pleasure in describing bloodshed. But in the ring of his voice she heard his joy in remembered danger and hardship, shared equally with his crew, each bearing another’s burden with no respect to persons. With his eyes she saw the black waters rushing past below while the timbers creaked and the salt spray blinded his eyes and crusted on his lips. She entered his world and knew his friends and found in their jovial comradeship and courage, their common endeavour, and curiosity to which the sea could set no limit, a charm deeper than any of her father’s.

She for her part sang to him while the roses on the upper earth bent their heads to listen, and fell petal by petal through the dungeon grating in their desire to reach this fairy palace. She danced to him until those dark confines became the boundless sea, and she the moonlight playing on its surface. She forgot that she had ever sung or danced or done any other thing in all her life but love, until the fading moonlight on the further wall showed her that the moon was setting, and she must go. She grew faint and transparent in her lover’s arms, and glided from his grasp into a mere pale light that flickered on his hand and then his face, and so passed upwards through the grating.

Then for the prisoner there followed an eternity of silence and empty darkness, that shifted reluctantly to a dull twilight for many hours, and then back again to darkness. He suffered tortures, such as no pain of wounds or thirst upon his shipwrecked raft had ever made him comprehend, lest that

darkness should remain for ever impenetrable to his sight, and never again break into a dim grey glimmer, and then into a silvery light, and then into the shape of his love, growing actual before his eyes until he could hold her warm and living body in his arms. This alone was real in his present life.

To Melusine their love was a dream of the night.

All day across her hurried senses there rushed a continuous procession of people, talking, laughing, flashing their colours in the sunlight, posturing before her, pleading with her, claiming all her attention as their natural right. She could see their faces sharp and clear before her; their defined features and expressions, their gestures and neat sayings, danced in her memory like a brightly painted frieze on a white wall.

But of her lover's appearance she held only the memory of a giant shape, grey in the moonlight or dark in the shadow, of black pits for eyes, and the gleam in them when he laughed or his love for her grew fierce, of the flash of white teeth revealing joy or anger, of the blurred form of his arm shooting out in the darkness like her Snake striking, as his sinewy strength closed round her. She could never think clearly of him as she did of other men, nor know what she thought of him, but felt his presence always in her mind like some huge shadow predominating over that sharply cut procession of dancing figures.

All danced to the same tune and she danced with them.

One still evening when the sea in the bay was very calm, there was a pleasure party on the water, arranged by the Princess. The Court embarked two and two from the steps of the Summer Palace and sailed about the gardens in boats, fantastically shaped, some like swans and some like dolphins and some like sea-serpents. Little boys, half-naked, and with coloured wings tied on their backs, ran about the gardens, and pelted the occupants of the boats with roses. A boat shaped like a jagged rock contained musicians dressed as Tritons who played various instruments. They sang such songs as this:

“Is Love so sweet a thing  
That kisses cause a drouth  
To burn the lover's mouth?  
Then love me not and kiss me not,  
Since Love makes longing spring.”

These words sounded foolish to Melusine, since who, that had the choice, would not choose to love and kiss?



“You hear them?” breathed Pharamond heavily in her ear where he lolled by her side in a boat shaped like the crescent moon. “They sing to us of love.”

“And advise us against it,” she replied.

“That is because—oh—er——” He actually wished for a moment that he were someone else than Pharamond. That conceited ape, Sir Diarmid, knew how to make love in honeyed phrases. Even that gutter-rat Salacius was clever, a damned sight too clever. He was no good at words, but he could express his feelings if the other boats would not keep so confoundedly close. These lamps, dangling above their heads from the tips of the crescent moon, were a nuisance.

“You were made for love,” he began in the discontented whine of an unwilling pupil. The remark was familiar to her, and she asked herself which of the Court kept a school?

In the next boat, which was shaped like a heart, the Lady Valeria leaned to Sir Diarmid and whispered: “Say that you love me. For your sake I have been false to Oliver.”

“Then I have no occasion to say it,” replied the maker of honeyed phrases.

“You said you alone understood me.”

“And therefore you have no mystery.”

“Ah, you are cruel.”

“You flatter me.”

The heart sailed past the crescent moon and Melusine saw a smile on Sir Diarmid’s face that gave him an exultant boyish air. Valeria’s face was hidden. She felt a tender and secret companionship with their happiness. It was they who had first troubled her by that dissatisfaction and desire, that sense that men and women were as gods, which she now knew to have been her first perception of the power of love. She would have liked to thank them for this. The musicians sang:

“Is Love so slight a thing  
That it can fade and pass  
And wither as the grass?  
Then love me not and leave me not,  
Since Love is light of wing.”

She and the Lady Valeria would have answered more wisely.

In a round boat that rose in glittering spikes like a crown, Sir Oliver sat stiffly beside the Princess Blanchelys. The Lady Valeria had said to him: “You must not be so ridiculous about the Princess. It may lead to mischief if you do not encourage her a little. You know I would never doubt you. And you should think of me. People are beginning to put our names together.”

They had left off doing so long ago in favour of a fresh combination. But Sir Oliver was a soldier, new to the Court, of a simple and steadfast nature. He was horrified at a possibility that had never troubled Valeria while it was a fact. So he tried to show a polite but reserved admiration to Blanchelys while he thought of Valeria’s unselfish restraint, of her innocent trust in his constancy, and of her sidelong glance under dark lashes. The Princess was a nice girl, but beside the Lady Valeria she was like a cabbage rose beside a magnolia blossom.

And the Princess Blanchelys, who could chatter faster and louder than anyone in the Court, sat dumb, twisting her hands clumsily together, and wondering if there really were a lump that had stuck fast in her throat and prevented any words rising from it to her lips, or any sound at all in response to Sir Oliver’s laboured remarks, beyond an unnatural high-pitched giggle. There they were, floundering deeper and deeper into a horrible thick glutinous morass of heavy silence which presently engulfed them both. The musicians sang:

“Is Love so sharp a thing  
That life itself takes flight  
From those whom Love doth spite?  
Then love me not and kill me not,  
Since love was made to sting.”

“Oh, how true that is!” cried Blanchelys to herself. “If only I could die at his feet, then he would see how I love him.”

She pictured herself doing it in accompaniment to the slow music of the violins which melted away over the waters, tingling, sighing in a delicious pain. But wish as she might, she could not die.

The party landed in the gardens for refreshments, and the attendant Cupids ran about offering them hearts made of march-pane pierced with jewelled arrows, nymphs made of the white breasts of capons stewed in wine, rising out of a sea of aspic jelly, and the chariot of Venus drawn by

doves, in sugar, triumphant over a mountainous cake built to resemble high Olympus. The Empress adored these simple rustic picnics.

On an artificially made hill in the middle of the gardens was a small white temple enshrining a statue of Diana, and Melusine had discovered that the rising moon could be seen from there sooner than from any other place in the grounds. So that when Sir Diarmid sought to detach her from the company, he found his task unexpectedly easy, since it was she who took the lead towards this secluded spot. Already he sighed wearily in anticipation of his success. So soon there would be another woman begging him to tell her that he loved her. But his eyes lit up in a smile of impish mischief at the consoling thought of Pharamond's helpless annoyance, like that of a stupid schoolboy gapping for a cherry that has fallen into another's mouth.

He spoke to her, in tones vibrant with restrained anguish, of that subtler and more sensitive race from which he had wandered so far, of its songs, of its dreams, of the incessant tears that rain from Heaven upon its lonely hills. He told her that in this Court she also was a Stranger. He told her that he alone could love her in the Land of Heart's Desire.

"But you love the Lady Valeria," she said, "so why do you speak of love to me?"

Then she remembered that when Valeria came to him in the mirror, he did not speak at all. Nor had her own lover spoken of his love for her. Perhaps mortals only speak of those things which do not deeply concern them.

Her question of Valeria had shown Diarmid how he had wasted time in laying his dreams of faery before a being of a coarser clay. All she could understand were the crude emotions of possession and jealousy. Yet the rebuff that he despised gave a slight uneasiness to his vanity which could only be assuaged by an immediate conquest. There was nothing for it but to take her hand and drop his voice a note lower.

"Shall I confess to you? I have never loved Valeria. But you——"

It was awkward he had missed her hand. She was not standing quite where he had thought. A patch of moonlight on one of the pillars of the temple must have made him mistake it for the gleam of her silver dress. He turned round, and round again, but could see her nowhere. Over the forest hills on the mainland there had appeared the rim of the moon. He could not feel quite certain of the Enchanter's Daughter. There must be something fishy about her.

*The Friend*

MELUSINE had not waited to hear Sir Diarmid's last remarks to her. On her moonbeam, she passed along the walls, but was arrested by a curious sound proceeding from the window of the Princess Blanchelys' room. It was a kind of soft bellowing, muffled but extremely unpleasant. This was not the time to inquire into the habits of ordinary mortals; but Blanchelys, cruel and incomprehensible as she had shown herself, was still a goddess in Melusine's mind, though, it must be admitted, now seldom there. She could not pass by and leave that goddess bellowing alone in her room.

She found the Princess lying face downwards on her bed, her head so deeply buried in her pillows that it appeared as though she were trying to suffocate herself. Melusine changed into her proper shape and entreated Blanchelys to tell her the reason of her sufferings. In a long groan of pain came the answer: "I am dying. I have drunk poison."

"Then I will fetch the doctor," said Melusine.

"No," shrieked the Princess. "No one must ever know why I have done it." She sat up on the bed and stared at her, but Melusine, obtusely unaware of the duties and requirements of true friendship, believed her statement and forbore to ask questions. The Princess perceived how difficult it was to make any impression on so dull a creature. "I got it for you," she said wildly. But her guest was polite and puzzled.

"Thank you. But what did you get and why?"

"The poison," screamed Blanchelys. "When black hair came in. Now it is I who have paid the price."

"Of what?"

"Of love."

But Melusine could not understand how one bought love with poison.

“There are no kisses in the grave,” she said.

“You are so earthy. But a mere Enchanter’s daughter cannot be expected to understand the exquisite agony of my feelings.”

“Does the poison hurt very much?”

“There again! The agony is in my heart, not in my—not because of the poison.”

Melusine picked up the bottle that had fallen by the bed.

“But this,” she said, “is your hairwash.”

“My God, what have I done?”

“You have mixed them up.” She went to the washhand-stand. “Here is the poison bottle, quite full. How fortunate!”

But the Princess was furious, and Melusine’s sympathy only made her worse.

“Was the hairwash very nasty?” she asked.

“I tell you I was dying. I thought I was, so I was; it’s the same thing, the doctors tell you. And I saw myself laid on this bed, ever so calm and peaceful at last, and white flowers all round me and Mamma sobbing and even Sir Oliver was sorry and saw what he had lost. Do you think I don’t mean it? I believe you think I mixed them up on purpose.”

“Indeed I do not. What should you do that for? But if it makes you so unhappy you can still drink the poison.”

“How wicked and heartless you are. You want me to commit suicide. But I can never endure such agony again, not even for Sir Oliver. Yes, I love him. Now I have told my unhappy, shameful secret to you alone.”

Melusine had foolishly thought that it made one proud and happy to love. And she who was so confident in her happiness that nothing in all the world could shake it, now felt unhappy and ashamed before this far worthier beauty in distress. She could find no words to express her sorrow for her.

But Blanchelys had no such difficulty.

“It is not much I ask. I only want to be happy. A true and loving husband, and later on a couple or so of lovers, just for chic and to keep up the interest, and then when I begin to go off, some very pretty children. Of course I would be a fool to marry a mere knight. It suits me to be expensive. Yet I am willing to give up everything for happiness. I feel somehow I was

meant for it. You are an Enchanter's daughter. Can you do nothing better than turning stags into seagulls? After all you are our guest and we have done what we could to bring you out. Mamma is always saying I can do so much to help you in little ways and I am sure I have tried, and it is not my fault if it has not been of much use. One cannot make a silk purse, you know—but never mind. Cannot you, just as a return, do this one little thing for me? Nobody cares for me, not one particle.”

In terms that revealed no shrinking from her misery but almost an enjoyment of it, she continued to avow her distress at ever having been born, her dislike of her parents for having brought about that disaster, and her despair of anything but an early demise. “You are my friend,” she wailed, “or I could never thus weep before you and unbosom my heart.”

Melusine perceived that the friendships of women are expressed in tears and unhappy confidences, even as those of men in laughter and the memory of good times together. So coarse was the nature of this airy being that she would gladly have accepted the roughest joke of Garth's sailors in token of friendship, rather than the spectacle of this beblubbered princess. She could not endure that she, who had once seemed to her a goddess, should so far fall from her lofty disdain.

“I can give you a charm,” she said hastily, “which will steal the heart from any man you wish, so that he will be in your power, able only to do your will and no one else's.”

In that case she herself would lose the charm for ever. But this consideration did not so much as occur to her, for in the arrogance of her happiness she never even wondered if she might ever need to use it.

She took molten wax from the burning candles and modelled it into the shape of a heart, which she held till it grew hard and cold in her hands. Then she made the Princess hold it in her breast, and described magic signs round it with her fingers and laid it under spells and crosses.

“Now take it,” said she, “and scratch on it with your finger-nail the name of the man whose heart you desire. Then wear it in your breast night and day, and it will draw to it the heart of that man and hold it prisoner. In your presence, he will be unable to see any other thing or person but yourself; in your absence, your image will fill his heart and he will think of nothing but your face.”

“Even if he happens to be in love with someone else?” asked the Princess eagerly.

Melusine hesitated. Her father had told her that this charm should only be used with the greatest discretion. But she remembered the Lady Valeria with Sir Diarmid and the happy confidence of that young man's expression. Since he alone possessed Valeria's heart, it could harm no one and would confer great benefit on two hopeless attachments, if she transferred Sir Oliver's affections from one who had no love for him, to the receptive love of the Princess. She assured Blanchelys that the charm would gradually dull and finally obliterate any former image in the heart; that in spite of any previous attachment, the man would become more her slave than if he were a dog chained to her side.

"How perfectly sweet!" exclaimed the grateful girl. "And could I use the charm on more than one? Not that I shall require it, as there are plenty of others in love with me as it is, and I swear to you that if I live to be a hundred, I shall never really love anyone but Oliver, and would only take lovers out of kindness and pity and a sense of duty to my husband, for that sort of thing adds enormously to one's importance, you know. Men like it."

When she spoke of love and lovers she bewildered Melusine, who did not understand that these words contain a greater variety of meanings than any in the language. She found it simpler to answer her question, and told her that if she wished for another man's devotion, she had only to scratch out the name on the heart and write a new one on it.

"It sounds as though it would do quite well," said the Princess graciously, and she began to pat her hair and powder her face and declare she looked a positive fright, in a charmingly easy and friendly manner that gave Melusine her full reward.

At that same moment, the Lady Valeria, who had stood long at her window, addressed the sinking moon.

"Can a woman love an image?" she asked of her. "Sir Diarmid is the glass of fashion, but Sir Oliver is a man, and loves me. I will go back to him and love him alone."

*The Expulsion*

IT was therefore very late when Melusine reached the dungeon.

“I have only half an hour before the moon sets,” she told her lover, and he was angry at her delay. She told him the reason of it, but he scarcely listened. She had found something else of greater importance for the moment than her visit to him, and it was to that only that he attended.

“All this child’s play of teaching the Princess Blanchelys to steal the heart of a man,” he said. “What has it to do with you and me?”

He need not have been so impatient and unreasonable; no doubt it was the restraint of his imprisonment that made his behaviour so different from that of any ordinary lover. They had a quarrel and it was their first, for from the moment when he had seen her with his waking eyes he had quite forgotten the resentment he had felt against his dream visitor. Now he remembered it, and told her that she had the cruelty and meanness of her sex, that because he was helpless in his dungeon and dependent on her kindness, she loved to torture him by keeping him waiting.

“You come to me from the Court,” he said. “It is gay there and men make love to you, and you wish to be friends with the Princess, and I am but one of a world of crowded pleasures. You come to me when you remember it and when it is time for you to leave the rest. But I am imprisoned here, knowing nothing of what you are doing. Every hour of the day I watch the light through the grating, with what slow steps the sun climbs the sky; and every hour I wonder, ‘where is she now? Who by her? Who whispering in her ear? Snatching at her sleeve, her hand, his greedy eyes devouring her beauty, open to the daylight as I have never seen it?’ And when the sun sinks at last, I strain my eyes through the empty darkness until each rat, each spider moving in the gloom, seems that first quiver of your light. My love for you runs like fire, like madness, like deadly poison in my veins.”

It seemed to Melusine that he had indeed gone mad. In terror for him she forgot her first anger and fear at his unkindness, and pulled at his clenched



fingers and forced him to look at her while she sought in her mind for words that would soothe and reassure him. But all the words that tumbled in her head were ridiculous and confused and had nothing to do with her and him. She wished to tell him how empty the days were to her also, linked each to each by insignificant events; how monotonous the men who spoke to her, so much alike in their words that she could scarcely tell which was speaking; how slow she found the sunset, and how swift the passage of the moon. But she could find nothing in all this to say, except “I love you,” and she said it again and again until she saw that he believed her.

But by that time the moon had set.

It was Melusine who first perceived that the grey light creeping through the bars above them was not moonlight but the dawn.

She would not be able to leave the dungeon until the following night, and the warders would find her when they came that day with bread and water for the prisoner. There was nowhere for her to hide, nor had she the power of becoming invisible except when she became a moon-maiden. There was nothing to be done.

Not all her father’s magic could bring back the moon.

Since they had spent all their time in quarrelling, she wished to pass what they now had in loving, but the King could only consider what would happen. He tugged at his chains, but they were so fast and massive that a single man, however strong, could not loosen them, and he had at last to fall back upon the ground, his hands torn and bleeding. Melusine bound them with her handkerchief, which she tore in half.

“Why should they be angry if they find I visit you?” she said.

“Because,” he answered, “the Emperor wishes me to marry his daughter Blanchelys so as to ensure friendship between our kingdoms, and that is why he keeps me here in prison since my refusal to do so. I had never seen her, but the discourtesy of his methods decided me.”

It was the first time Melusine had heard of this, and something within her seemed to shrink, as though a cold finger had touched her heart.

The warders came very early that morning. With them was the Lord Keeper of the Dungeons and bribery was impossible. They gaped in amazement at seeing the Enchanter’s daughter, but she turned to King Garth and kissed him before them all, and said, “Do not struggle, for even if you could have killed them, others would come, and they are bound to take me in the end.”

They took her to the Emperor and Empress and told them that they had found her in the King's dungeon, but that the manner of her entrance was a mystery. She herself refused to explain it. The Emperor inquired closely about the fastenings of the dungeon door. The Empress's higher nature was concerned only with the moral aspect. "We must be broad-minded," said she.

"What kind of lock has it?" he asked. "There's a burglar-proof kind \_\_\_\_\_"

"My dear, what does all that matter? Do let us be practical. What I feel is, we need not necessarily assume that the Worst has happened."

"Perhaps the key didn't fit," said the Emperor.

The Lord Keeper assured him that it did.

"You can't always tell," said the Emperor.

"Eminondas!" exclaimed his spouse, "I do wish you would attend to essentials. I have always said that the King was, after all, a gentleman."

"I don't care who's a gentleman," the obstinate snuffle persisted, "if the Lord Keeper has bungled it, he'll lose his head."

"I am sure he has not betrayed her," came the reply in bland satisfaction.

"Who's not betrayed whom?" said the Emperor. "I'm not at all sure about it. You'll have to show me those locks. And the grating. What about the bars of the grating?"

"Sire, a cat could not get through them."

"Have you tried one?" asked the Emperor. "This needs going into."

They went into it; that is to say, they tried to make the Cat go into it, and, as has already been shown, he could not do so.

"It's all quite simple," said the Empress, "just an ordinary case of magic."

"In that case why couldn't she get out again?" demanded the Emperor.

Somebody said it might have something to do with the moon.

"Moonshine!" snorted the Emperor.

Sir Diarmid advanced with an exquisite gesture of self-effacement; "I could furnish," said he, "conclusive evidence of the fact that the Lady Melusine's powers of disappearance are in conjunction with the moon."

“Then furnish it,” snapped the Emperor.

“Honour forbids me,” replied the young man heroically. “Your Majesty must accept the word of a scion of a line of kings.”

His reticence was quite understood. There was soon no reasonable doubt that Melusine had the power of turning herself into a moonbeam and going where she chose in that capacity.

“But it will all be quite different once she is happily married,” said the Empress.

She was a wonderful woman. Once she had made up her mind nothing could stop her. And Pharamond took after her. He, too, had decided he must marry Melusine. He had a taste for celebrity, and she had become the most talked-of woman in the Empire. Little boys chinked her portrait on the walls of the towns like this



or this



with the inscription beneath: “Where did she go to?” “Ah!”

There were all sorts of songs about her and the refrain of one of them remains to this day:

“So she’ll go no more a-roving  
By the light of the moon.”

For they had shut her up in an inner room in the Palace with no windows into the open air, so that she could no longer become a moonbeam. She was told she should remain there until she agreed to marry Pharamond, and she was told nothing of King Garth. They might have killed him, she did not

know. Night and day were alike to her in the sickly light of the lamp. They kept her three friends from her; she had no books and nothing to do until the Empress, thinking it a good thing to encourage the domestic arts, sent her an embroidery frame, a piece of linen, a needle and silks. This kept her from going mad as otherwise she might have done. For she thought so much of Garth in his dungeon, of its long agony of monotony, of all that he had said to her that last night, and never said before, of all that she had not answered, that she often forgot she was herself and strained her eyes into the darkness beyond the lamp, hoping, as he had done, that a glimmer of light would show her love was near.

Her embroidery frame reminded her that she was not he, but far more fortunate. A ship first grew on the linen, a green vine and scarlet birds. Then came portraits of people at Court and all had black puddings at the ends of their noses. Blanchelys was there in her favourite dress and coronet, but her face was left blank, a featureless round. Garth was not there. She could no more see him than herself, for she had lost him in herself as she had lost herself in him.

She was never alone, for two maids were appointed to wait on her and watch her night and day. They were foreigners who could not speak each other's languages nor Melusine's, nor could Melusine speak theirs.

Only Pharamond visited her. She sat at her embroidery frame working all the time that he was there and saying not a word. He found her excessively trying. But the portraits on the walls in the streets and the songs and jokes egged him on. The admiration of the courtiers, the interest of the whole Empire in her, had made it clear that he would be marrying someone really worthy of his attention.

"You used to be such a jolly little thing," he told her in the discontented whine that made it difficult to refrain from throwing her embroidery frame at him. "Such a nice pally little thing. I can't think what's come over you now."

"Then look at the lamp," said Melusine at last. He did, and remarked that the wick was all right though perhaps it wanted a new burner.

"That is the only light I ever see," she said. "I do not even know what time of day it is."

"It is half-past six."

"And is it raining, dull, chilly?"

"No. It is quite a fine day. Stormy clouds, but they've held off."

“Ah, then it will be a fine sunset.”

It was something to have her talk even about the weather. But when she told him how she longed to see the sunset, he looked at her in suspicion.

“Quite impossible,” he said, and she looked up startled, for she had expected to see the Lord Archbishop standing in his place.

She was docile again but dumb. It was very dull for Pharamond.

Next day she said,

“What time is it?”

“Half-past six.”

“And is it raining?”

“No. It is quite a fine day.”

Then she sighed and would say no more. It happened every day.

He told her how comfortable she would be if she married him, what a splendid dress she would wear at the wedding, how all the women would envy her.

She only said,

“I want to see the sunset.”

So cold was she, so fixed and wooden, that he felt as helpless with her as if she were encased in armour. He thought how Salacius would laugh at him; but it was all very well, Salacius would be just the same if he were in his awkward position. After all, if he took her to see the sunset, he would keep fast hold on her and return long before moon-rise, and they would be out of sight of the two foreign maids who sat in their enforced dumbness ferociously staring at each other, at Melusine and at him. A glance at them decided him; he dropped a ring worth an earl's ransom into each stiffly satined lap, and each tightly closed her baleful eyes. They sat there, starched, hooped and whale-boned, two monstrous dummies whose faces had become mere lifeless excrescences from their clothes. Then he took Melusine by the hand and led her through the door, but the guards on the further side lowered their pikes with a gesture of the utmost respect and barred their passage.

“It is our painful duty,” said one.

“To obey the Emperor's orders,” said the other.

This was an expensive business. Once you started tipping you never knew where it would stop. Pharamond took from his neck a chain worth a king's ransom and dropped it neatly over the pikes. The guards raised them with a jerk that split the chain in half, and forbore to stoop for the pieces until the Prince had led his prisoner down the corridor towards a little private stairway that led straight from the Palace into the gardens.

*The Charm*

“AND now what about that kiss?” said Pharamond.  
“*Look!*” she cried.  
“Cabbage,” said the Prince.

It was a white butterfly.

“They are the commonest kind of all,” he told her. “Last Thursday, or was it Friday, no, it was Thursday, because it was when I was fishing and got a bite from a beggar that weighed eight pounds at least, only a beastly thorn bush caught my line, deliberately put out a branch and caught it, which showed that the fish must have enchanted it or something, anyway, it was Thursday. What was I saying——?”

“That it was Thursday.”

“Oh yes, Thursday. Well, I saw a yellow sulphur; they are quite rare round here you know. I used to collect them, but one gives up that sort of thing at about ten years old, and besides, it is rather awkward if you catch a small kind of fairy by mistake; they can be quite unpleasant about it.”

But Melusine was still engrossed in the commonest kind of butterfly. She pursued it from flower to flower, not to catch it, but to watch it. When it danced in a late ray of sunshine, she danced too. But when Pharamond sulked she ran back to him and talked and laughed as he had never heard her. She said she would give him a flower and pinned one in his breast, but it was a weed called shepherd’s purse and he felt uncomfortable about its appearance and its meaning as an omen. So to cheer him she told his fortune on the long-lobed grasses, and said he would be an apothecary and drive to his wedding in a wheelbarrow but clothed all in satin. When he again claimed his kiss, she told him, “When the sun sets.”

It was setting then but the moon would not rise for two hours yet. Pharamond had ascertained this, determined not to be caught.

He felt clumsy and confused, as though he were rather drunk, though he had not drunk much that day. He looked at Melusine all the time, yet sometimes he could not feel sure of seeing her and sometimes he seemed to see two or three of her, for she moved so fast and her eyes dazzled him. He had never seen her so gay, he decided she was really pretty, and in his admiration he forgot the testimony of the courtiers and street boys and no longer congratulated himself on marrying the most talked-of woman in the Empire. All this was because he was suddenly falling in love, to the best of his ability; but all he knew was that he felt an awkward fool, that Salacius was right, there was only one way to get on the right side of a woman, and why couldn't he show that, though not so damned clever, he was at least as much of a man as that dirty rat Salacius?

He felt more hopeful when she flung herself down on a grassy bank and said she was tired and wished to rest. She sang him songs that the mermaids had sung to her, she told him the stories that they tell each other in their palaces of shell and coral under the sea. But he only thought of Salacius.

“And what about that kiss?” he said in the religious voice of one who proclaims his stern duty, for he had made up his mind.

“I have told you many stories,” she said. “Tell me just one and I will kiss you.”

He could never remember any stories, and said so, scowling. He was determined not to be made a fool.

“Tell me,” she said, “of that game I have heard you speak of to others, an ancient solitary game that is played with clubs by half-naked savages in the northern hills. There seems so much to tell of that game that it must surely be more exciting than any tale of love or perilous adventure.”

“Ah, there's nothing like a good game of golf,” he said.

He told her that last Friday on the first tee, he fluffed his drive owing to the criminal disloyalty of his caddie, who had chosen the very moment when he had finished addressing the ball to sniff loudly just behind him. Luckily he had had a good lie and got in a beautiful long low straight brassie shot which carried him clean over the bunker with just a short approach left to get to the green. He took his mashie-niblick, which he had got at St. Andrews, but it had never been quite the same since a Scotch wizard had taken a ride on it instead of a broomstick, and this unfortunate circumstance made him take too much turf, and so he landed short of the green in a bunker, where, to make matters worse, some devil or other had been walking



about, for he found the ball half-buried in the print of a cloven hoof. There he was three into the bunker and bogey for the hole was four, and making up his mind to lay the ball dead, he took his niblick and executed a beautiful screwback shot which landed within a foot of the pin, rolled to the edge of the hole, and there stopped dead, doubtless owing to the eternally damned influence of the aforesaid cloven hoofprint. At the next hole . . .

The long shadows melted into the grass, the sky grew pale and dim, the birds sang more faintly, but Pharamond did not notice. The sound of his own voice describing his own doings in the most interesting of all pursuits held him enthralled under a charm stronger than any that an Enchanter's daughter could lay on him. He never saw the lights that were being lit inside the Palace, he never heard the clank of arms as the sentinels were relieved for the evening watch, and all the while Melusine sat gazing at him as though she too saw nothing but the strokes that he had made last Friday. But as she gazed she receded from him little by little in slow, imperceptible movements along the grass.

There was a deep clamour as the bell of the Palace proclaimed the hour. The spell was broken, and the Prince awoke as out of a trance. He sprang up, but Melusine had already risen and was running away among the trees. He ran after her in an agony of rage, fear and impatience. But he saw that with the superior length and strength of his legs he would catch her in a few minutes. She was darting in all directions among the trees, as erratic as a dragonfly, and now and then he heard her laugh, so that his anger rushed to his head like wine, but it was not her laugh that he heard, but that of Salacius. Once he was so near that her flying hair touched his face, but his foot caught in a fallen branch, and he stumbled forward helplessly. He sprang up again, but she had regained her distance and he saw her flitting through the trees like a phantom. But she was getting tired. Before her was an old oak of immense girth; she dodged wildly round it, now to the right, now to the left, but each time he cut off her retreat. She made a sudden rush for it and heard his feet pounding at her heels. His outstretched hand grasped at her flying sleeve, the shock pulled her backwards and she fell at his feet.

He gave an exultant shout and bent over her, but it was not her face that he saw, but the face of Salacius. Salacius could not laugh at him now. He snatched her up in his arms and ran towards the Palace. As he came out of the trees on to the open lawn, he ran still faster, for it seemed to his horror that her body was growing lighter in his arms. He could almost fancy that he saw his own arm through it. She grew lighter in his arms and more shadowy

to his eyes every instant; he clutched her round the waist, but his fingers met on air. There was nothing on his arm but a faint patch of moonshine. He stood still, gaping at his sleeve; he looked up and saw the moon looking at him. He hit his head with his fists and rushed into the Palace, where he drank three glasses of brandy and threw himself on his bed. And the smile that he saw mocking him was the smile of Salacius.

*The Ancestress*

MELUSINE hurried on her moonbeam to King Garth's dungeon, and found it empty.

She wandered round the Palace in search of her three friends, but could find them nowhere. She saw the guards outside the Palace, but she could not ask for news of Garth. Since he was not in his dungeon, where was he? Had he escaped? Had he been moved to another dungeon? Was he alive or dead?

She drifted down into the town and saw many people in the streets. They hung about at the corners and round open doors that showed a light and people drinking inside, and they talked of the price of beer and the price of butter and how Liz was no better than she should be, and what Sal had said to Mickey and Mickey had done to Sal when they quarrelled, and why Dan had lost his job and whether Alice's sickly baby wouldn't be the better for a drop of gin. But none of them happened to mention if King Garth were alive or dead.

She slipped away from those narrow crowded streets on to the mainland, and along the lonely shore where she heard a mermaid singing in a rocky pool and recognized her as a mermaid from her own shores. But the thin inhuman voice struck her with terror such as ignorant and foolish sailors feel when they hear it. She thought if she and Garth lay drowned, how that same voice would sing of it in the same clear and cold, untroubled tones.

She hurried past it further into the mainland, over fields and villages, towards the forest. She had no settled plan in her wanderings, but she had earned the friendship of a stag, and he might help her where no humans would. Here she was wrong, for when she met him in the shape of a seagull on the edge of the forest, he reproached her bitterly for her past services.

"Only the most gross and stupid materialists," said he, "imagine death to be the worst of evils. I had rather be torn in pieces by the hounds than thus continue an existence which is horrible to me because I am unaccustomed to

it. I live among strangers, and, what is worse, my own person is strange to me. Now that I have no magnificent weight of antlers on my head, no long and slender legs, can no longer eat delicious grass, run through the forest, bellow and tramp the ground, fight other stags and love my gentle does, but can only fly and float and waddle on scrawny legs, and utter thin screams and eat revolting food, I do not believe I have a self at all. Of what use is it to keep one's life at the expense of one's personality?"

"At least yours has become very philosophic," said Melusine with a shade of malice. "I doubt if you would have acquired that by remaining a stag all your life."

"That only shows," said he, "that I have ceased to be myself."

She changed him back into a stag.

"Now," she said, "you can feel superior to all other stags because of your strange experience."

"I shall certainly never mention it to them," he said, "and I beg you will never do so either."

He trotted haughtily into the forest to be more carefully stag-like than any other stag for the rest of his days.

He had had nothing to tell her. She drifted back again, and on the side of a quiet road saw a high wall and tall iron gates leading into a shadowy garden. On the other side of the gates was a figure in the dress of a nun. She held the bars with both hands and behind them her wan face shone out of her black robes. Melusine came nearer and saw that it was the Lady Valeria. Seen from above, her face was full of down-dropped curves and deep shadows. Her eyelashes rested on her cheeks, but this time they remained as still as if they had been painted there. Melusine wanted to cry out and beg her not to look so sad. She was too beautiful to be sad, yet sadness became her. She let her light fall on her face and Valeria's eyes opened full and dark upon it and so swam slowly up to the face of the moon.

"I have left the Court," said Valeria, "but I shall never escape."

In that dark and muffling robe, behind those gates, she was too remote to need her accustomed reserve. In whispering tones she told her invisible companion, unawares, that it was a mistake to enter a convent because you were in love with two men at once. She had had true love from Sir Oliver and could never now have again what she had thrown away. But that first night that she went to Sir Diarmid, he led her to a mirror and there unwrapped her cloak and when she raised her eyes she saw his reflection in

the glass. Since then she had had nothing from him but misery without significance. That image of him in the mirror was all that she had ever seen of him; and that was the supreme moment of her life.

She listened as though to words in the moonbeam and said aloud: "Was it then of his life too? I have sometimes thought so. If I had only known, and known how to keep our love there, always at that supreme moment. But one does not know that the moment is there; and it passes, and it is only long afterwards, at prayers, or while listening to the sweet singing of the nuns, that one knows. And by then it is too late; one cannot recall it except in memory, for the moment was lost, long, long ago."

As though a flash of lightning had revealed it, the white mask-like face was riven, and Melusine saw the fixed and determined grin of an apparently physical suffering.

"Do mortals only love what they have lost?" Melusine thought that she had cried the words aloud, but no sound fell on the soft air, and Valeria remained in solitude, telling her sorrows only to the moon.

Melusine dare look no longer on that riven mask, nor reveal her presence and tell her that her spells had won Sir Oliver's heart for the Princess, and that no power of hers could now remove that gift. She decided that she would play no more with the lives of men and stags, which was the conclusion her father had reached many years before.

She climbed up the moonbeam, up, up, up, but she knew that though she left the world and reached the moon, she too was a mortal and would never escape.

She did not reach the moon, but she climbed so high that she could see over the whole country and as far away as France. There, in a wide stretch of country, she saw a castle rising in pinnacles and rounded towers tapering to a point, and said as though repeating something that had just been said to her:

"That is Lusignan."

She slid down the moonlight towards it and looked in through heavy curtains into a hall lit with candles. In a bed hung with purple, the Lord of Lusignan lay dying. A priest knelt at his head and chanted the *Nunc Dimittis*, and all round him knelt his servants with bowed heads, and some of them were sobbing. His wife knelt at his feet and her head was raised above her clasped hands; she did not weep nor look at her lord nor at anything in that hall, but gazed into the vacant air as though she already saw

her lord in heaven and were herself walking towards him. His little son, who could not yet talk clearly, sat on the topmost step of the bed and played with the tassels of the counterpane. Sometimes he chuckled and sometimes he turned and stared with round frightened eyes at all the kneeling servants.

Outside on the ramparts lay the thin moonlight from the crescent moon. Melusine waited there, looking down on the country far below, which was flat and broken by nothing but an occasional dark row of trees appearing like a reef of rocks in a dead calm sea.

Then the thing that she waited for, not knowing what it would be, came slowly out of the air, falling towards the castle, circling round it, flying towards her. It went past her with a long and desolate cry, and she saw that it was a woman whose face was of perfect though sorrowful beauty, but that her body from the waist downwards was that of a serpent.

The air was very still after that cry, as it had been for some moments before. No startled bird twittered, no mouse stirred. Round the castle again it came and this time it was weeping bitterly and wringing its hands. The third time it came it uttered a laugh more dreadful than tears or cry, and flew away into the air until it became as small as a dragonfly beneath the moon, and then disappeared altogether.

Melusine knew now why she had come. She went back to the forest on the seashore of the Emperor's country and there resumed her own shape, lay down and immediately fell asleep. As soon as she was asleep, she dreamed that the serpent lady came to her and said:

“I am the Fairy Melusina who loved a mortal. I made him Lord of Lusignan and he loved me, but he betrayed my secret and I was forced to leave him for ever. When each Lord of Lusignan lies dying, then only I am permitted to revisit my home and theirs, and to recall for one moment in each generation the love that I have lost.”

For an instant her face was riven as the face of the Lady Valeria had been, and to Melusine it seemed that no love was safe from betrayal, whether by oneself or another. An icy fear shook her, so that her tongue was frozen in her mouth, and she longed yet could not cry to her to ask if herself also, who was neither fairy nor mortal, would for ever lose what she loved. As is the way of dreams, she was no longer with the serpent lady, but in the dungeon again with King Garth in that inevitable hour when the moon had set. This time she, as well as Garth, tore at his chains, and she wept frantically and cried that she had betrayed their love, and prayed and uttered spells so as to make that one hour, one half-hour, roll back instead of on.

But not all her prayers and spells could call back the moon.

*The Retreat*

ON the next night Melusine hurried back to the Palace on an early moonbeam, only to discover that every window was so severely shuttered that no thread of light could enter. In the town also all windows were closed and darkened and not a single human being could be found in the streets, which yesterday at the same hour had swarmed with loiterers glad to crawl out in the cool evening from their dark and crowded homes. On a chimney pot she met the Raven and at once became visible for the purposes of conversation. He was delighted at her appearance, but the long anxiety he and his companions had felt on her account showed itself in his testy irritability and a tendency to croak.

“Now that you have escaped from the Palace,” he said, “it would be well to give up this moonbeam habit, which is apt to lead you into difficult and undignified situations. Even at this moment you can only remain on this sloping roof by sitting down and clasping the chimney pot.”

“But have you any news of King Garth?” she asked.

He had not.

She had never heard him speak so much and so unnecessarily, and made haste to profit by his loquacity by asking why the streets were empty and all windows shuttered. He told her that it was because of an Imperial command, issued that morning, which ordered everybody to be inside their closed and shuttered houses at the hour of sundown. This was no doubt the immediate result of her escape, and the Emperor’s fear of her establishing communication by moonshine with any of his subjects.

Her friends had previously left the Palace, where their movements had for some time been growing uncomfortably restricted. Since the imprisonment of their mistress, their position had sunk from one of high favour to an obscure and even dangerous ambiguity.

One of the Pages had thrown a stone at the Raven, which, narrowly missed breaking his wing; the action had been applauded by all the Courtiers



near and when reported to the Emperor, he had remarked that it was a pity that boys could not throw straight nowadays. These significant and terrible words were clearly intended to seal the fate of his guests, and the Raven had judged it advisable to retire from the Court immediately. The Cat, more indifferent to the course of current opinion, and with material considerations at stake, for he enjoyed the favour of one of the under cooks, continued to ignore hints and snubs until the day came when a huntsman let loose the hounds on him in the courtyard. After that he perceived that he could no longer defer his retirement from Court life, and precipitately joined the Raven in the obscure purlieu of the town. The Snake had shown his aloof and far-sighted judgment by disappearing on the very day on which Melusine had been discovered in King Garth's dungeon.

It was agreed that she should meet her friends in the forest and there remain for the present. Within twenty-four hours the Raven had collected his companions and joined her there.

It was raining when they met in a hollow oak which smelt of rotting wood and fungus, and the Cat was cross because his fur was wet. It was plain that he regretted the comforts of civilized life. Melusine fancied that her friends had changed in her absence, not knowing that it was she who now looked on all things with a different vision.

In time she contrived to build a little house of leafy branches thatched with bracken, close by a stream where deep drifts of leaves, turned black and sodden, and moss-grown boulders and clumps of hanging ferns and long slippery green hart's-tongues concealed all but a dark thread of water. There they lived in a perpetual green twilight, so far beneath the enormous trees that they seemed to be walking at the bottom of the sea; and in a wind the waving green above their heads sighed and splashed like the sound of the sea, and swung to and fro like giant seaweed in the currents of the sea.

Her friends procured her sweet roots and fruit and pigeons' eggs, and went often at her wish to the town to find if they could hear anything of King Garth, but returned always without any reliable news. This was possibly due to their discretion, for, as the Cat pointed out to his companions, when a disaster cannot be avoided, one should, if possible, avoid the discomfort of knowing it.

It was the easier, as their mistress was strangely inert and heavy, indisposed even to wander on a moonbeam. The memory of past pleasures lost the sharp and bitter sweetness which had tormented her when in prison

and became softened, muffled, until she herself seemed no more than a dead leaf rotting in the stream.

Into this green and silent seclusion there one day fell the sound of singing, and Gillian, the woodcutter's second daughter, came walking along the stream in a striped petticoat and a full blue blouse with a string of red beads round her short sturdy brown neck. She sang a melancholy tune in a gay voice and then stopped suddenly with her mouth wide open on the next note of her song. For there in the wood in front of her was the smallest house she had ever seen, built all of leaves and bracken, and outside it, on the edge of the stream, stood a strange-looking lady, whose dress was of silver and made a trickling silver reflection in the water at her feet. Her eyes looked up wild and startled, like those of some forest animal; they were clear green, and the woodcutter's daughter was certain that this silvery creature looking at her through her long black hair was some kind of fairy.

She began to speak to it, promising to place a bowl of cream every evening on the window sill if it would tell her whether she were wise to marry young Rumpel from the farm or no, for when all's said and done, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, and when her baby was born it might be a boy with blue eyes and that was all she was likely to get of the Prince, but she would have that for sure and young Rumpel too, for he was a kind and reasonable body and knew very well that a maid could not be expected to remain a maid for ever. But all that that still, staring creature said to her was, "Can you tell me of King Garth?"

The woodcutter's daughter could. In her remote home in the heart of the forest, gossip about the Royal family was the chief topic of conversation.

She could have told Melusine down to the smallest knot of ribbon what the Princess wore at her last ball, and she knew, moreover, that the ribbons should have been scarlet instead of blue, which had gone clean out of fashion since black hair had come in with the Enchanter's daughter, and instead of going out with her had grown and grown, in spite of all the Princess could do to stop it, till she had fair cried her eyes out with rage. Boiling oil, that's what she wanted to try, but the Emperor he put his foot down and said it would be bad for trade. Fashion and trade, they go together, they say. It was hard indeed for a Princess to be out of it. They did say she would come to dyeing her hair like the rest, but that would not stop it being coarse and fuzzy, and there was no doubt but what it did give her a common look. People raved over the Princess, but give her the Prince every time, that's what she said. She said a great deal more, for so delighted was she at the chance of displaying her knowledge of this favourite subject that she had

forgotten her first awed surprise at sight of the strange creature and approached quite close to her, and in time even came to answer her question.

“King Garth?” said she. “That’s the foreign gentleman that’s to marry the Princess. They say the wedding will be the finest the land’s ever known, but what they all say is, ‘When is our Prince going to marry, that’s what I want to know,’ but there’s some perhaps may know an answer to that, maybe they do and maybe they don’t, it’s not for me to say, but this I will say, it’s a sin and a shame that a young gentleman can’t marry where he wishes, and all because he is a Prince.”

“But King Garth is not going to marry the Princess,” said the silver lady.

“Indeed, then you know more of the matter than me or the rest of us, but all I know is that the wedding is fixed and the bells rung for it, and that there will be an ox stuffed with chickens stuffed with larks stuffed with olives roasted whole in the market place and the fountains will run wine instead of water.”

“But King Garth is not going to marry the Princess,” said the silver lady.

“Why not? She is not as handsome as her brother, I do not care who hears it, but it is better to marry a princess than to stay in prison.”

The silver lady was silent. The woodcutter’s daughter looked at her with disappointment, for it did not seem that she was going to be of any use to her. But she gasped the next moment at the sudden contradiction of her thoughts, for the silver lady asked her earnestly, as though she were asking a great favour, if she would consent to their changing clothes. Exchange her everyday blouse and petticoat for silver robes, and put diamond shoes on her bare feet! It was not likely she would hesitate. She did as she was asked as quickly as might be, though she could not put the shoes on her feet for they were too small, and so put them instead on her hands where no doubt they looked quite as well, for she could not take her eyes off them.

When at last she did so it was all she could do to keep herself from bursting out laughing at the sight of that delicate stranger in her coarse clothes that were far too wide. But she was not the girl to laugh at a lady who wore diamonds on her shoes, and she only suggested that the lady should hide her hair, which made her look too much in the Court fashion, by tying it up in a red cotton handkerchief which she gave her for the purpose. When this was done, Melusine set off for the town.

*The Blind Man*

SHE was not troubled now by the betrothal. It was a ruse adopted by both to hoodwink the Emperor for the time being. Blanchelys could desire the match no more than Garth, for she loved Sir Oliver; she had sworn, sobbing, that if she lived to be a hundred she could never marry any man but Oliver. And now she had his love and must be content. Garth had never sworn nor sobbed; it had not been necessary. Neither he nor herself could love anyone else.

She was glad she was going to the city, for she would see him in the daylight and he would see her and know she was there, waiting for him. So she felt contented and assured as she walked to the city, and she soon found she had to sit down and rest. The grass at the side of the road was withered and burnt up by the sun, and as she looked at it the sound of violins came into her memory and then some words of a song:

Is love so slight a thing  
That it can fade and pass  
And wither as the grass?

It was some time before she remembered that she had heard that song on the last night she had seen King Garth, and that it had troubled her. She wished she had not remembered it.

She heard the clatter of hoofs, and a cloud of dust came over the hill behind her, and in the midst of the cloud was a fine horseman and a skinny scrap of a girl perched on the saddle before him, who uttered shrill screams of mirthless laughter like the cries of a peacock before rain. The horse drew up before her and she looked up to see a foolish grin bent over her from behind the girl. So wide and empty was it that it seemed divorced from the rest of the face which stared with vacant roving eyes over her person. They looked thus at each other for an instant before she recognized Sir Oliver and wondered why that once splendid soldier now looked like a poor fool.

“What are you stopping for?” screamed the girl on the saddle. “Isn’t one girl at a time enough for you?”

“Not while there’s room for two,” shouted Sir Oliver. “Come you, give me your hand and put your foot in the stirrup.”

He took Melusine’s hand and swung her up into the saddle behind him. The horse was a substantial charger and did not really much object to the extra weight, but his dignity was ruffled and he uttered a long protesting neigh.

“Oh, my God!” shrieked the girl before him. “What a fool you look between the two of us.”

He appeared delighted and kissed her loudly. She had a very wide, gaping mouth like the beak of a fledgeling sparrow, and when he had finished kissing her she made a grimace at him and then winked at Melusine. He pretended to be angry with her and tried to kiss Melusine, but her face was too close against his back. She had to clasp her hands round his middle, while he had his arm round the girl in front. He asked the girl in front to marry him and the girl behind to love him, or else the other way round; he did not mind which, for his heart was free and all he wished was to fill it with as many occupants as possible.

Melusine was sadly perplexed. This was not the way for her spell to have worked. If his heart were now free, could it mean that the Princess no longer wished to hold it? She longed to ask Sir Oliver if they did not still love each other, but it was a delicate question to ask in circumstances which were rapidly growing less and less delicate.

But whatever the disadvantages of her position, she was reaching the city a great deal quicker than she could have done on foot. Before the sun had set, they were in front of the gates. A crowd had gathered, for, as Sir Oliver told Melusine, they expected the return of the royal party from their ride, and a royal betrothed couple is of necessity generous. She looked at him in surprise at his light-hearted tone and in reply he endeavoured to swagger as much as was possible to a man in his position.

“Ah,” he said, “you have heard, I see, of that rumour concerning the Princess and myself. In fairness to Her Royal Highness I am bound to mention that it was exaggerated. It was a trifling affair on both sides, an amusement, a bagatelle, that is all. I have had a hundred such since then.”

She was again surprised to hear that formerly quiet and steadfast soldier explain himself so fully. But as he twisted round in the saddle to make sure

from her face that she believed him, she looked into his eyes and through them and saw that they were empty, for there was now no heart behind them.

At that, the fear which had laid a cold finger upon her that last night in the dungeon, now seemed to enclose her whole heart within its icy hand.

But they were now among the crowd who jostled and mocked them and made many loud and rude comments at the spectacle of a man and two girls on a horse. All this, instead of making Sir Oliver angry and uncomfortable, as it would have done a short time ago, delighted him, for he liked nothing better now than to be thought a gay and devil-may-care fellow who loved to make a fool of himself and of everyone else.

The city guards rode among the crowd to keep the people away from the centre of the street, and Sir Oliver was made to back his horse into the press. Melusine slipped down from the saddle and away into the crowd until she found herself in the front row of people at the side of the street, beside a washerwoman, who told her that it would be the Prince's turn next and that for her part she thought it a good thing that that business of the Enchanter's daughter had come to nothing, for you never knew where you were with such people.

There was a blast of trumpets; people called and shouted and, in spite of the city guards, ran across the street. There appeared the King's halberdiers in green and gold, riding two and two. Then came the ladies of the Princess Blanchelys, in single file to show their beauty one by one. They rode on black horses, whose trappings glittered in the evening sunlight; their robes were all of white and each carried a silver lily in her hand. They were supposed to be chosen for the fairness of their skins but their judges must have been ill advised, for nearly all were rather brown or freckled or even sallow, so that when the Princess appeared, not even a Republican could have hesitated to proclaim her the fairest of them all. She rode on a white horse, in sky-blue robes that flowed over her horse's back and tail. Two pages on white ponies appeared to be drawn at the ends of her train like flying cupids caught up and swirled along in their goddess's cloak.

Beside her rode the great figure of a man, whose grey, still face seemed to turn the sunlight into shadow. It was bent towards the Princess, and the eyes were fastened on her as by invisible cords. When she spoke or smiled, his lips moved in repetition of hers. Yet he did not look as though he saw her. He seemed to be riding, speaking, smiling in his sleep.

"Who is that man?" asked Melusine of the washerwoman. But the washerwoman had no time to attend to such imbecile questions. She was

scrambling for the largesse that the halberdiers had thrown into the crowd, and so was everybody round her.

“Hurrah! Hurrah! Long live the Princess and King Garth!” shouted the crowd. They had rushed under the horse’s hoofs for the largesse, the betrothed couple had to stop still for fear of trampling on them. The Princess wore an expression of contempt and annoyance, but the man beside her did not seem to notice that their horses had stopped. In that stooping, swaying, crawling crowd, Melusine alone remained upright, pushed here and there in the throng until she found herself just before the royal horses.

She looked up into the eyes of the man who rode beside the Princess, and caught at his bridle. In the sunlight his face remained dark, she could not see it. She knew now that she had seen that face dimly in the darkness or by the pale unreal light of the moon, but what she had seen then had been a thousand times more vivid than this dead outline of a face that could not look at her.

His face swam in darkness before her; she saw nothing but his blind eyes. As in a nightmare, she tried to shriek aloud to him, but could utter no sound.

“Strike her hand off your bridle,” cried the Princess. “These impudent people can never get largesse enough.”

She threw Melusine a coin which clattered on the cobbles underneath the hoofs of King Garth’s horse, and caused it to rear suddenly. People near dived forward for the coin, Melusine was pushed back, borne away. At the last, she saw, over the people’s heads, King Garth’s face still turned towards the Princess, his eyes fixed on her, and his head, in reply to what she was saying, give a grave mechanical bow. They rode on towards the Palace.

She struggled to get out of the crowd, but the people would not let her go. They did not notice her, they did not know she was there, but they pushed her, they impeded her, they danced round her singing and shouting, “Hurrah! Hurrah! Long live the happy couple! Long live our Princess and King Garth.”

Sir Oliver, on foot, was chasing a fat fair-haired girl, who ran with panting hoots and shouts of exaggerated laughter. He had all but caught her when he saw Melusine, and at once veered round and ran towards her.

“A cheat! A cheat!” he called. “Do you run away and give no payment for your ride? I claim my fee.”

His hand fell on her shoulder with the heavy lifelessness of a stone. “Come, a kiss to begin with,” he said.

She looked at him and no longer wondered why his face was changed, even as King Garth’s. She knew now that Sir Oliver’s heart, which had been stolen and attached to the Princess by her arts, was now left an empty husk, with no power in it but to drift aimlessly about the world, seeking to attach itself to whatever object passed before his eyes. She kissed him and left him. He stared after her and rubbed his cheek, which felt a strange new warmth.



## 20

### *The Wise Girl*

MELUSINE returned at last to her three friends in the forest, since there was nowhere else she wished to go. She came to them through a dank white mist that turned the bushes into clouds and wrapped everything in a soft and awful obscurity. To them her eyes looked blind, as the King's had done to her, and she seemed like someone walking in her sleep. They asked no questions and made no comment on her changed appearance. In this she showed her wisdom in having chosen for her friends a cat, a snake, and a raven.

To entertain her, the Cat brought a young field mouse that he had captured, and played with it before her, thinking that its antics would surely divert her from her grief. The mouse ran, shammed death, squeaked, and ran again, in a manner that should delight one of her sensitive perception by its caricature of the droll and futile efforts of human beings to escape what lay before them. But she pounced upon the Cat and struck him, Him! with her clenched fist and rushed from him sobbing in anger, with the mouse held to her bosom. The Cat stalked off in deep offence.

But the philosophy and detachment of his nature in time brought him, not to forgiveness, an empty word that meant nothing to him, but to toleration of her unreasonable ill temper, the natural result of human youth in love. How different, he reflected, are the effects of this passion on man and beast. The beasts are ennobled by it, are made proud and confident and full of joyful arrogance. In love they feel themselves to be the lords of the earth. But the unfortunate humans are enslaved by it, they are made abject as under torture, and their pride becomes only another instrument for that torture.

In the house of leaves and bracken, Melusine sat crying over the mouse, which was practically unhurt and now only terrified by the sound of her long and agonized sobs that seemed to be tearing her heart from her body. This piercing grief, though awakened by the mouse, was not caused by it. She had indeed forgotten the little creature in her hands, and was for the first

time recollecting the hours that she had spent with Garth. As each recollection rose out of that dark and dreadful void that she believed to be her love, she turned her head to right and left, as though to escape its sight. She had thought that since Garth no longer loved her, he could never have done so. She had never loved, she had never been loved. She had been under a spell.

But now she knew that her love was a live thing inside her, preying on her and tearing her, and knew for the first time what that love had been to her. It had grown and been gathered as naturally as the magical flowers in her father's garden, but now that it was over, it appeared a miracle that at the time she must have stupidly ignored.

And she cried aloud to the mouse, "Am I, then, as other mortals, to love only what I have lost?"

But she could fasten on no single moment as the Lady Valeria had done, and wish that life had stood there for ever; for all their love seemed now to have been the supreme moment of their lives, and to have passed as a moment.

Round her in that still and shapeless mist hung dripping mosses and grey lichens like the beards of old tree-men who had long since mouldered away. She said softly to the mouse: "One does not know that the moment is there until it passes. It is only long afterwards, in the rain, or while listening to the muffled trickle of the stream, that one knows. And by then it is too late, one cannot recall it except in memory, for the moment was lost, long, long ago."

And at last she released the mouse, who had suffered as acute an agony of terror in her gentle clasp as it had done in the cruel claws of the Cat.

She was more restless after that and wandered further afield, for her love did indeed appear to have become a live thing inside her, preying on her and tearing her.

On one of her rambles she met the woodcutter's daughter, as she was picking up sticks, with a very young baby slung in a shawl on her arm. Gillian had been putting two and two together and her arithmetic had led her to the conclusion that the strange lady in silver robes, who had asked about King Garth, must be no other than the Enchanter's daughter there had been all that to-do about, some months ago. It was a good chance for her that she had met her. The silver robes and the shoes studded with diamonds were safely packed away at the bottom of her wooden box with the key to it, so that they should be there when she needed the money. Now that her baby

was born, young Rumpel had not been so anxious to marry her, but he would change his tune when he saw what lay at the bottom of her box. She bided her time, however, for with such possessions, what need was there for hurry? She might get a fine gentlemanly man like the young jewel-smith in the city who wore a velvet coat on Sundays, or even, with luck, a grocer or an alderman. She was not a grasping girl, but she liked to get good value for her money. As for golden halos on market days, she had done with all that. The result of them was slung in a shawl on her arm and that was the best thing about them. The Prince had made great promises to her that night in the forest after the hunt, but he had forgotten them. He was much as any other merry young gentleman, only rather more so, and when she thought of him, which was seldom, she laughed her wide, ringing laugh.

But she did not laugh at Melusine. It was different for ladies. They took things different. It was very foolish of her to have given her love to the foreign gentleman while he was in prison instead of waiting till she could secure him, for it stood to reason that he would want her while he was alone and unhappy, and forget her when he was free.

She said this to the silver lady as she always called her in her thoughts, but she seemed too foolish to understand it, for she only answered something about having given a spell to the Princess Blanchelys.

“There’s spells and spells,” said Gillian wisely, “and for my part I think the strongest spell the Princess could use was in being there beside him, making sheep’s eyes at him and letting him know what a fine man she thought him, while you were away from him. However, there’s no use in crying over spilt milk, and who knows but what she may get tired of him, as they say she did of Sir Oliver, or better still she may have to leave him for a time, and then, if there’s nobody else, there’s no knowing but what he may come back to you in the long run. I’ve heard of such things happening, for when all’s said and done, a woman’s a kind of habit to a man, and once he’s got used to her there’s a good chance but what he’ll return to her.”

On her next visit to the house of leaves and bracken in the heart of the forest, she found the silver lady had also a baby in her arms.

The excellent education that Melusine had received had been strictly limited in the one respect of natural science, a limitation not to be wondered at, since a mighty magician necessarily has small regard for the more ordinary laws of cause and effect. But the consequence of this trifling omission in an otherwise complete mental equipment was that she knew no reason to connect the birth of her son with her earthly lover, but believed,

according to the laws of the earliest magic in the world, that this was caused by the moon, and that that transient orb must now be her secret husband and the father of her child. She happened to mention this indisputable fact to the woodcutter's daughter, who tactfully complied with it as a fine lady's means of saving her face, knowing well that the gentry are apt to look on such things as babies in a strained and difficult manner.

To her a baby was so much more lively and solid a fact than a lover that it surprised her to find Melusine's attention only half bestowed on hers. It was clear where the other half went to. She was still harping on the foreign gentleman, poor lady, and could not see that her turn was over. Ladies were all alike. There was one she saw when she went to the convent, a lovely and most gracious lady with downcast eyes, but when she opened those languid lustrous eyes, those melting melancholy eyes,—well, it was more than her prayers she thought of, Gillian could see that. Ladies were all alike, crying for the moon, not seeing what lay in their arms, not even when it was a sound, solid, lively brat crowing in their arms.

*The Wedding*

ONE morning Gillian came later than usual to the house of leaves and bracken, and Melusine said to her, “Why are you so late this morning?”

“Because my married sister called to see me.”

“Why did she do that?”

“Because she wished to borrow my red ribbons for her hair.”

“Why did she wish that?”

“Because she has gone to the town.”

“Why has she gone?”

“To eat sugar cakes and drink wine and see the fireworks.”

“Why are there fireworks?”

“Because it is a gala day.”

“Why is it a gala day?”

“Because it is the wedding day of the Princess and King Garth.”

“Then I too will go to the town to eat sugar cakes and drink wine and see the fireworks.”

She rose and wrapped her baby in the old shawl that Gillian had given her, called her three friends to her side and kissed Gillian good-bye.

For the first time the good-natured girl lost patience and scolded her.

“You are not strong enough yet to walk a step. I cannot come with you because it is washing day, but what can you do alone in the world with no one to look after you and your baby? A helpless little fool like you,” sobbed the woodcutter’s daughter, crying loudly over the other’s head which she had pulled down on to her broad shoulder.

“I am an Enchanter’s daughter,” said Melusine, “this time I intend to use my power.”

Gillian looked helplessly after her as she and her baby and the three animals disappeared through the trees. “An Enchanter’s daughter!” she said, and snorted. “Much good has it done her! She’s not even had the wit to keep her fine clothes on her back.”

She set out a few steps after her, but it was washing day, and her mother would be in a proper taking if she did not help her, and would grumble about her to young Rumpel, who would be looking in this afternoon, and though she was not sure as yet but what she might do better for herself, it would show no better wit than the Enchanter’s daughter to throw away a bird in the hand before she was yet sure of her two or three in the bush.

She was right. For all that she was an Enchanter’s daughter, Melusine was exhausted before she had walked a mile through the forest. She sank on the ground and bitterly regretted the chariot drawn by gigantic dragonflies wherein she had been wont to ride. Even a donkey cart would have been acceptable. At the sight of her distress her friends took to human speech and the Raven asked if she could not contrive to summon a flying horse or a magic carpet.

“Alas,” said she, “none of my books are with me, and my dear father never allowed me to practise from memory. Ever since I happened to raise the many-headed hound of Hell, Cerberus, instead of Venus’ doves, he thought it better to avoid any possibility of mistake.”

The Snake suggested that one means of magical conveyance had been open to her, the shell with the rose petal and the silver and pearl pin, which she had converted into a boat large enough to carry their entire company over the sea.

“I left it in the pocket of my silver dress,” said Melusine, “and Gillian gave it to her baby to play with. He smashed it in the first moment.”

They considered the fate of the magic vessel in silence, but Melusine was the only one of the four who did not regret that they had ever sailed over the sea that moonlit night in a boat made out of a shell and a rose petal and a pin.

“It would be of no use here,” she said, “since we are not even near the river.”

“A spell that can work with one object,” said the Cat, “may do so with another. It might even work with myself.”

She clapped her hands and sprang to her feet.

“Your intelligence, dear friend, is superhuman,” she cried.

“I should hope so,” said the Cat.

She touched him three times, made the sign that she had made over the shell to the East of him and to the West, and said:

“Big black Cat  
Who walks at my side,  
Grow, grow, grow,  
That we all may ride.”

There before them was the Cat like a large black tiger. Melusine involuntarily caught her baby to her breast and her cheeks were very pale. The Cat stroked his whiskers and regarded her out of the corner of his eye with an inscrutable expression. His sudden sense of power did not diminish his affection, but the quick turn of her head had made him think of a startled field mouse, and her fluttering hands, of small white birds. If he wished, he could play with her as he had done with mouse or bird, frightening her, tantalizing her with hopes of escape, and finally crushing her with one blow of his huge, soft paw. It pleased him to know this as he inclined his head to her feet with arrogant humility, a servile yet terrible gesture. She was still trembling when she seated herself upon his back, her baby in her arms, her Snake coiled round her neck, her Raven on her shoulder. They rode thus through the forest and then down the high road to the city. People who met them ran shrieking from before them. It was the proper advance for an Enchanter’s daughter.

But when they drew near to the city itself she had no wish to render their approach conspicuous, and slipping from the Cat’s back she reversed the sign over him and said:

“Big black Cat  
That we now ride,  
Shrink, shrink, shrink,  
And walk by my side.”

There he was his usual size again, though it felt at first a great deal smaller to him.

Voluptuous dreams of bloodshed on a mighty scale slipped from him as he walked again beside his mistress, and gave way to more homely

reflections on mice and cream. It occurred to him that even a cat can, for a short time, be enchanted.

The city was in an uproar. People were dancing through the streets, crowding by the fountains that ran red wine instead of water, besieging the shops of the pastrycooks who had orders to give away sugar cakes free, each one made in the supposed likeness of King Garth or the Princess Blanchelys, with currants for eyes and cheeks cochinealed a bright red. A strong smell of roasted meat came from the market place, where three oxen were being roasted whole by enormous open fires. People were letting off their fireworks already although it was still broad sunshine, and the air was full of the noise of bursting rockets, of every sort of musical instrument, of singing and cheering and shouts so hoarse and screams so piercing and ferocious that it was difficult to believe they expressed enjoyment, and that some horrible massacre was not in progress.

Everyone was far too busy or too drunk to notice Melusine and her odd companions, and she managed to make her way through the press to the cathedral in the middle of the city. People were swarming through the cathedral examining the red and blue banners, the cloth of gold awning at the altar steps, the huge triumphal crowns and hearts and true lovers' knots made of white flowers, particularly of white lilies in compliment to the name of the Princess. Their strong sweet scent made her feel sick and faint with a sensation of deadly chill, for the cathedral was vast and very cold, and in the scent of the flowers there lurked the smell of decay, of hard stone, and of the dead. In the recesses of those mighty arches, a voice was uplifted in a melancholy monotony of indistinguishable words, a voice that was like no living voice, since it had ceased to be human in addressing itself to God.

“When will the wedding take place?” she asked, but the people only stared and said “Hush.” Only an old man by the door would answer her, for he was accustomed to the place.

“You are too late,” he said. “The wedding took place at midday.”



*The Trousseau*

MELUSINE went to the Palace gates and asked to see King Garth and the Princess Blanchelys. She was told that they were even now sitting at their wedding feast and could see no one, least of all a barefoot peasant girl and her brat of a baby. If she had come earlier, she could have walked with the townspeople in the gardens, but they were now closed to the public. She had parted with her friends lest they should lead to her recognition and capture, and now returned to them.

“I must get into the Palace before nightfall,” she said, “but the gates are too well guarded and there is no moon to-night, even if they have ceased to shutter the windows.”

She looked up above her at the wall that shut off the Palace grounds from the city. It was twenty feet high and built of smooth stone that afforded no smallest foothold. They were in a narrow alley at the foot of the wall, and alone, for everyone in the city wished to be where everyone else was. She stooped to the Snake at her feet and touched him three times, then made the sign to the East of him and to the West and said:

“Green and silver Snake,  
Listen to my call,  
Grow, grow, grow,  
And bear me up the wall.”

The alley was filled with the monstrous coils of the Snake. He reared himself up on his tail, and his head touched the tops of the trees on the other side of the garden wall. The Raven with a dismal squawk flew as high as he could go, and the Cat for once forsook his composure and sprang spitting on to his mistress’s shoulder. The Snake lowered his head and thrust it towards them, darting out a tongue as long as a sword and answering the curses of the Cat by a mighty and appalling hiss. No one can say with what sentiments he was inspired by the changed attitude of his comrades towards him, for his emotions were of a more inscrutable profundity than those of the Cat. He

swooped upon Melusine, wound himself round her so as to hold her in his coils as in an armchair and lifted her over the wall. She reversed the sign over the Snake and said:

“Green and silver Snake,  
Now grown so tall,  
Shrink, shrink, shrink,  
On this side of the wall.”

The monster shrank to a gleaming ribbon beside her, and the Cat stepped down disdainfully from her shoulder and in and out of the slender coils. The Raven returned with an abstracted air and said something about having flown off to make a reconnaissance. There was none to make, for the gardens were empty and everybody was at the wedding banquet. The sun had barely set, but lights were already being lit within the Palace, and through the numerous windows there shone out shafts of yellow light into the pale evening air. The sound of music and voices and laughter also flowed out through the windows; the noise was scarcely more restrained than in the market place, and it increased as the yellow light grew brighter in the deepening twilight.

Melusine went towards it. At the end of those shafts of light she could now see many gorgeous figures sitting round a long table, and at the head sat the Princess Blanchelys in resplendent white, beside a grey, still figure that Melusine only observed later to be in fact in gold and scarlet. In that turmoil of shrill, harsh laughter, of swaying, extravagant motions, he seemed to be imprisoned in a circle of silence.

People looked oddly at him from time to time and whispered; but there was no gainsaying his devotion to the Princess, his eyes never moved from her. She was flushed and very lively, she shouted jokes at him and at people far down the table, her eyes rolled and flashed, and she carried her head with a triumphant air. It was as though she displayed a conquered king as her captive rather than her husband. But no one remarked anything odd in this, it was as they would have expected her or a hundred others to behave at their wedding.

“The dear child has such vitality,” murmured the Empress, that is to say, it was intended as a murmur, but she had to bellow before it could be heard, and Melusine, outside the window, understood why she had felt Blanchelys to be a goddess. That mysterious word of the Empress’s must denote some charm or gift more potent than beauty or even magic. She watched the scene as though it had no meaning for her; she could not believe that King Garth

himself sat there with his eyes fastened as by chains to the Princess Blanchelys. So dully did she regard it, that it surprised her more to observe that nearly all the Court ladies whose hair had been golden and curly, now wore raven locks, smoothly banded round their heads or falling in straight and generally sticky masses.

She stole round to the back of the Palace, to the pantries where the cooks and the scullions and the kitchenmaids were all roaring and romping and yet contriving to infuse a great deal more ceremony into their revelry than did the guests in the hall. She again dismissed her friends and sat down on the doorstep, where her baby began to cry.

“What is that unpleasant noise?” said the head cook.

“Sir,” said a scullion, “it is a peasant girl and her baby. They are sitting outside on the step and the baby is crying.”

“She has no business there,” said the head cook. “Send her away.” He was very proud and the scullions trembled before him. But a good-natured under-housemaid was sorry for the baby and said she would send them away. She brought Melusine a glass of wine and asked her how she had got there, and played with the baby.

“I walked a long way from the country,” said Melusine, “to see the wedding, but when I arrived it was over. Then I walked with some friends in the Palace gardens, but I lost them and found I was shut in.”

“What a shame,” said the under-housemaid. “Chuck, chuck, pretty darling, iddums then. Is it a boy? How old? My sister’s child is a young rascal. Lively as a monkey. What do you think he did the other day?”

She told her at some length. Then she said, “Now you’ve finished, I expect we’d better go or the head cook will be after us. A regular old tyrant he is. I’ll take you round by the gardener’s door.”

As they went, she talked of the wedding and the to-do there had been about it and all the extra work it had meant. She grumbled, but it was plain she took great credit to herself for its success and was as proud as if it had been her own wedding. They stood by the gardener’s door in the wall, and the under-housemaid opened and shut it and fidgeted with the door knob and leaned against it and looked outside and looked back and delayed the exit of her guest in a hundred ways while she held forth on the uselessness and injustice of the upper-housemaids, and the power and glory to which she had contributed so much more than they. She was a rather meek girl in her daily

life and easily put upon. Never had she had such a chance as this to show off.

“Are the presents very fine?” asked Melusine.

“Fine? You never saw such fine things in all your life, you may be sure of that.”

“I wish I could,” said Melusine.

The under-housemaid regarded her indignantly.

“I mean,” said she, “I would give anything to have a glimpse of them.”

“I dare say you would,” said the under-housemaid, “but it’s as much as my place is worth.”

“There would be no one there now,” said Melusine. “Guests and servants are all feasting. Since you have such power and influence in the Palace, I should have thought it would have been easy for you to slip in without anyone knowing.”

Bitterly she wished that she had some of the more material branches of magic such as alchemy at her fingers’ ends, so that she could bribe the under-housemaid with clay suddenly transformed into gold. But flattery proved as powerful a charm. The under-housemaid locked the gardener’s door again very softly and led her back into the Palace by a passage where all was dim and quiet, and so up into a long room which was filled with shining objects of glass and gold and silver, all spread out so as to do themselves the fullest justice. They looked so pompous that Melusine felt quite subdued in their presence as though they were living persons struck to an awful stillness by their own importance. There were ample, spreading bowls, and elegant and majestic coffee-pots, and some teapots that reminded one of a classic temple, and others that were comfortable and fussy-looking, and there was an incredible number of fish knives, all fully displayed, and among all these, as proudly shown off as any, were various insignificant little pieces of paper with a few figures scrawled on them, which, the under-housemaid informed her, were the most valuable of all.

“But where,” said Melusine, “is that superb and exquisite present you spoke of, that nightdress-case, that you and three other of the housemaids have embroidered for Her Royal Highness? If I go away without seeing that, I have seen nothing.”

“That is in Her Royal Highness’s bedroom along with the rest of the trousseau,” said the under-housemaid.

Her speech flowed forth again in praise of it and the rest of the trousseau, of the daintiest camis and the dinkiest nighties and the dreamiest petties and the divinest knicks. Her plain face, resembling a pudding in shape and colour, shone with the reflection of their glory, and Melusine felt humbled before so pure a passion for beauty. But she did not scruple to make use of it in her persuasions, which at last succeeded in inducing that good-natured but foolish and, since the truth must out, that slightly intoxicated girl to lead her stealthily into the Princess's bedchamber. Here, in an ecstasy that was quite disinterested except as regarded her personal pride in the pet of a nightdress-case, she displayed garment after garment of bewildering beauty but obscure intention, until suddenly she shut a drawer to, and stared fixedly at nothing, while her flushed face reverted to its former pasty hue, this time enhanced to a slightly bluish tinge.

“’Ush,” said the under-housemaid, too much agitated to notice what had forsaken her. “It can’t never be the Princess,” she continued in an equally disregarded redundancy, though she was generally a most careful girl. “It’s a long sight too early. Come along quick, though.”

She hurried out into the corridor, not waiting to look back for Melusine, who followed her for a few steps and then slipped back into the Princess's bedchamber. In another moment she heard a cautious tread approaching, and concealed herself in a cupboard behind the Princess's dresses, leaving the door ajar so that she could hear what happened.

*The Bride*

THE person entered, stumbled over a box that the under-housemaid had left out of its place, and uttered a familiar expletive. No one except the Princess swore in quite that lady-like and unconvincing tone. But why, Melusine asked herself, should the Princess come to her bedroom early and unattended on her wedding night, and in this stealthy manner as though she had no business to be there? Presently this was explained by a tap on the door; it was opened to admit a man, whose lazy tones Melusine recognized as Sir Diarmid's.

They greeted each other as lovers, for the Princess said, "So there you are," and Sir Diarmid replied that he could not possibly get away before. The Princess then said she did not know what she had been about to grant him this interview, and Sir Diarmid said that he had known very well.

"You take it all as a matter of course," said a querulous tone. "And I gave up my faithful Oliver for you."

A dreaming, reminiscent note crept into Sir Diarmid's voice.

"It must be his rôle," he said, "to be offered as a love sacrifice. But I'll not have him twice over, and a reversion at that. You gave up Oliver for King Garth, when the boredom of his sheep's eyes had made you consider it time to secure a suitable marriage. It is your husband I should be asking in sacrifice."

"So cruel of you. You know I loved the King at first. I thought him so stern, so gaunt, so truly big. He seemed ever so different somehow from our little world, for I assure you I often think extremely seriously."

"Once a woman has taken a lover, she always takes herself seriously. It is the strongest argument in favour of virtue."

"Take a lover! You surely do not speak technically. I would have you know I am not that kind of woman. Indeed I could wish my nature were less

pure, for the devotion of a lover bores me, and I can now scarcely manage a single thrill for my husband. Dear Diarmid, will you not be a friend to me?"

He made a polite affirmative; and she, after a slight, and as it seemed, expectant pause, proceeded: "In any case not to-night. Some other time, perhaps. I am so torn and troubled, have pity on me, Diarmid."

"Do you prefer it to my love? For you will not get that, if to-night you give yourself to your husband."

"But you have my heart," she cried.

"It is the minor portion. And I have no great faith in these segregations of the anatomy. Give me your person and I will not complain should you tell me that your husband has your heart."

"You are a dreadful cynic. You may be very clever, but you do not understand me, and that after all is the important thing. Is it my true self you desire? How can I leave my husband for you on my wedding night if you have no reverence for me?"

"But could you if I had?"

There followed a deep sigh, as of unfulfilled aspirations.

"I have a mirror in my room," continued the sweet and sorrowful voice of the exile. "It is supported by Cupids who gaze into it, faint with prospective adoration of the beauty it will one day reflect. In that mirror you will see your true self and never forget it."

"If only it were not to-night!" said the Princess.

"Shall we call it a virgin sacrifice?" he suggested gently; "whether we avoid technicalities or not, it is Sir Oliver's other rôle to be forgotten."

This was followed by the sound of a slap, the sound of a laugh, and the sound of a kiss. There was a long pause. At this moment Melusine's baby began to cry. There came a half-strangled gasp from the Princess.

"It is only a whimpering puppy," he assured her.

"It is a baby," was suddenly uttered in a sharp, matter-of-fact tone of annoyance and disgust.

"A baby?"

"A baby. Do not look at me in that ridiculous fashion. You surely do not imagine that if I had ever had a baby I should keep it in my wardrobe

cupboard? For the sound undoubtedly proceeds from there, and I shall have to ring to have it removed. Therefore you had better go instantly.”

Melusine stepped out from the wardrobe cupboard and confronted a pale, staring, slightly dishevelled bride and a dispassionately watchful young man.

“I have waited here to speak to you,” she said to the Princess.

It was Sir Diarmid who spoke.

“Take off that handkerchief,” he said.

She did so and her hair fell in a black wave over her.

“I could not be mistaken,” he pronounced with greater emphasis than he had yet used. “Those eyes, that skin, above all, that hair, they transcend anything I have ever seen.”

“Diarmid!” cried the Princess.

“I speak as a connoisseur. Till now these points have never had the power to charm me.”

“Till—*now*?”

“In that clumsy dress, attached to that unpleasant and strident object, she has yet acquired a something that she lacked before. One can see that she has loved and has suffered, that it is extremely probable she will do so again.”

“You are disgusting,” said the Princess. “I shall ring the bell immediately.”

“I dislike a scene,” said Sir Diarmid. “And my presence might inconvenience Your Royal Highness.”

He left the bedroom. As he passed Melusine he caught up a tress of her hair and let it filter through his fingers. “It is so fine,” he murmured, “that it appears intangible.” Then he bowed and said: “You have shown me that my taste is subject to the laws of humanity like that of any common lover of the duller Saxon race. I failed to appreciate your beauty. Permit me to apologize for my loss.”

The Princess stood aghast as he closed the door after him with an air that was almost abashed. She gave a snort that awoke a sudden resemblance to her father, and turned sharply to the bell. But Melusine stood before it.

“One moment,” she said.



“I know quite well what you would say,” said the Princess, “but I assure you, you may just as well spare yourself the trouble. Nobody will believe a word of it.”

“I don’t think you know what——”

“It is sufficiently obvious, thank you. You play the spy and think you can hold a threat over me. But who is going to listen to your preposterous story of a man in my room?”

“But it is not that——”

“Will that squawking brat bear out your evidence? It is just a case of your word against mine. And everybody knows what I am, and can now see what you are. Will you kindly let me pass?”

Her angry tones rose higher and higher in competition with the baby’s wail. Melusine still stood firmly in front of the bell. The Princess raised her hand, but with a violent effort remembered her dignity and swerved round towards the door.

“Then I shall call instead.”

“You will listen to me first,” said Melusine.

To her own annoyance the Princess found she had stopped.

“I came here,” said Melusine, “to try and speak to King Garth. Will you let me do so?”

“Have you no sense of decency?” asked the Princess.

“You will not? Yet you wish to go to Sir Diarmid, and that, as you said, is difficult on your wedding night. But possible, if someone took your place with your husband.”

“Your coarseness revolts me.”

“Don’t you wish to go?”

“I—oh, but this would never do.”

“It has been done frequently in the fairy tales.”

“They are most unreliable.”

But it was plain she had begun to consider it.

“He is so excessively absent,” she murmured, “that something might perhaps be arranged.”

“Then you will let me go to him.”

The Princess woke slowly to a recollection of the other’s presence.

“*You?* I have sufficient maids of honour for the purpose. Why should you imagine I should let you, of all women, take my place?”

“Because I love him.”

The Princess laughed.

Her laughter fell round Melusine like a shower of arrows, but did not touch her.

“I will give you anything in the world,” she said, “if you will let me spend this one night in his bedchamber instead of yourself.”

The Princess’s eyes scanned her bare feet.

“And what have you left to give?” she asked.

“I will send for my father’s books of magic and make you mistress of them all.”

Blanchelys laughed again.

“And what have your spells ever done for you? You have lost your lover, you have lost your fine clothes, and you have acquired a most inconvenient baby.”

“Yet you have found my spells useful.”

“My good girl, do you really believe I won the hearts of Sir Oliver and King Garth through your absurd little mummery? No, it was because I treated them like the dirt beneath my feet. Remember that, should you wish to succeed with men rather better than you have done so far. And in any case,” she sighed, “it has failed completely with the one man I really want, since Sir Diarmid has no heart to steal.” She sighed yet more profoundly. “Few men are worthy of love.”

“There is nothing then that you want?”

“No-o. And yet—life is very complicated.”

Her reflections had led her to her mirror, wherein she gazed with an expression that deepened from discontent to despair, when she remarked in a very sharp tone: “*Nothing* will induce me to dye it.”

Melusine suddenly perceived the present cause of life’s complications.

“But of what use is beauty if it does not happen to be chic?” the Princess continued to her reflection. “My favourite blue has become dowdy and nobody wears anything but silver or scarlet which ruin my colouring; yet I cannot bring Papa to pass a law against this disloyal fashion. I have always said it is high time that women took an interest in politics.”

The Princess was apt to forget her indifference or hostility to the person she addressed, since that person was always of less importance than what she happened to be saying. This engaging trait had often flattered Melusine in the past by its seeming familiarity; but now, so false is friendship in lovers, she only sought to make use of it. She shook her hair over her shoulders so that it hid her baby in a cloud as dark and soft as night and he instantly fell asleep in its shelter.

“You wish for black hair,” she said.

“Oh, wouldn’t it be lovely!” exclaimed the artless girl. “I should then be the rage.”

“I can give you my hair,” said Melusine.

“Thank you. A wig indeed!”

“I can give you the blackness of my hair, and the length of it and the softness.”

“Is this another of your old spells? Well, I don’t mind your trying.”

“It is not a gift this time.”

“Oh, of course. You are in need of money now. Well, how much?”

“I have told you my price. To spend this night in King Garth’s bedchamber.”

“How amazingly indelicate. You seem to forget that we are a moral Court.”

“Do you want my hair?”

“At least you might have some pride. What does King Garth want with you? He has never mentioned you. He never even saw you in the street that day. He loves me wholly and was sick to death of you long ago.”

“But you want my hair.”

“Certainly. I am willing to pay a reasonable price for it. Ten pounds. Then fifty. Well, a hundred. Come, I know Papa will not mind, as it is a wedding present. Shall we say five hundred? Then a thousand. Oh, but you

are a shark and a Jew. Well, I do not care. I will make it ten thousand. A year, I mean. You shall be a duchess. You shall marry Sir Oliver. He is the tallest man in the Army and from one of our oldest families. Oh, but you are a mule, a block. What *will* you take?"

"This one night in King Garth's bedchamber."

The Princess sat down suddenly before her mirror. She brushed up a branch of her hair which at once stuck out like a furze bush. She buried her face in her hands.

"So fine that it appears intangible," she murmured. She remained thus for some time, then she raised her head and looked long at her reflection. At first it looked back dully at her, then a sudden light came into the eyes, and the lips parted and curled upwards in a slow smile that was so full of cunning resolution and of exultation that it startled herself and she bent her head for an instant to hide it. When she looked up again the face in the mirror was as blank as a wax doll's.

"You shall have your price," she said.

*The Father-in-Law*

**I**N that country, whether it were owing to the presence or absence of the Salic law, it was the custom for a Royal bride to go to her husband instead of the contrary proceeding.

The Princess had insisted on dispensing with all the usual boisterous ceremonies, declaring that the indelicacy of the marriage service had already upset her sensitive nature, and that anything approaching merriment on a wedding night was most unsuitable.

Her father muttered that she was right in that; but grumbled at the omission, which her mother supported.

“Men do not understand these things,” she said, “but it is high time this barbarous notion of marriage as a festival should be changed for a more reverent attitude. Dear child, how sweet she looked in church. I hope,” with a reproachful sigh, “she will be happy.”

To which the Emperor replied, “Reverence? Nonsense. Women hate fun because it lessens their sense of importance. And so the Court cannot scramble for the bride’s garter because she prefers to wear a halo. It is this sort of thing that leads to revolution, for if the people find they cannot get fun out of Royalty they will soon find they can get nothing else.”

He left the room hastily so as to secure the last word and wandered up and down the passages, thinking that he would stand no more of Adelisa’s half-plaintive, half-triumphant comments on the wedding; that she had spoiled his son until he was a conceited puppy; and that his daughter had always been encouraged to bully or ignore him. Women were all alike, or at least ladies were; they made life duller and drabber every day with their solemn sense of spiritual superiority to the coarser and more childish sex. There should be no women above the rank of barmaids, and the discovery of a reasonable ground for his hitherto furtive preference for low company encouraged him a little, so that he began to smile to himself and think what a

wide-minded philosopher he might have made if he had not been an Emperor and married to Adelisa.

In this he was ungrateful, for what philosophy he had, he owed to his troubles with his wife.

The sound of several approaching footsteps made him step back hastily into a doorway, for it was always his first instinct to observe a newcomer without being himself observed. He saw King Garth, accompanied by several gentlemen-in-waiting, come quickly and in silence down the passage.

The light of a small lamp hanging from the ceiling fell on their faces in scattered yellow patches that gathered again into a steady pool as the company passed on into the shadow and through the door that led to King Garth's bedchamber. An involuntary shudder shook the Emperor in his hiding-place. He could not have said why, but he thought that King Garth had the look of a man who was going to his death through that door at the end of the passage.

Yet Garth was devoted to Blanchelys,—Adelisa said so twenty times a day and she always knew. But the word “devoted” carried an uncomfortable suggestion; he remembered that it was originally attached to victims offered in sacrifice. “And that's not so far out either,” he thought, for women were all alike, they had the best of the bargain when they married you, and went on making it better and better until you had shrunk to the mere shadow of what you were.

He considered how that savage and disdainful pride of King Garth's had suddenly stooped to acceptance of his hospitality and of all his terms; how ever since then he appeared to have entered an unknown world wherein he recognized neither enemy nor friend, but wandered lost and starving.

This was held by all else as clear proof of his love for the Princess; but the Emperor had sometimes thought that the King must be mad. And once as they walked in silence through the gardens, the Emperor trotting very fast to keep up with the other's slow stride, that disconcerting giant had looked down on him and said, “I have thought that too. Else why should I now wish to marry your daughter?”

He had not dared to give even a sympathetic chuckle in answer, but reflected that these big men were like children who cannot love without helpless adoration, and the reflection consoled him for the fact that his head did not reach his son-in-law's shoulder.

He turned sharply, for some sense that was neither sight nor hearing told him he was not alone. At the other end of the passage he saw a figure moving towards him, which did not stop as he turned, but came slowly on. He saw that it was a girl in the dress of a peasant who held a sort of bundle on her arm. The noiseless, gliding tread made him fancy at first it was a ghost, but one that was oddly familiar; yes, it might be the ghost of his late visitor, the Enchanter's daughter.

But as the figure advanced into the pool of yellow light beneath the lamp, he saw that her hair was not long and black like Melusine's, nor of that peculiar gossamer fineness; it hung lank and dead and its colour was so nondescript that it looked more grey than anything else.

He advanced towards her, saying, "Come, this won't do, you know, this won't do." But she went past him, without hurrying, without looking up at him, without any appearance of having seen or heard him at all. He fell back in fear and dismay, and watched the figure as it went on into the shadow at the end of the passage, and through the door that led to King Garth's bedchamber.

*The Wedding Night*

THERE was no one in the antechamber. The King's gentlemen had left by the other door, through which the Princess was expected to arrive, and not by the passage. There was bright light in the antechamber and a quantity of white flowers which gave forth a sickly perfume, so that mingled with their scent was the memory of that chill smell of stone and damp and dead men's bones that had clung to the white flowers in the Cathedral. The room was like a bright and empty tomb. Melusine passed through it.

The bedchamber blazed like the sun at noonday. The ceiling and walls were gold, stamped with scarlet velvet. Scarlet candles in gold candlesticks, six feet high, stood round the bed, which was hung with drawn curtains of cloth of gold. There were seven steps to the dais of the bed; the first was blue, the second was scarlet, the third was green, the fourth was yellow, the fifth was purple, the sixth was orange, the seventh was crimson. Melusine went up them and drew aside the curtains.

King Garth lay in the bed, though she had been sure he was not there. He lay as still as a figure on a tomb and his face looked as though it were carved out of grey stone. His eyes were shut and his mouth was shut, with a tight line between the lips. She touched his hand and it was hard and cold like stone.

Then she laid her head beside him and kissed him and called him by his name and spoke to him of the nights that they had passed together in the dungeon. But all was in vain. Nothing that she could say or do would wake him, and when the baby cried, that did not wake him either. She lay as still at last as he, and it seemed to her that both were dead, yet not together; for she could remember their love, and he did not. At that, so great a terror seized her that she clung to him and cried to him to save her, for it seemed that she was slipping from his side into a vast and dreadful void, into nothing. But nothing answered her, and she found that she touched nothing.



She rose and went to the window and drew back the scarlet curtains. It was a moonless night and very dark. She could but just see the stone terrace far below. The dizzy height did not frighten her; this chasm was not a void, it held hard stone at the bottom, and death, and forgetfulness, which was all that she could now share with Garth. She climbed on to the window sill; but at that moment her baby, which she had left on the bed, began again its angry cry of hunger. She had to feed it before she died; when she had done so, she remembered that she would have to feed it again in a few hours.

*The Second Night*

WHEN the dawn came, the Princess's confidential maid stepped softly into King Garth's bedchamber and led Melusine away. She did not protest, for her bargain had been only for a night, and her time was up. But she asked to see the Princess again before she left.

"That is easily managed," she was answered, in the sly and superior fashion common to confidential maids who have received so many confidences that they can have no opinion of anyone except themselves. "You may think yourself lucky, for Her Royal Highness has commanded that you should be brought straight to her."

They found the Princess sitting in a pink wrapper and the grey light of dawn. This combination was trying to her complexion, but though she held a mirror in her hand and regarded it intently, she did not once powder her face. Her hair, now black and soft as Melusine's had been, flowed smooth as water over her shoulders, but her expression was one of extreme annoyance.

"Do you want to know what I think of Sir Diarmid?" she said. "It is not worth the trouble. Men are all alike. Look at the sacrifices I made. My first love, then my husband, then even my hair, my lovely golden curls, which Mamma always said made me look like a child angel. I am sure it will break her heart when she sees what I have done. All for Sir Diarmid! And was he grateful? Did he appreciate what I had done for him? My dear, if you think so, you know nothing about men." As usual, the Princess had begun to forget the person she addressed. "No. He actually had the consummate nerve, the unmitigated cheek, the incredible face, to say that I might as well buy the half of a dress and go about in that and an odd petticoat, as make my hair mysterious as midnight, but keep that schoolgirl complexion. He said that rosy cheeks with black hair made me look like a Dutch doll. And we called him the Prince of Lovers! In short, I might just as well have spent the night alone, or with my husband."

And here she gave a sharp and satisfied glance at Melusine, and then a sigh of resignation. “Well, there is nothing for it. I must buy your complexion.”

“I ask the same price.”

“Is that all? My poor girl, there are some fools who do not know when they are well off. But it comes cheap for me. And now for the complexion.”

It was done. The clear beauty of Melusine’s skin was transferred to her rival’s, while her own became dull and clouded. Blanchelys rushed again to the mirror and remarked that the trick had really worked. But the other did not even look to see what she had lost.

All that day Melusine spent in practising her spells, and when she came in the night to King Garth’s bedchamber, she tried again and again to wake him by their power, but all were in vain. When she saw that her magic could not help her, she did not cry nor speak to him as before, nor pull at his hands, nor kiss his impassive face. Nor did she think of crying against fate, for magic knows nothing of fate.

She lay beside him and held him in her arms and tried to warm him into life. But his eyelids remained shut as though nailed down on his gaunt cheeks, and his mouth remained shut with a tight line between the lips, and his whole body seemed shut off from her, as if it were already encased in its coffin. She saw the scarlet candles burn lower in their mighty candlesticks, and knew that the night was creeping by outside the curtains.

Though she did not sleep, she dreamed; for she saw herself kneeling before her father and praying him to save them. But he told her that to overcome his own spells needed a power greater than he possessed.

“I will kill Blanchelys,” she said.

“Death does not break enchantment,” he replied, “but the living Blanchelys may do so.”

She remembered Sir Oliver on the horse and cried that she could not see King Garth released to that ignoble freedom.

Her father looked at her with dismay. “Only your lover can help you now,” he said.

She opened her eyes on the lifeless form beside her.

When the dawn came, the Princess's confidential maid stepped softly into the bedchamber and led her away.

Melusine asked again for the Princess and was again told that the Princess had commanded her presence.

Blanchelys sat in a wrapper of scarlet and silver, her hair hung round it like a night cloud and in that cloud her skin shone as white and transparent as a moonbeam. But her eyes were swollen red with crying.

"Why, oh why," said she, "has fate chosen to persecute me thus? I am a princess, and beautiful, I have a tender and most loving nature, I have inspired love many times, yet it has never been exactly as I wished, there was always something wrong somewhere. Men are stupid. They cannot appreciate me with that exact nicety that I deserve."

She laid her head on the dressing-table and clutched a pot of face cream in one hand, an eyebrow pencil in the other.

The maid nudged Melusine in her most confidential manner, and whispered:

"Go on, she wants you to begin first. Can't you see what she's getting at?"

"What?"

"Your eyes."

A shudder ran through Melusine's body, she stiffened and drew back. She had parted with the beauties of her skin and hair almost without thinking. Her eyes were herself.

"Men are brutes," the Princess continued between her sobs, "they demand always the ultimate sacrifice. If only I had never changed my hair and skin! Now Sir Diarmid says they make my eyes incongruous—inadequate was the barbarous word he used. My beautiful eyes, blue and innocent as a baby's, so I am frequently informed. How I hate him, in fact I do not believe I even love him. Come, I have been generous to you. Each time I have given you what you asked, and never haggled, though there are few brides who would do what I have done. Don't look so lugubrious. Do you also find you are not appreciated? Then you should joke as I do. It is our national characteristic to laugh at our sorrows."

"Isn't she wonderful?" said the maid in a very audible whisper.

"You shall have the colour of my eyes," said Melusine.

That night she looked in the mirror and knew for the first time that she had been beautiful. She had not known her beauty, even as she had not known her love, until both had left her. This is not unusual among mortal women, but to the Enchanter's daughter it seemed that she was the one fool of the whole wide world not to know what she had had until she had lost it.

She thought that if she had known the power of her beauty and how to show it to King Garth, she might have made him love her enough to resist the spell that Blanchelys had put on him. But now that that beauty was lost, she had nothing to help her win his love again.

*The Bridegroom*

IT was not King Garth's fault, much less his choice, that he has appeared hitherto as a prisoner, generally under enchantment, and frequently asleep; all of which circumstances have forced him to take a somewhat passive part in this story. His past life had furnished matter for very different tales in the *Saga of Garth of the Sea*, which tells how he slew single-handed the Seven-headed Dragon of Savanorak; how in his ship, the White Wolf, he fought with a fleet of five hundred vessels, and sank the lot; how he wrested the Kingship of the Sea from Ragnar the Dane, reft it from Ragnar's throat with his bared teeth, for it was so that he did battle when his ship had been burnt and himself seized, yet burst from his betrayers with his arms still bound, and fought that last fight as a wolf fights, till Ragnar the Dane lay dead. Only the few who are ignorant of these mighty deeds should have any reason to complain of his lack of vigour. It is not strange if, like many another hero, he was at his weakest in the battle of love; and it may at least be laid to his credit that unlike many such heroes, he was aware of his weakness and troubled by it.

He had felt freer in his dungeon than in this foreign palace where the people seemed to him like quick-witted chattering pygmies. He was shy of them and stood very still in their presence, not looking at them, and the sound of their voices seemed to reach him from a great distance; all this gave him an appearance of intolerable pride and disdain. The Court revenged themselves by hidden smiles at the size and strength of this barbarian king, at his silence or his slow-coming speech, at his leather cloak that he still wore whenever it was possible, and the enormous naked sword hanging from his shoulder that no other man could wield. They thought that he did not notice their smiles, but he did, though the only sign he ever gave of it was to shift a little on his feet, swiftly and silently, a movement that somehow served to check his anger by reminding him how easy it would be, in one tremendous rush, to wreak it on these little clever foolish people. He hoped they would not make him too angry. They made him feel an uncouth savage, but he did not want to kill them, for it would annoy his Princess, and

he was never so miserable as when she opened her blue eyes on him so that they looked quite blank and very round in that cool stare that she knew so well how to command.

He was afraid of her, for he knew he was in her power, yet did not know how he came to be there. He did not think her so especially beautiful, she said nothing in particular to charm him, in fact he could hardly attend to her when she spoke; but the bold and upward-roving glances of her blue eyes, and the limpid, trickling chatter of her speech, threw his spirits into such perturbation that he was struck dumb and could hardly move hand or foot in her presence. Many consider this a common effect of love, but there are some who more judiciously account it enchantment.

But no man knows when he is under a spell.

He did not forget Melusine at once. He told himself a hundred times a day that he loved her, which he had never once troubled to do while it was a fact. He told himself that what he felt for Blanchelys was a feverish fancy, a thing that would pass. But it did not pass, and then he considered that it was his love for Melusine that had been a fancy and a fleeting thing. For few can bear to think that a real and living thing has passed from them; and when their love has died, they prefer to say it never lived.

So Garth came in time to deny his love altogether, for the image of Melusine faded altogether from his mind, and he began to think that he had only dreamed of a visitor by moonlight in his dungeon, until at last he came to forget even that he had dreamed. He gave to the Princess his dreams, his memories, all that he had, including some purple poppies that he found in the embroidered pouch of his belt. She in return, each time that she saw him, added another link to the chain which bound him to her. When he was alone he chafed against it, he hated and even despised her for using him as her slave, he wished to kill her. But when he was with her, the heart of cold wax within her breast drew his living heart out of his, so that the pain of it tortured him; for he could dimly perceive that he was chained, not to an equal and loving heart, but to a hard and lifeless object. He was blind indeed to mistake his cruel enchantment for love; but he had had no better education in magic than that of most ordinary mortals.

On the night of his wedding, as the King sat in the anteroom of his bedchamber, wrapped in a bedgown of velvet and fur, a page clad all in white appeared before him and offered him on one knee a goblet of gold Venetian glass filled with a purple liquid, which gave forth a strong smell of peppermint, orange juice and cloves.

“Sire,” said the Page, “the Princess has commanded me to bring you this drink which she has mixed with her own hands from the Imperial family recipe. It is a comforting posset suitable for bridegrooms, being compounded of the leaves of the periwinkle and houseleek which when taken in conjunction do induce love between man and wife; and of thyme which is highly exhilarating to the blood, mixed with two spoonfuls of the distilled water of lavender flowers which is of great assistance in the tremblings and passions of the heart; and with a plentiful quantity of that hot and kindly cordial, borage, which induces courage.”

The King took the cup between his hands and looked long into the purple liquid. It seemed to him that some fragrance too delicate to be called a perfume lay buried beneath a heavy odour of peppermint, orange and cloves. He could not evoke it, for of all fugitive memories, that of a scent is the most difficult to recapture. Instead, the memory of a face began to take form in the depths of the cup, and he saw a ragged yellowish beard and little dull eyes that blinked at him in a perplexed and frightened fashion. He could not think why he should remember the Emperor’s face looking out at him from the darkness of a doorway, and that as though he had but just seen it there, nor why the sound of grumbled muttered words should steal into his head from nowhere:

‘Women are all alike. They get the best of the bargain when they marry you, and they go on making it better and better until you have shrunk to the mere shadow of what you were.’

“The Princess,” said the Page, “has commanded me to bring her word when Your Majesty has drunk the cordial she has mixed for you, and on that news she will attend your Majesty.”

The face that he had not seen in the doorway, the thoughts that he had not heard uttered, the scent he could not remember, all fled from the King, and he saw only the bright blue and slightly staring eyes of the Princess. He lifted the cup and drank. It fell from his hands and he dropped back in his chair in a dead sleep.

“But this cannot be the desired effect of the drink,” said the chief gentleman.

“It won’t do at all,” said the second gentleman.

They all tried their utmost to wake him, but their efforts were in vain. Suspecting mischief, they threatened the page with torture, and he then confessed the Princess’s confidence to him, that the drink was a magically



powerful opiate made by the head sorcerer from certain purple poppies, and that she had employed this pretty device to preserve her maidenhood on her wedding night, in accordance with a bet made to certain of her old schoolfellows. Such artless innocence provoked mirth and good humour. The gentlemen decided that they had better lay the King on his bed, and this they managed to accomplish, but though they had to drag the giant into the next room, he was not aroused so much as to stir an eyelash.

They drew the golden curtains round him with jokes and laughter, then went noisily down the seven flaming steps of the dais, and away, their voices echoing back into the brightly lit antechamber, back into the gold and scarlet room where King Garth lay as if upon his tomb.

*The Third Night*

ON the third evening when the Princess had won the colour of her eyes from Melusine, the impulsive girl hurried to Sir Diarmid at an earlier hour than before.

“I can now give you all that you desire,” she cried as she rushed into the room.

He rose from the chair in which he had been sitting, and laid down a book with care, inserting a peacock feather between its pages so that he should not lose the place. Not till then did he turn his eyes in her direction. As they looked at her, a smile sparkled beneath his curling lashes, then flashed to the corners of his delicate mouth, then opened it in charmingly frank and hearty laughter.

“Now,” he said, “you shall see your true self.”

He led her to the mirror.

“Do you see any difference in yourself?”

“But—surely. Have I not made myself all you asked for?”

“All.”

“Then what more do you want?”

“Nothing.”

“Then you are satisfied?”

“Completely.”

“Well—then——?”

“You ask me what I am waiting for? I answer, nothing. I thank you for the ecstasy of this fulfilment. And now, Madam——” He moved towards the door.

“What do you mean?” cried Blanchelys.

He took her hand and turned her again to the mirror.

“Can black hair and a white skin give mystery to one who lacks it?” he asked in his gentlest tones. “Your eyes are of green jelly instead of blue, but they are the same eyes. They can bring me nothing new.”

“You utter swine,” said the Princess.

“We are all swine or fools. You have chosen your part. My tastes are refined and require a subtler satisfaction than any that you can imagine. But in you I met for once a conceit equal to my own. I could not permit that. By your face I should judge that it will never quite equal it again.”

The agony of a tortured vanity can feel very like a broken heart. Blanchelys hesitated on a choice. Should she decide that she was broken, and enter a convent, or even kill herself? Or should she consent to see that she could live very well without Sir Diarmid’s approval? Her mother’s sound sense of material values came to her assistance and she chose the latter. She looked at Sir Diarmid and knew that her anger would only amuse him.

“You may be very clever,” said she, “but I don’t see what you get out of it.”

She looked from him to the book with the peacock feather between its leaves to mark the place where he would begin reading again as soon as she left. She would soon get out of this room, she would soon get out of this mess, she would soon be able to see herself quite differently. Already she was beginning to do so.

There must be no reproaches. She looked at the ceiling and clasped her hands.

“I loved you,” she said. “I gave up everything for you. Men don’t like it. They prefer women who are cold to them. I am too tender, too trusting for your world. After all, I have my husband. He would understand me, for he is true and loving, he is a man. What are you, I should like to know? I shall go back to him and tell him everything.”

“Then do not again forget Sir Oliver.”

She left the room. She ran along the passages. She flung open her bedroom door and saw Melusine still standing before her mirror. At sight of her Blanchelys began to sob and cry: “I have lost my beauty and all for nothing.”

“There is still peroxide,” said the confidential maid.

“Yes, I shall spend the rest of my life in dyeing my hair, rouging my cheeks, and painting blue shadows round my eyes. See what comes of meddling with your tiresome magic. Men are all alike. I shall go back to my husband.”

Melusine turned quickly from the mirror. “I still have this night,” she said.

But the confidential maid who stood by the door had already shown her perception by locking it, and as Melusine rushed towards her she deftly threw the key out of the window. The Princess, who was at the window, was beckoning to the men-at-arms in the lighted courtyard below.

“It is not of the slightest use to make a fuss,” she said. “I quite recognize that it is trying for you, but I also have my trials, and you bring mischief wherever you go. Yet I am the last person in the world to bear malice and am indeed pleased to do what I can for you. It is a pity you have lost your looks and I assure you men are not worth it. But Pharamond is so wild to marry notoriety that he might be induced to swallow anything, even a baby. I must ask Mamma.”

At her command the guards forced open the door and led Melusine and her baby to the inner room where she had formerly been imprisoned. The Princess hastened to the Imperial coucher to acquaint her parents, in a few well-chosen words, with as much of the situation as was necessary.

“That girl is here again,” she said.

“Unpardonable,” said the Empress.

“Unlucky,” said the Emperor.

“But I have had the forethought to replace her in her prison.”

“My generous child,” said the Empress, “you would forgive your husband everything!”

Blanchelys explained that though this was the case, she would feel safer if Melusine were instantly married to somebody else. Her mother quite understood her feelings. She never lost her grip on a subject, and the fabulous wealth of enchanters was the subject that had informed her maternal dreams long before her son had reached a marriageable age.

“There is just one drawback,” said the Princess. She whispered to her mother.

“Even Pharamond might object,” she added aloud.

But the Empress showed once more the unshaken faith and unswerving purpose of a mother's loving ambition.

“Quite impossible,” she said. “The silly romantic girl must have adopted it. Yes, that is how it was. I can always trust my intuitions.”

The Emperor groaned at her last words, but nobody attended to him. Messengers had already been despatched to summon Pharamond to the presence, also the Lord Archbishop and a suitable company of acolytes. The Empress was dictating a letter to the Foundlings' Hospital.

“What?” said Pharamond, when they told him. “One doesn't marry at midnight in one's mother's bedroom. There is something fishy about it.”

They mentioned publicity, but he paid no heed. In his mind he could already hear his mother's voice, bland and inexorable, and he felt small and frightened and despairing and longed to give in to whatever she wished. But in his mind he could also see Salacius' sneer and was determined to show he was a man. He put his princely foot down. He had had about enough of it, he said. It was not good enough.

He wandered out into the corridors, restless and unresolved. There he met an old woman who was carrying a baby, which instantly confirmed Pharamond's darkest suspicions of something fishy. Her tales of an erring chambermaid would not go down with him. That baby was not born tonight, he told her, nor was he himself born yesterday. She swore that she knew nothing but that she was to take the infant to the Foundlings' Hospital.

He made her lead him back through the corridors to where she had received charge of it. They came to the inner room of Melusine's former imprisonment, guarded as before by men-at-arms. After strong inducements from the Prince they revealed the name of their prisoner and the fact that the baby was hers. This was going too far. He liked a sport as well as anyone, but maternity was a thing to be guarded against. He told the old woman to remain where she was on pain of death, and ran headlong from that place.

In that inner room Melusine had heard the guards drawing the great bolts and turning the keys in the padlocks that locked her in. They had looked at her, with all her colours dim and faded; they had told each other that she had gone off very quickly since they had last had charge of her. They would not have known her at all, they said; they wondered what the Prince would think of it.

They had taken her baby from her. Now the darkness was all round her, thick and horrible. Yet because she had been accustomed to meet her lover in the darkness, she waited for an instant in a fantastic hope that his unseen hands would fall on her, that she would be lifted and clutched close against him and find herself at rest.

But soon she knew that the darkness was empty, and that her arms were also empty of something that they had held close and carefully, something that was dependent on her for its very life. Her baby had astonished and perplexed her by its arrival and inconvenienced her by its presence, but now that this helpless living object was removed from her, she desired its return with an irrational ardour that shook her body into sobs and frantic cries such as she had never uttered for her lover.

Now for the first time she knew herself to be alone, and now for the first time she despaired, beating her hands against the darkness until it became palpable iron, bruising and battering them against it, crying on the baby they had taken from her, crying on the Princess who had broken her promise, crying on her father who could not help her, crying on her lover who could not see her, crying that she was alone in darkness for ever.

On the other side of the door she heard the guards laughing at her.

The Princess had gone back to her husband.

Owing to the former eagerness of her candid ardour, it was still early. King Garth had not yet undressed nor even unbuckled his sword; the gentlemen-in-waiting were still in the anteroom and the page in white had not yet brought the cup containing the comforting posset suitable for bridegrooms.

The gentlemen-in-waiting discreetly retired.

King Garth knelt at the feet of his Princess. His perturbation at her presence was the more troubled because he had no recollection of the two previous nights. All that he knew was that he awoke in the morning to see the impress of a small head on the velvet pillow beside him, and thought that his bride must have left him while he slept. Each morning the Princess had sent word to her husband that she had an attack of the vapours and would not be able to see him that day. Each evening she had sent the page in white with the same cup and message.

“I can now give you all that you desire,” she murmured in the tender tone that is induced by a sense of omission.

He wondered if she had not given it before. It was awkward that he could not remember.

She laid her little hands in his and felt a great security in his strength and his stupidity. He was completely devoted to her. He was a true man. He would never see anything.

“Look at me,” she whispered. “I am yours.”

He looked. He rose. He was still looking. Then she remembered her black hair, her white skin, her green eyes. It was very awkward.

“I am your wife,” she cried.

But he still looked.

“I am the Princess Blanchelys.”

He did not hear her.

Did he take her for Melusine? She was a quick girl and decided that it was better not to confuse the issue.

“In any case I am your love,” she said.

In his eyes, which had for so long appeared blind, something slowly woke and terrified her by its presence. She shrieked and fell on her knees before him.

“Do not kill me. I have not been false to you.”

At last he spoke.

“This is the false bride,” he said.

But the Princess had fainted.

He did not wait to revive her. As a man might rise from the dead, he burst from that bright and empty room and rushed through the Palace looking for his love, calling on her whose name he could not remember. Room after room was empty except for white staring faces and cries and forms that fled from him, for a senseless confusion.

He saw a ragged yellowish beard and little dull eyes that blinked at him in a perplexed and frightened fashion, and did not remember why he knew that face; it turned and fled from him like all the others.

The portly white-clad figure of the Archbishop rose before him as it had done in the Cathedral at his wedding, but he did not remember why he hated that face; it also turned and fled, tripped and fell headlong, and little white-

clad boys fled also, dropping vessels that crashed into fragments, spilling wine and water.

The desperate face of a young man gaped up at him, twisting his mouth into words, then he turned and fled, but came again, stumbled, and caught at the great leather cloak that swung from the King's shoulders, and fell at his feet, shrieking, "That way! That way!" King Garth plunged over the prostrate form of Prince Pharamond, down a narrow and almost concealed corridor.

At the end of it stood two guards before a door, and an old woman who deposited something on the floor and scuttled away, screaming. The guards threw down their pikes and would have also left in haste, but he seized one of them in his arms and made him unfasten the padlocks. As soon as he was set down, the man ran away as fast as he could, and King Garth opened the door, so that the light from the passage fell full into the room. Before him stood a woman with averted face.

"Look at me," he commanded.

"I cannot," she said. "They are not the eyes you know."

He turned her face towards him. He said: "This is the true bride."

At the same moment, the thing on the floor screamed loudly, and Melusine ran towards it, taking it up into her arms.

At the same moment, the heart of wax within the bosom of the Princess cracked asunder with a tearing sound like sharp splinters of laughter. She seized the pieces and cast them from her. "So much for magic," she said. "The trumpery thing could not stand the slightest strain. But after all he is still my husband."

And hastily consulting her pocket-mirror, she had the satisfaction of seeing that her golden curls, her rosy cheeks and china-blue eyes, released from the charm, had returned to her.

At the same moment, the Emperor, who had summoned the Captain of the Guard, instructed him that King Garth was rushing through the Palace in a berserker fury that might lead him at any moment to deeds of destruction. The Emperor himself had had to run from him, the Archbishop had been upset, the Prince was still prostrate. The Captain's orders were that at all costs he was to take King Garth prisoner.



A company of the guards marched to the inner room. But as they approached in that narrow, dark and winding passage, a force like a whirlwind came upon them, dealing strokes like lightning, crashing over their huddled bodies that fell shrieking beneath its headlong fury.

Then, except for their groans, there was silence in the passage, until they asked each other in hollow, ghastly, whispering voices what it was that had gone by, and some made no answer.

“It was the hand of God,” said one.

“It was the demon of destruction,” said another.

The Captain of the Guard decided to report to the Emperor that his company had been overcome by an army of trolls. This seemed a more possible and also more palatable explanation than that they had been overcome by a single man, even if he were a giant and mad with the rage of battle.

With Melusine wrapped to him in the folds of his leather cloak, King Garth fought his way to the drawbridge. But it had been raised on the first alarm, and their retreat was cut off. On the further bank of the moat stood a close company of horse. In the courtyard on either side there gathered reinforcements, but not too quickly, for each man was anxious not to arrive before the others. King Garth set Melusine down, and stood before her. From a pantry window, there sprang a black shadow with blazing eyes to their feet, and crouched there, spitting at the advancing men. At the same time, from the side of the moat, there glided to them a shining ribbon that raised its head and hissed. And down from the roofs of the Palace there came the sound of wings, and a voice croaked above their heads, and then at their feet.

“But why don’t the men come on?” cried a girlish voice from a balcony. “Oh, Mamma, don’t say we have missed all the fighting!”

The men came on. They made a rush, then fell back. Three of them lay dead. More were groaning.

Melusine had stooped to the Raven and was saying a verse to him:

“Coal-black Raven  
Perched at my side,  
Grow, grow, grow,  
That we all may ride.”

The men made a second rush from every side.

But a monstrous blackness confronted them. It took shape against the sky and had the form of mighty wings. They stood numbed with terror as they heard a croak that seemed to rend the night asunder. Then that dark enormity arose and soared slowly upwards, and they saw between its wings the King seated beside a woman who held something in her arms. A cat lay curled in her lap, a snake lifted its head from her shoulder and softly hissed. The monster sailed upwards till it was no more than a speck in the sky. The soldiers rubbed their eyes and stared at each other.

“Well, that’s that,” said the Emperor from his seat on the brightly lighted balcony.

“What a set!” said Pharamond to his mother. “I hope you will stick to our own in future.”

“I shall never again love anyone like him,” said Blanchelys, “so strong, so noble, so heroic. After all, he is——”

But the Empress firmly intervened: “My love, he was not worthy of you. Besides, you can never get him back. We must immediately arrange a divorce.”

“No,” wailed Blanchelys, “an annulment!” And she burst into tears.

The group on the balcony was already invisible to those on the back of the Raven. Mightier than his companions in his hour of greatness, the bird of darkness beat up against the night wind; the sweep of his vast wings shook the storm clouds, the thunder rolled below them and the lightning played beneath their feet. So he bore them from the world, which was now no more to them than an indistinguishable shadow. When they met the dawn, Melusine asked her lover:

“How did you break the enchantment?”

“What enchantment?”

“The spell that bound you to the Princess.”

“What Princess?”

She had not been so long among these mortals as to learn the delicacies and refinements of true love, and was glad to let the matter rest. A more cruel question tortured her.

“How did you know me when I have lost all my looks?”

He turned and looked at her. With the breaking of the charm, the night-darkness of her hair, the whiteness of her skin, the sea-green of her eyes had returned to her. But her lover had observed neither their loss nor their recovery; only that from her whole person there seemed to flow a tender radiance such as he had never yet known in her.

“But you have grown more beautiful than ever,” he said.

Then for the first time he noticed the baby, and asked if she had borne him a son. But she in surprise wondered what it should have to do with him. When he had told her, she perceived that she had been in the power of a stranger magic than her father’s.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *These Mortals* by Margaret Irwin]