

The little grey mouse

Description

I

THE HOUSEHOLD

There was a widowed man named Prudent who lived with his daughter. His wife had died shortly after the birth of this daughter, whose name was Rosalie.

Rosalie's father had a lot of money; he lived in a large house that belonged to him: the house was surrounded by a vast garden where Rosalie could go for walks as much as she wanted.

She was raised with tenderness and gentleness, but her father had accustomed her to unquestioning obedience. He forbade her to ask unnecessary questions and to insist on knowing what he did not want to tell her. He had managed, by dint of care and supervision, to almost uproot in her an unfortunately too common defect, curiosity.

Rosalie never left the park, which was surrounded by high walls. She never saw anyone but her father; there were no servants in the house; everything seemed to be taken care of; Rosalie always had what she needed, either in clothes, books, works or toys. Her father brought her up himself, and Rosalie, although she was nearly fifteen years old, was not bored, nor did she think that she could live in any other way and surrounded by people.

At the end of the park there was a small house with no windows and only one door, always closed. Rosalie's father entered it every day, and always carried the key with him; Rosalie thought it was a shed for storing garden tools; she had never thought to mention it. One day when she was looking for a watering can for her flowers, she said to her father:

« Father, please give me the key to the garden house.

– What do you want with the key, Rosalie?

– I need a watering can; I think I'll find one in that little house.

– No, Rosalie, there's no watering can in there. »

Prudent's voice was so altered as he spoke these words, that Rosalie looked at him and saw with surprise that he was pale and that sweat was flooding his forehead.

What's the matter, Father? » said Rosalie in fright.

– Nothing, my daughter, nothing.

– It is the request for this key that has upset you, Father; what is there in this house that is causing you such a fright?

– Rosalie, you don't know what you are saying; go and get your watering can from the greenhouse.

– But, Father, what is there in this house?

– Nothing that would interest you, Rosalie.

– But why do you go there every day without ever allowing me to accompany you?

– Rosalie, you know that I don't like questions, and that curiosity is a bad habit. »

Rosalie said no more, but she remained pensive. This little house, which she had never thought of, was running through her mind.

What could be in there? » she said to herself. But why does he go there every day? It must be to bring food to the ferocious beast that is locked up there... But if there was a ferocious beast, I would hear it roar or stir in its prison; you never hear any noise in that cabin, so it is not a beast! Besides, it would devour my father when he goes there... unless it is tied up... But if it is tied up, there is no danger for me either. But my father is a good man; he wouldn't want to deprive an unfortunate innocent of air and freedom... I'll have to find out about this mystery... How can I do that?... If I could take this key away from my father, only for half an hour! Perhaps he will forget it one day... »

She was roused from her reflections by her father, who called to her in an altered voice.

« Here I am, Father; I'm coming home. »

She returned indeed and examined her father, whose pale and defeated face indicated a lively agitation. More intrigued still, she resolved to feign gaiety and insouciance in order to give her father security, and thus succeed in getting hold of the key, which he might not always think of if Rosalie seemed not to think of it herself.

They sat down to table; Prudent ate little, and was silent and sad, in spite of his efforts to appear cheerful. Rosalie showed such a cheerfulness, such a carefree attitude, that her father finally regained his usual tranquility.

Rosalie was to turn fifteen in three weeks; her father had promised her a pleasant surprise for her

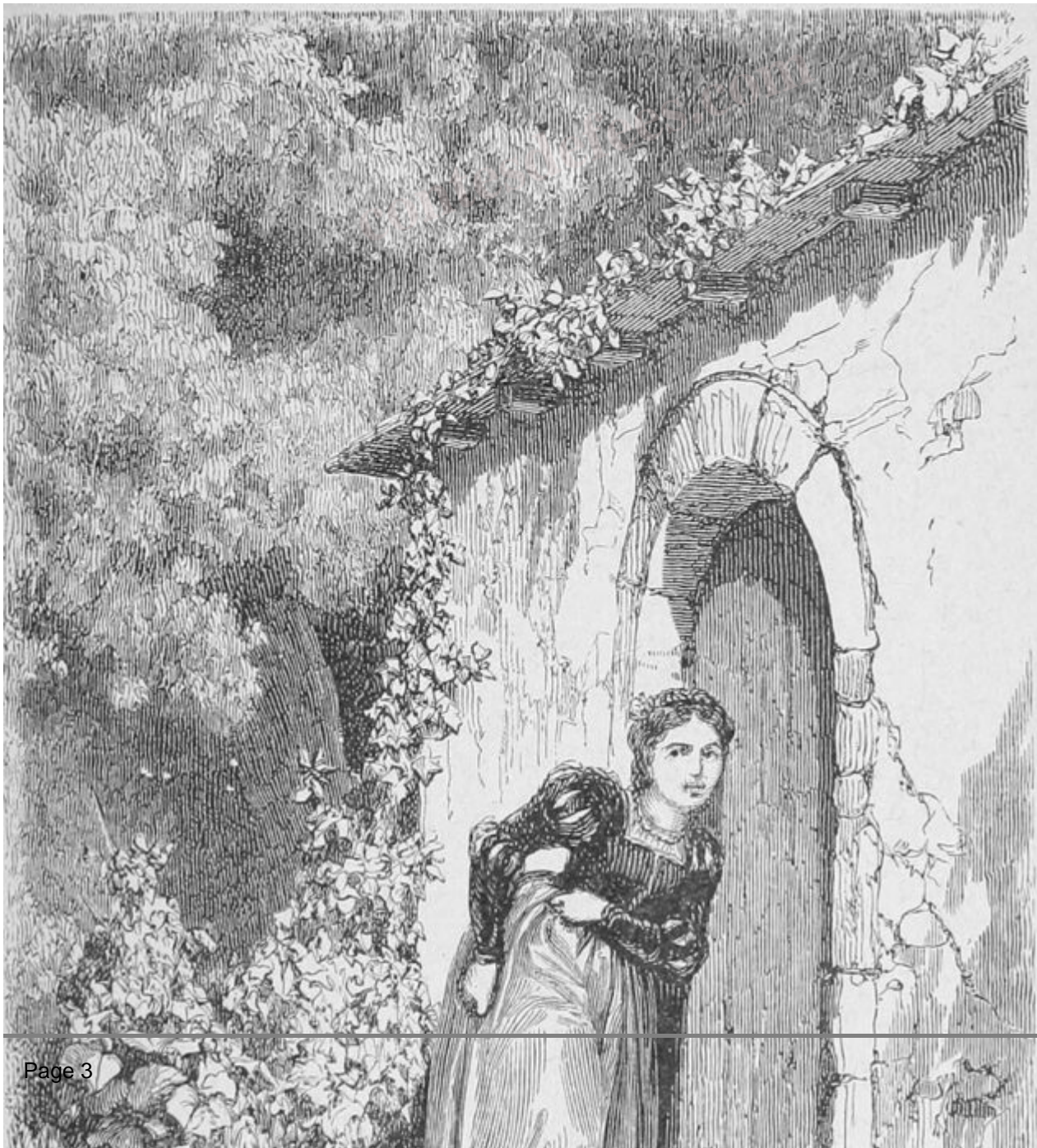
birthday. A few days passed; there were only fifteen more to wait.

One morning Prudent said to Rosalie:

« My dear child, I am obliged to be away for an hour. It is for your fifteenth birthday that I must go out. Wait for me in the house, and, believe me, my Rosalie, do not let yourself be curious. In a fortnight you will know what you so desire to know, for I can read your mind; I know what occupies you. Farewell, my daughter, beware of curiosity. »

Prudent kissed his daughter tenderly and walked away as if he were reluctant to leave her. When he had gone, Rosalie ran to her father's room, and what joy she felt when she saw the key left on the table! She grabbed it and ran quickly to the end of the park; when she reached the cottage, she remembered her father's words:

Beware of curiosity; she hesitated and was about to put the key back without having looked into the cottage, when she heard a faint moan come out; she stuck her ear against the door and heard a very small voice singing softly:



I am a prisoner,
And alone on the earth.
Soon I must die,
From here never to leave.

« No more doubt, » she said to herself; « It's an unfortunate creature that my father keeps locked up. »

And knocking softly at the door, she said:

« Who are you, and what can I do for you?

– Open to me, Rosalie; please open to me.

– But why are you a prisoner? Have you not committed some crime?

– Alas, no, Rosalie; it is an enchanter who keeps me here. Save me, and I will show you my gratitude by telling you what I am. »

Rosalie hesitated no longer; her curiosity prevailed over her obedience; she put the key in the lock, but her hand trembled and she could not open; she was about to give it up, when the little voice continued:

« Rosalie, what I have to tell you will instruct you in many things that interest you; your father is not what he seems to be. »

At these words, Rosalie made a last effort; the key turned and the door opened.

II

THE HATEFUL FAIRY

Rosalie looked eagerly; the cottage was dark; she could see nothing; she heard the little voice saying:

« Thank you, Rosalie, it is to you that I owe my deliverance. »

The voice seemed to come from the ground; she looked, and saw in a corner two bright little eyes looking at her with malice.

« My ruse has succeeded, Rosalie, to make you yield to your curiosity. If I had not sung and spoken, you would have turned away and I was lost. Now that you have delivered me, you and your father are in my power. »

Rosalie, without yet fully understanding the extent of the misfortune she had caused by her disobedience, nevertheless guessed that it was a dangerous enemy that her father was holding captive, and she wanted to withdraw and close the door.

« Halt there, Rosalie, it is no longer in your power to keep me in this odious prison, from which I would never have left if you had waited until you were fifteen. »

At the same moment the cottage disappeared; the key alone remained in the hands of Rosalie, dismayed. Then she saw a little gray Mouse looking at her with his little sparkling eyes and laughing in

a small discordant voice.

« Hi! hi! hi! what a frightened look you have, Rosalie! In truth, you amuse me immensely. How nice you are to have been so curious! I've been locked up in this awful prison for nearly fifteen years, unable to harm your father, whom I hate, and you, whom I hate because you are his daughter.

– And who are you, wicked Mouse?

– I am the enemy of your family, my dear! My name is the Hateful Fairy, and I live up to my name, I assure you; everyone hates me and I hate everyone. I'll follow you anywhere, Rosalie.

– Leave me alone, you wretch! A Mouse is not much to fear, and I'll find a way to get rid of you.

– We shall see, my dear; I'll follow you wherever you go. »

Rosalie ran towards the house; every time she turned around, she saw the Mouse galloping after her, laughing mockingly. When she reached the house, she tried to smash the Mouse into the door, but the door remained open despite Rosalie's efforts, while the Mouse remained on the threshold.

« Rosalie cried out in anger and fright. She grabbed a broom and was about to strike the Mouse with it, when the broom flared up and burned her hands; she quickly threw it to the ground and pushed it down the chimney with her foot so that the floor wouldn't catch fire. Then, seizing a cauldron which was boiling in the fire, she threw it on the Mouse; but the boiling water had become good fresh milk; the Mouse began to drink, saying:

« How kind you are, Rosalie! Not content with having delivered me, you are giving me an excellent breakfast! »

Poor Rosalie began to weep bitterly; she did not know what to become, when she heard her father returning.

My father! » she said, « my father! Oh, Mouse, for pity's sake, go away! Don't let my father see you!

– I will not go away, but I am willing to hide behind your heels, until your father learns of your disobedience. »

No sooner was the Mouse huddled behind Rosalie, than Prudent entered; he looked at Rosalie, whose embarrassed look and pallor betrayed fright.

Rosalie, » said Prudent in a trembling voice, « I have forgotten the key of the cottage; have you found it?

– Here it is, Father, » said Rosalie, presenting it to him and turning very red.

– What is this spilt cream?

– Father, it's the cat.

– What do you mean, the cat? The cat brought a pot of milk to the middle of the room to spill?

– No, Father, it was I who, in carrying it, spilled it. »

Rosalie spoke very low and did not dare to look at her father.

« Take the broom, Rosalie, to remove this cream.

– There's no more broom, Father.

– No more broom! There was one when I went out.

– I burned it, father, by mistake, in—in—in— »

She stopped. Her father stared at her, glanced uneasily around the room, sighed, and walked slowly toward the cottage in the park.

Rosalie fell into a chair, sobbing; the Mouse did not move. A few moments later, Prudent returned hurriedly, his face shaken with fright.

« Rosalie, unhappy child, what have you done? You have yielded to your fatal curiosity, and you have delivered our cruelest enemy.

– Father, forgive me, forgive me, » cried Rosalie, throwing herself at his feet, « I did not know the evil I was doing.

– That's what always happens when you disobey, Rosalie: you think you're doing a little harm, and you do a lot of harm to yourself and to others.

– But, Father, what is this Mouse that is causing you such great fear? How, if it has so much power, did you keep it prisoner, and why can't you lock it up again?

– This Mouse, my daughter, is a wicked and powerful fairy; I myself am the Prudent genie, and since you have delivered my enemy, I can reveal to you what I had to hide from you until I was fifteen years old.

« Your mother was a mere mortal, but her virtues and beauty touched the queen of the fairies as well as the king of the genies, and they allowed me to marry her.

« I gave great celebrations for my wedding; unfortunately I forgot to call the fairy Hateful, who, already irritated to see me marry a princess, after my refusal to marry one of her daughters, swore an implacable hatred to me, my wife and my children.

« I was not frightened by his threats, because I myself had a power almost equal to his, and I was much loved by the queen of the fairies. Several times I prevented by my enchantments the effect of the hatred of Detestable.

But, a few hours after your birth, your mother felt very strong pains, which I could not calm; I left for a moment to invoke the help of the queen of the fairies.

When I returned, your mother did not exist any more: the malicious fairy had taken advantage of my absence to make her die, and she was going to endow you with all the vices and all the possible evils;

fortunately my return paralyzed her malice.

I stopped her at the moment when she had just endowed you with a curiosity which was to make your misfortune and put you at fifteen years under her entire dependence.

By my power united to that of the queen of the fairies, I counterbalanced this fatal influence, and we decided that you would not fall at fifteen years in her power unless you succumbed three times to your curiosity in serious circumstances.

At the same time, the queen of the fairies, in order to punish Hateful, changed her into a mouse, locked her up in the little house that you saw, and declared that she could not come out of it, Rosalie, unless you voluntarily opened the door for her; that she could only resume her first fairy form if you succumbed three times to your curiosity before the age of fifteen; finally, that if you resisted at least once to this fatal inclination, you would be forever freed, as well as me, from the power of Detestable.

I obtained all these favors only with great difficulty, Rosalie, and with the promise that I would share your fate and that I would become, like you, the slave of Hateful if you gave in to your curiosity three times.

I promised myself to bring you up in such a way as to destroy in you this fatal defect, which could cause so much misfortune.

« That is why I locked you up in this enclosure; that I never allowed you to see any of your fellow men, not even servants.

In three weeks you were to be fifteen years old, and find yourself forever freed from the odious yoke of Detestable, when you asked me for this key which you seemed never to have thought of.

I could not hide from you the painful impression that this request made on me; my confusion excited your curiosity; in spite of your gaiety, your false insouciance, I penetrated in your thought, and judge of my pain when the queen of the fairies ordered me to make temptation possible and resistance meritorious, by leaving my key within your reach at least once!

I had to leave it, this fatal key, and facilitate, by my absence, the means to succumb; imagine, Rosalie, what I suffered during the hour that I had to leave you alone, and when I saw on my return your embarrassment and your blush, which only indicated to me too much that you had not had the courage to resist. I had to hide everything from you and not tell you about your birth and the dangers you had run on the day you turned fifteen, on pain of seeing you fall into the power of Detestable.

« And now, Rosalie, all is not lost; you can still redeem your fault by resisting for a fortnight your fatal inclination. You were to be united at fifteen years of age with a charming prince of our parents, Prince Gracieux; this union is still possible.

« Ah, Rosalie, my dear child; for pity's sake, if not for my sake, have courage and resist. »

Rosalie had remained at her father's knees, with her face hidden in her hands and weeping bitterly; at these last words she regained some courage, and, embracing him tenderly, said:

« Yes, father, I swear to you, I will make reparation for my fault; do not leave me, father, and I will seek

from you the courage which I might lack if I were deprived of your wise and paternal supervision.

– Ah, Rosalie, it is no longer in my power to stay with you; I am under the power of my enemy; she will probably not allow me to stay to protect you against the traps that her wickedness will set for you. I am surprised that I have not yet seen her, for the spectacle of my affliction must be sweet to her.

– I was near you at the feet of your daughter, said the Grey Mouse in his sour little voice, showing himself to the unfortunate genius. I was amused by the story of what I have already made you suffer, and that is why I did not show myself earlier. Say farewell to your dear Rosalie; I am taking her with me, and I forbid you to follow her. »

As she said these words, she seized, with her sharp little teeth, the bottom of Rosalie's dress, to drag her after her.

Rosalie uttered piercing cries while clinging to her father; an irresistible force dragged her along. The unfortunate genie seized a stick and raised it at the Mouse; but, before he had time to lower it, the Mouse put his little paw on the foot of the genie, who remained immobile and statue-like.

Rosalie held her father's knees in her arms and cried out for mercy to the Mouse; but the Mouse, laughing with his high-pitched, diabolical laughter, said to her:

« Come, come, my dear, it is not here that you would find enough to succumb twice more to your kind defect; we are going to run the world together, and I will show you the country in a fortnight. »

The Mouse was still pulling Rosalie, whose arms, entwined around her father, resisted the extraordinary strength her enemy was employing.

Then the Mouse gave a little discordant cry, and suddenly the whole house was in flames.

Rosalie had enough presence of mind to reflect that by allowing herself to be burned she was losing all means of saving her father, who would remain eternally under the power of Détestable, while by preserving her own life, she also preserved the chances of saving him.

« Farewell, father! » she cried; « see you in a fortnight! Your Rosalie will save you after she has lost you. »

And she escaped to avoid being devoured by the flames.

She ran for some time, not knowing where she was going; she walked thus for several hours; at last, overwhelmed with fatigue, half dead with hunger, she ventured to approach a good woman who was sitting at her door.



« Madam, » she said, « please give me shelter; I am dying of hunger and fatigue; allow me to enter and spend the night with you.

– How does such a beautiful girl find herself on the highways, and what is this beast that accompanies you and has the look of a little demon? »

Rosalie, turning around, saw the Gray Mouse looking at her mockingly.

She wanted to chase it away, but the Mouse stubbornly refused to leave. The good woman, seeing this struggle, shook her head and said:

« Go on your way, beautiful: I do not lodge in my house the devil and his protégés. »

Rosalie continued on her way, crying, and wherever she presented herself, they refused to receive her and her Mouse, which did not leave her. She entered a forest where she fortunately found a stream to quench her thirst, and plenty of fruit and nuts; she drank, ate, and sat down by a tree, thinking anxiously about her father and what would become of her for a fortnight. While thinking, Rosalie, in order not to see the cursed Grey Mouse, closed her eyes; tiredness and darkness brought sleep: she fell deeply asleep.

III

THE GRACEFUL PRINCE

While Rosalie was sleeping, Prince Gracieux was hunting in the forest with torches; the deer, quickly pursued by the dogs, came to huddle frightened near the bush where Rosalie was sleeping. The pack and the hunters rushed after the deer; but all of a sudden the dogs stopped barking and gathered silently around Rosalie.

The prince dismounted to put the dogs back on the hunt. He was surprised to see a beautiful young girl sleeping peacefully in the forest. He looked around and saw no one; she was alone, abandoned.

On closer inspection, he saw the trace of tears that she had shed and that still escaped from her closed eyes. Rosalie was dressed simply, but in a silk cloth that denoted more than ease; her pretty white hands, her pink nails, her beautiful chestnut hair, carefully pulled back by a golden comb, her elegant shoes, a necklace of fine pearls, indicated a high rank.

She did not wake up, in spite of the trampling of the horses, the barking of the dogs, the tumult of a numerous gathering of men. The prince, stunned, did not tire of looking at Rosalie; none of the people of the court knew her. Worried about this obstinate sleep, Gracieux took her hand gently: Rosalie was still asleep; the prince shook this hand lightly, but without being able to awaken her.

I cannot, » he said to his officers, « abandon this unfortunate child in this way, who may have been led astray on purpose, the victim of some heinous wickedness. But how can I take her away asleep?

– Prince, » said to him Hubert, « could we not make a stretcher of branches and carry her in this way to some nearby inn, while your Highness continues the hunt?

– Your idea is good, Hubert; have a stretcher made on which we will place her; but it is not to a hostelry that you will carry her, but to my own palace. This young person must be of high birth, she is beautiful as an angel; I want to see myself that she receives the care to which she is entitled. »



Hubert and the officers soon had arranged a stretcher on which the prince spread his own cloak; then, approaching Rosalie still asleep, he gently took her in his arms and laid her on the cloak. At this moment Rosalie seemed to be dreaming; she smiled, and murmured half aloud:

« My father, my father!... saved, forever!... the queen of the fairies,... Prince Gracieux... I see him... how beautiful he is! »

The prince, surprised to hear his name pronounced, no longer doubted that Rosalie was a princess under the yoke of some enchantment. He made the bearers of the stretcher walk very gently, so that the movement would not awaken Rosalie; he stood by her side all the time.

They arrived at the palace of Gracieux; he gave orders for the apartment of the queen to be prepared, and, not wanting to suffer anyone to touch Rosalie, he carried her himself to her room, where he laid her on a bed, recommending to the women who were to serve her to inform him as soon as she was awake.

Rosalie slept until the next day; it was broad daylight when she awoke; she looked around her with surprise: the wicked Mouse was not near her; he had disappeared.

Am I free from this wicked fairy? » said Rosalie with joy; « am I with some fairy more powerful than her?

She went to the window; she saw men-at-arms, officers adorned in brilliant uniforms. More and more surprised, she was about to call one of these men whom she believed to be so many geniuses and enchanters, when she heard walking; she turned around and saw prince Gracieux, who, dressed in an elegant and rich hunting costume, was before her, looking at her with admiration. Rosalie immediately recognized the prince from her dream, and involuntarily exclaimed:

« Prince Gracious! »

– Do you know me, Madame? » said the astonished prince. How, if you have recognized me, could I have forgotten your name and your features?

– I have only seen you in a dream, prince, » answered Rosalie, blushing; « as for my name, you cannot know it, since I myself have only known my father's name since yesterday.

– And what is it, Madame, this name that has been hidden from you for so long? »

Rosalie then told him all that she had learned of her father; she confessed to him naively her guilty curiosity and the fatal consequences that had followed.

« Judge my pain, Prince, when I had to leave my father to escape the flames that the wicked fairy had kindled, when, repelled from everywhere because of the Grey Mouse, I found myself exposed to die of cold and hunger! But, soon, a heavy, dreamy sleep took hold of me; I don't know how I am here, and whether it is your house that I am in. »

Gracious told her how he had found her asleep in the forest, the words of her dream that he had heard, and he added:

« What your father has not told you, Rosalie, is that the queen of the fairies, our relative, had decided that you would be my wife when you were fifteen years old; it was she, no doubt, who inspired me to go hunting with torches, so that I could find you in this forest where you were lost.

Since you will be fifteen years old in a few days, Rosalie, deign to consider my palace as your own; please command it as a queen. Soon your father will be returned to you, and we can go and have our wedding celebrated. »

Rosalie thanked her young and handsome cousin warmly; she passed into her toilet room, where she found women waiting for her with a great choice of dresses and headdresses.

Rosalie, who had never bothered with her own toilette, put on the first dress they presented her, which was of pink gauze trimmed with lace, and a lace headdress with mossy roses; her beautiful chestnut hair was pulled up in a braid forming a crown. When she was ready, the prince came to take her to lunch.

Rosalie ate as one who had not dined the night before; after the meal, the prince led her into the garden; he showed her the greenhouses, which were magnificent; at the end of one of the greenhouses was a small rotunda furnished with selected flowers; in the middle was a box which seemed to contain a tree, but a sewn cloth enveloped it entirely; one could only see, through the cloth, a few dots glittering with extraordinary brilliance.

IV

THE TREE IN THE ROTUNDA

Rosalie admired all the flowers very much; she thought that the prince was going to lift or tear the canvas of this mysterious tree, but he was ready to leave the greenhouse without having spoken to Rosalie.

What is this tree so well wrapped, Prince? » asked Rosalie.

– This is my wedding present to you; but you must not see it until you are fifteen, » said the prince cheerfully.

– But what is so brilliant under the cloth? insisted Rosalie.

– You will know in a few days, Rosalie, and I flatter myself that my present will not be an ordinary present.

– And can't I see it first?

– No, Rosalie; the queen of the fairies has forbidden me to show it to you before you are my wife, under pain of great misfortune. I dare to hope that you will love me enough to contain your curiosity for a few days. »

These last words made Rosalie tremble, reminding her of the Grey Mouse and the misfortunes that threatened her and her father if she gave in to the temptation that was undoubtedly sent to her by her enemy, the hateful fairy.

She therefore spoke no more of this mysterious web, and continued her walk with the prince; the whole day passed pleasantly.

The prince introduced her to the ladies of his court, and told them all that they had to respect in the princess Rosalie the wife that the queen of the fairies had chosen for her.

Rosalie was very kind to everyone, and everyone rejoiced at the idea of having such a lovely queen.

The next day and the days that followed were spent in festivities, in hunting, in walks; the prince and Rosalie saw with happiness the day of Rosalie's birth approaching, which was also to be the day of their marriage; the prince, because he loved his cousin tenderly, and Rosalie, because she loved the prince, because she longed to see her father again, and also because she ardently wished to see what was in the box in the rotunda.

She thought about it constantly; at night she dreamed about it, and, in the moments when she was alone, she had extreme difficulty in not going into the greenhouses, to try to discover the mystery. Finally came the last day of waiting: the next day Rosalie was to be fifteen years old.

The prince was very busy with the preparations for his wedding, which was to be attended by all the good fairies of his acquaintance and the fairy queen.

Rosalie found herself alone in the morning; she went for a walk, and, while reflecting on the happiness of the next day, she went mechanically towards the rotunda; she entered pensively and smiling, and found herself in front of the canvas which covered the treasure.

« If I wanted to, I could find out today, because I can see some small openings in which I could easily insert my fingers... and by pulling a little on it... By the way, who would know? I would bring the canvas closer after looking at it a little... Since it is to be mine tomorrow, I may well take a look at it today. »

She looked around, saw no one, and, entirely forgetting, in her extreme desire to satisfy her curiosity, the prince's kindness and the dangers that threatened them if she gave in to temptation, she passed her fingers through one of the openings, pulled lightly: the cloth tore from top to bottom with a noise like thunder, and offered to Rosalie's astonished eyes a tree whose stem was made of coral and whose leaves were made of emeralds; the fruits which covered the tree were precious stones of all colors, diamonds, pearls, rubies, sapphires, opals, topazes, etc. , as big as the fruit they represented, and of such brilliance that Rosalie was dazzled.

But no sooner had she contemplated this unparalleled tree, than a noise louder than the first one drew her out of her ecstasy: she felt herself being taken away and transported to a plain, from which she saw the prince's palace collapsing; frightful cries were coming out of the ruins of the palace, and soon Rosalie saw the prince himself coming out of the rubble, bloody, covered in rags. He came towards her and said sadly:

« Rosalie, ungrateful Rosalie, see to what state you have reduced me and all my court. After what you have just done, I have no doubt that you will give in to your curiosity for a third time, that you will consume my misfortune, that of your father and yours. Farewell, Rosalie, farewell! May repentance atone for your ingratitude to an unfortunate prince who loved you and wanted only your happiness! »

As he said these words, he walked slowly away. Rosalie had thrown herself on her knees; flooded with tears, she called out to him, but he disappeared from her sight, without even turning around to contemplate her despair. She was ready to faint, when she heard the little discordant laugh of the Grey Mouse, who was in front of her.

« Thank me then, Rosalie, for helping you so well. It was I who sent you those beautiful dreams of the mysterious web at night; it was I who gnawed the web to make it easier for you to look at it; without this last trick, I think you were lost to me, as well as your father and your Gracious Prince. But one more little peccadillo, my dear, and you will be mine forever. »

And the Mouse, in his infernal joy, began to dance around Rosalie; these words, wicked as they were, did not excite Rosalie's anger.

It is my fault, » she said to herself; « without my fatal curiosity, without my guilty ingratitude, the Grey Mouse would not have succeeded in making me commit such an unworthy action.

I must atone for it by my pain, by my patience, and by the firm will to resist the third trial, however difficult it may be.

Besides, I have but a few hours to wait, and on me depend, as my dear prince said, his happiness, my father's, and mine. »

Rosalie therefore did not move; the Grey Mouse had used all possible means to make her walk, but Rosalie persisted in remaining in front of the ruins of the palace.

V

THE CASSETTE

The whole day passed thus; Rosalie suffered cruelly from thirst.

« Must I not suffer much more, she said to herself, to punish myself for what I made my father and my cousin suffer? I will wait here until I am fifteen.

Night was beginning to fall, when an old woman passing by approached her and said:

« My beautiful child, would you do me the favor of keeping this cassette for me, which is very heavy to carry, while I go near here to see a relative?

– 'Gladly, Madam,' said Rosalie, who was very complaisant.



The old woman handed her the tape and said:

« Thank you, beautiful child; I won't be gone long. Don't look at what's on this tape, because it contains things..., things like you've never seen... and like you'll never see again.

Don't put it down too hard, for it's made of brittle bark, and a rough bump might break it... And then you'll see what's inside... And no one must see what's inside. »

She left with these words. Rosalie laid the cassette gently beside her, and reflected on all the events that had taken place. The night came; the old woman did not return. Rosalie looked at the cassette, and saw with surprise that it lit up the earth around her.

What, » she said, « is shining in this cassette?

She turned it over, looked at it on all sides, but nothing could explain this extraordinary glow; she put it down again, and said:

She put it down again and said: « What do I care what is in this cassette? It does not belong to me, but to the old woman who gave it to me. I don't want to think about it anymore, lest I be tempted to open it. »

Indeed, she did not look at it anymore and tried not to think about it; she closed her eyes, resolved to wait for the return of the day.

« Then I shall be fifteen years old, I shall see my father and Gracieux again, and I shall have nothing more to fear from the wicked fairy.

– Rosalie, Rosalie, » said the little voice of the Mouse hastily, « here I am near you; I am no longer your enemy, and to prove it to you, I will, if you like, show you what the cassette contains. »

Rosalie did not answer.

« Rosalie, don't you hear what I am proposing? I am your friend, believe me, please. »

No answer.

Then the Grey Mouse, who had no time to lose, rushed to the cassette and set about gnawing the lid.

Monster, » cried Rosalie, grabbing the cassette and clutching it to her chest, « if you have the misfortune to touch this cassette, I will wring your neck right now!

The Mouse shot Rosalie a devilish glance, but she did not dare to brave her wrath.

While she was devising a way to arouse Rosalie's curiosity, a clock struck midnight. At the same moment, the Mouse gave a mournful cry and said to Rosalie:

« Rosalie, the hour of your birth has struck; you are fifteen years old; you have nothing more to fear from me; you are now beyond my reach, as are your odious father and your dreadful prince. And I am condemned to keep my ignoble form of mouse, until I succeed in making fall in my traps a beautiful

and well born girl like you. Farewell, Rosalie; you may now open your cassette. »

And, as he finished these words, the Gray Mouse disappeared.

Rosalie, distrusting the words of her enemy, did not want to follow his last advice, and resolved to keep the cassette intact until the day.

No sooner had she made this resolution than an owl flying over Rosalie dropped a stone on the cassette, which shattered into a thousand pieces.

Rosalie gave a cry of terror; at the same moment she saw the queen of the fairies before her, who said:

« Come, Rosalie; you have at last triumphed over the cruel enemy of your family; I will return you to your father; but first, drink and eat. »

And the fairy presented her with a piece of fruit, one bite of which satisfied and quenched Rosalie's thirst. Immediately, a chariot with two dragons was near the fairy, who got on it and made Rosalie get on.

Rosalie, having recovered from her surprise, thanked the fairy for her protection and asked her if she was going to see her father and Prince Gracieux again.

« Your father is waiting for you in the prince's palace.

– But, Madame, I thought the prince's palace was destroyed, and that he himself was wounded and reduced to misery.

– It was only an illusion to give you more horror of your curiosity, Rosalie, and to prevent you from succumbing to it a third time. You will find the prince's palace as it was before you tore the cloth that covered the precious tree he intended for you. »

As the fairy finished these words, the chariot stopped near the palace steps. Rosalie's father and the prince were waiting for it with the whole court. Rosalie threw herself into the arms of her father and the prince, who did not seem to remember his mistake of the day before.

Everything was ready for the wedding ceremony, which was celebrated immediately; all the fairies attended the celebrations, which lasted several days.

Rosalie's father lived close to his children. Rosalie was forever cured of her curiosity; she was tenderly loved by Prince Gracieux, whom she loved all her life; they had beautiful children, and they gave them powerful fairies as godmothers, in order to protect them from evil fairies and evil genies.

Illustrations by Gustave Doré and Jules Didier

date créée

01/02/2023

Auteur

cdf