

# RALPH

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# Fairy Tales IN THE HIGH PLACE

THE HIGH PLACE is a *reductio ad absurdum*: the usual fairy story, pursued beyond its conventional ending. The young prince wins and marries the beautiful princess, and they live unhappily ever after – a particular illustration of Cabell's general idea that dreams are best kept at a distance. The central theme is reinforced by the appearance of other men who attained their youthful visions and bitterly regretted it, such as Philippe d'Orléans, Demetrios the son of Miramon Lluagor, and Florian's own ancestor that ambiguous gray champion Manuel. The general fairy-tale case is mentioned twice, once by the Duke of Orleans –

"There was once," the lady began, "a king and a queen. . ."

"I know the tale," Orléans said, . . . "they had three sons. And the two elder failed in preposterous quests, but the third prince succeeded in everything, and he was damnably bored by everything. I know the tale only too well. . ." (Kalki ed., p. 136)

and once by Florian himself:

And Florian nodded. "I take your meaning. There was once a king and a queen. They had three sons. And the third prince succeeded in everything. . . Your face and your lives are strange to me. But it is plain that all four of us have ventured into the high place, that

dreadful place wherein a man attains to his desires." (pp. 161-162)

You would expect to find THE HIGH PLACE full of influences from fairy tales. And so it is – but not from the fairy tales that might be expected.

In the first chapter, Florian falls asleep with his head pillowed on "this curious new book, by old Monsieur Perrault of the Academy," (p. 4) and after awakening (or dreaming he has awakened), hears his father say:

". . . I am sure that you have dreamed all this, jumbling together in your dreaming old Monsieur Perrault's fine story of the sleeping princess – La Belle au Bois Dormant, – with our far older legends of Poictesme. . ." (pp. 13-14)

Yet the larger dream, the dream which is THE HIGH PLACE except for the last chapter, is not that kind of jumble at all. Though it contains plenty of material from the "older legends of Poictesme" – i.e. from Ralston and Baring-Gould – it owes virtually nothing to Perrault's *Histoires ou Contes des Tem. Passé, avec des Moralité*, published by Claude Barbin at Paris in 1697. Even the sleeping-beauty tale, as presented by Cabell, takes no more than its basic idea from Perrault's version.

As Perrault has it, a malevolent fairy condemns the princess to die, and a



benevolent fairy commutes the sentence to a century's sleep. The good fairy decides to put the princess's family and the staff of their castle to sleep, to make waking up after 100 years less unpleasant for her, and also places a magic tropical rain-forest around the sleepers – to prevent local entrepreneurs from charging admission and leading hordes of commoners through the castle to stare. When the prince arrives, the forest parts for him; and as soon as he comes within sight of the sleeping princess, she awakes. The awakening-kiss motif is absent. In Cabell's version, the water-fay Mélusine casts an enchantment over her immediate family and their castle, such that they sleep forever, or in Florian's dream about five centuries. The family happens to include a supernaturally lovely girl, a younger princess of Albania – named Melior, the Better Princess, probably because Optima would not match so well with the sister's name, Mélusine. The forest was already present, and merely grows thicker and wilder in the succeeding centuries. In order to keep out sightseers, Mélusine stations around the castle a number of improbable creatures out of medieval bestiaries. Florian exterminates these guardians, with diabolical aid, quite as easily as the predestined prince in the original tale penetrates the magic forest. He thus breaks the spell and awakens everyone before setting foot in the castle. Again, it is not a kiss that revives the sleeping beauty. Florian does eventually kiss his princess, however – “So”, as Cabell coyly remarks, “was the affair concluded.” (p. 79) He accepts Melior as a flesh-and-blood woman, and kills his dream of the unattainable princess, with that kiss, and the rest – never mind that Florian is Puyssange, is ardent, and so forth – the rest is anti-climax.

Perrault does pursue his Prince and Princess beyond their marriage, telling how their two children were almost eaten by the Prince's stepmother, an *Ogresse*. But this is merely a grafting of another story onto “The Sleeping Beauty”. The danger to Florian and Melior's child is entirely different, and nothing like it occurs anywhere in Perrault. (See below.)

Only a very few other things might have come from any of Perrault's stories. At his first sight of Melior awake, Florian is even more gloriously tongue-tied than the prince in “La Belle au Bois Dormant”:

He parted his lips once or twice, This was, he joyously reflected, quite ridiculous. A woman waited: and Florian de Puyssange could not speak. (p. 77)

Le prince charme de ces paroles, & plus encore de la maniere dont elles estoient dites, ne scavoit comment luy temoigner sa joye & sa reconnoissance; il l'assura qu'il l'aimoit plus que luy-mesme. Ses discours furent mal rangez, ils en plurent davantage, peu d'eloquence beaucoup d'amour. (Perrault's Popular Tales, ed. Andrew Lang, Oxford, 1888, p. 13. The tales are also available in a passable translation, *Perrault's Fairy Tales*, with 34 Doré illustrations, published as a Dover paperback in 1969)





The idea of the surpassingly beautiful but quite brainless princess occurs in "Riquet à la Houppe," but Cabell took nothing else from that tale – if indeed he needed to plunder Perrault for that comic-strip notion. The Collyn has a faint scent, despite a stronger smell of witchcraft, of the principal character of "Le Maistre Chat, ou le Chat Botte," alias Puss in Boots. Finally, the timeless jungle Florian passes through to get from Amneran to the hut of the singing goose is rather reminiscent of the magic paralyzed forest surrounding the Sleeping Beauty's castle. But none of these resemblances can be called striking.

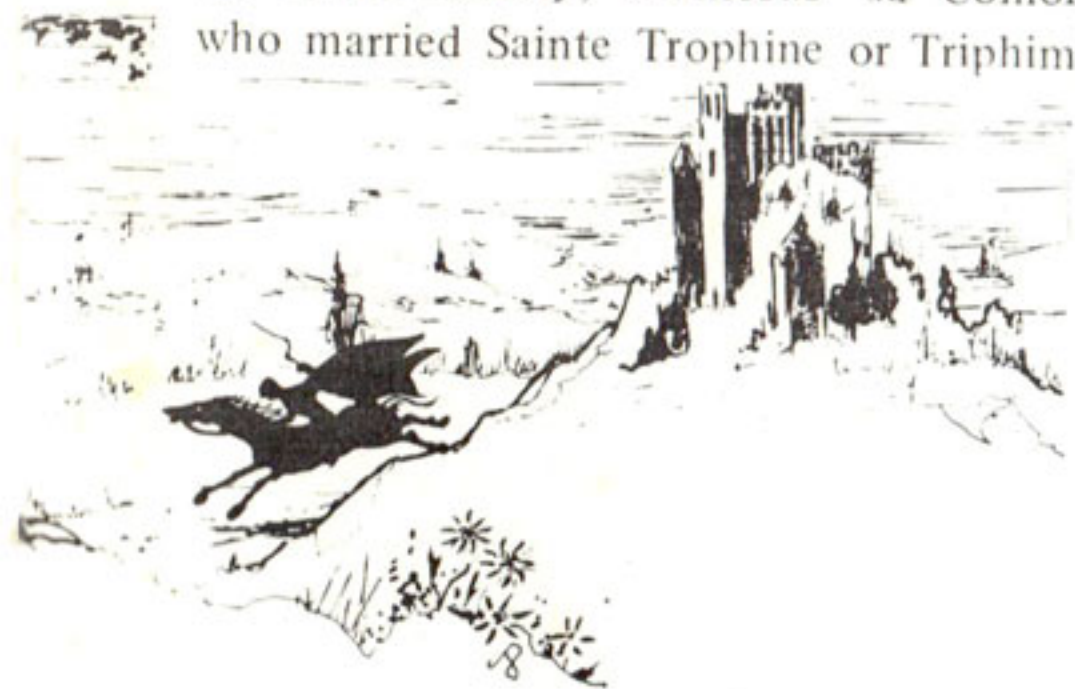
Of course Florian's peculiar system of serial monogamy reminds us of "La Barbe Bleue." But still nothing comes from Perrault except the general idea; Cabell's development of details must be referred to an older and different version of the Bluebeard story. Cabell himself identifies it in Florian's reflection on the specters of his previous wives:

Thus, then, began the unimaginative working of Hoprig's holy ring, with a revamping of the affliction put upon Komorre the Cursed in the old nursery tale, Florian decided. (p. 228)

According to Andrew Lang, Komorre was "a more or less mythical Breton prince of the sixth century, Cormorus or Comorre who married Sainte Trophine or Triphime,

and killed her. . . She was restored to life by Saint Gildas." (Perrault's Popular Tales, pp. 1x-1xi) It seems unlikely that the story of Komorre, as opposed to the more widespread Barbe-Bleue, was ever current in nurseries outside Brittany. The only version I have ever seen occurs, as "Komorre," in Edith Wingate Rinder's *The Shadow of Arvor: Legendry Romances and Folk-Tales of Brittany* (Edinburgh, ca. 1895), and runs thus - -

Komorre the count of Kerne asks for the hand of Triphyna, daughter of the king of Gwened. Because Komorre passes for the wickedest man since Cain, and has already gone through four wives who have all died suddenly, the king refuses. The armies of Kerne and of Gwened are about to settle the dispute in the usual way when Sant-Veltas (Gildas) persuades Triphyna to save all those lives by marrying Komorre after all. In case of danger, he gives her a silver ring which will turn from white to black if Komorre thinks about killing her. Triphyna marries the count, and her influence reforms him for several months, but she remains a bit scary, and prays every day for God to save her from a violent death. (Rather selfish, for an apprentice saint). Then Komorre is called to a gathering of Breton princes. He gives his wife all the keys to the castle, even to the empty dungeons, and goes. (This business of giving the keys to the wife has no function whatever in the story. We can only surmise that it has filtered in from one of the more conventional versions of the Bluebeard myth) Five months later Komorre returns, to find Triphyna sewing a cap for the baby she expects in about two months. Komorre starts acting the heavy again and the ring turns black. Triphyna, desperate but unable to escape, goes to her usual praying-spot, the





chapel of the tombs of Komorre's previous wives. At midnight, the wives emerge from their tombs in their winding-sheets, and warn her to flee.

. . . the phantoms cried :

"Beware, poor lost child, Komorre lies in wait to slay thee."

"To slay me," she exclaimed, "what have I done that he should desire my death?"

"In the space of two months thou wilt bear him a child, and it has been revealed to him that his first child shall take his life. Thus it is that, when he learned from us what he has learned from thee, he brought about the death of each one of us."

"Holy Mother of God!" cried Triphyna, sobbing; "if this be true, what hope is left to me?"

"Go seek thy father in the land of yellow corn," came from the phantoms.

"But what way of flight is there for me?" sobbed the young countess; "Komorre's savage dog guards the courtyard."

"Give him this poison which caused my death," said the first of the dead women.

"And how can I descend the high wall?"

"Use this cord which strangled me," replied the second apparition.

"I know not the way, and the night is dark."

"This torch which burned me will light your path," promised the third of the phantoms.

"How shall I compass so long a journey?"

"Take this staff which struck my brow," answered the last of the four spectres.

It occurs that way. In the morning, Komorre sets out in pursuit. Meanwhile Triphyna gets through the forest around the castle and crosses a moor. In a shepherd's hut, empty except for an old magpie in a cage, she spends the day – not sleeping, of course, but crying and praying – and leaves at dusk. Komorre sniffs around for two days without result, but when he finds the shepherd's hut he hears the magpie repeating his wife's self-pitying whine, "Poor Triphyna!" He puts his dog on the scent. Meanwhile again, Triphyna has reached the borders of Gwened; but she has to duck into a handy forest to have the baby a bit early. It's a boy, name of Sant-Trevor. A falcon of her father's lights on a tree, and she gives it her ring to carry as a message. Now here comes Komorre. She hides the kid in a hollow tree just in time. Komorre cuts her head off and gallops away whistling. The falcon brings back the king of Gwened with Sant-Veltas. The saint prays and tells Triphyna to arise. So she gets up with her head in one hand and takes the kid in the other and runs off toward Kerne, so fast the troops and her father can hardly keep up. Komorre prudently pulls up the drawbridge and takes the Fifth. Sant-Veltas sets the kid down, and Sant-Trevor walks to the moat, throws a handful of sand at the walls, and makes a pious remark. The whole castle falls down. Sant-Veltas replaces Triphyna's head and fixes her neck, and she spends the rest of her life oohing and aahing over her son's halo.

This is an accurate if not respectful summary. We can only hope that Cabell had



a better version than this atrocity in Victorian prose, but even from this certain parallels can be drawn.

Like Komorre, Florian is rather notably wicked, and has murdered four wives. Like Sant-Veltas, St. Hoprig advises the princess about her wedding and gives her a ring which turns black if danger is imminent. Of course Sant-Veltas is nobody's patron saint in particular. (We ought to note, however, that his intervention is nothing strange. Saints abound in all these Breton tales, always of the Celtic persuasion, many of them either Irish, or, like Gilas, Celtic refugees from the Saxon invasion of Britain.) Melior's ring is not silver, but gold, with three diamonds which turn black. (p. 87) Whereas Komorre wants to kill his wife before the baby can be born, Florian wants the baby as a "gift" to Janicot, and contemplates no harm to Melior — though to be sure he wishes to get rid of her. Komorre stays away five months and returns two months before the baby is due; but because of the strain of Triphyna's escape, it is born two days later. Florian stays away about four months and returns the day before the baby is due. Melior is not in the habit of praying, but she goes to the chapel where Florian's previous wives are entombed, to pray on this special occasion for St. Hoprig's help. The effigies on these civilized tombs come alive at midnight — a less crude device, perhaps, than bringing up the very corpses. Parts of Cabell's dialogue are close to Mrs. Wingate Rinder's:

"Beware, poor lovely child," said the likeness of Aurelie, "for it is apparent that Florian intends to murder you also."

"I was beginning to think he had some such notion," Melior replied . . .

"Yes, for, my dear," said Carola, "you have permitted him to get tired of you. It was for that oversight he murdered all of us."

"But I have no time to put up with the man's foolishness just now . . ."

"Go seek protection of St. Hoprig," advised Hortense.

"And how may she escape," asked Marianne, "when Florian's lackeys are everywhere, and Florian's great wolf-hounds guard the outer courts?"

"She can give them the sweet-scented poison which destroyed me," said Carola. "But all the gates of Bellegarde are locked fast; and how could anyone climb down the unscalable high walls of the outer fortress?..

"By means of the strong silken cord which strangled me," answered Marianne.

"But who would guide her through the dark to sorcerous Morven?"

"The molten lead which was poured into my ear," replied Aurelie, "will go before her glowing like a will-o'-the-wisp."

"And how can she, in her condition, make so long a journey?"

"Let her take the fine ebony cane which broke my skull," rejoined Hortense. (pp. 228-229)

Some of Cabell's changes, such as Florian's murderous intentions toward child and not wife, are necessitated by the plot. Others are in the interest of verisimilitude, such as the sprucing up of the dead wives' dialogue and the substitution of molten lead for a torch. A torch is an unlikely instrument of



murder – unless this wife suffered martyrdom in the manner of Edward II. Many small changes seem to result from moving the setting from Brittany in the early dark ages to southern France in the eighteenth century; the ring, the tomb-figures, the ebony cane in place of a simple staff. And Melior, though brainless and a blabbermouth, is not a mindless, will-less, pining pious nonentity like Triphyna. Her character alters the whole atmosphere of the ghost scene, along with a good deal of the wife's dialogue, and the finale. The upshot is that she ignores all the four ghosts' advice, and flies away on her sister Melusine's magic staff – of which she was reminded by Hortense's exhortation to take Florian's ebony cane to support her weary faltering steps on the way to Morven.

Like Komorre, Florian pursues his wife next morning. Unlike Komorre, Florian knows as soon as she flees; but he is not anxious to prevent the birth, so follows at his leisure. Crossing Amneran heath and penetrating a sort of jungle, he finds a hut empty except for a bird in a cage. The bird talks and, with no particular malice, reveals that Melior has been there and has had her baby. There are similar events in "Komorre," though there Triphyna went further before the baby arrived, and the bird in question could not talk. Of course if Komorre had heard that the baby was already on the scene, he

would have run back and shut himself into his castle. Anyhow, both stories more or less end with the saint who has taken the wife under his protection making everything more or less all right again.

The goose in the cage is a side issue. It is true that the 1697 edition of Perrault's *Histoires ou Contes des Temps Passe* had a frontispiece – showing an old woman spinning while telling tales to a man, a girl, a little boy, and a cat – labelled "Contes de Ma Mere L'Oye," and that collections of nursery rhymes and tales have since gone under the name of "Mother Goose." But the goose Florian meets is a character who turns up in many volumes of the Biography – for instance, Kerin of Nointel encounters it down a well. It is an old maid of the male sex, which squats in its cage and sings sonorous self-satisfied songs about the Ideal. I suspect this is Cabell's icon of the conventional stuporous poet laureate – like Tennyson, Wordsworth, Southey, Cibber, or their ultimate original, that stuffed shirt of the western world, Virgil. The goose is a fairly obvious image for that sort of thing; but it makes me wonder if Cabell had read *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, where Pound sardonically remarks of those who would follow the imperialistic example of Virgil and Co., "One must have resonance, resonance and sonority.....like a goose." (XII, 54) — G.N. Gabbard

## Source Notes

### THE BLUE BIRD

The following item might be worth inserting in James P. Cover's *Notes on Jorgen*. The incident is recorded on page 46. Jorgen wishes to get a used, second hand Wednesday from Mother Sereda. "First, though," says Mother Sereda, "here is the blue bird. Would you not rather have that, dearie, than

your Wednesday? Most people would." But Jorgen said that it was not the blue bird that he desired. Mother Sereda then took from the wall the wicker cage that contained the three white pigeons, etc.

Was Cabell following here the symbolism of Maurice Maeterlink whose Blue Bird symbolised happiness?

— Conway Zirkle