

Ourson Part VIII: The Conflagration

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French

Intermediate
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Ourson now forbade Violette to go alone in the forest. She was no longer allowed to carry him his dinner so he always returned to the house at midday. Violette never left the farm without Ourson.

Three years after the event in the forest, Ourson saw Violette arise in the morning pale and exhausted. She was seeking him.

“Come, come,” she said, drawing him along, “I have something to say—something to relate—Oh, come!”

Ourson was much alarmed and followed her precipitately.

“What is it, dear Violette? For the love of Heaven, speak to me! What can I do for you?”

“Nothing, nothing, dear Ourson; you can do nothing—only listen to me. You remember the dream I had in my childhood, of the toad! the river! the danger! Well, last night I had this same dream again. It is terrible! terrible! Ourson, dear Ourson, your life is menaced! If you die, I will die also!”

“How! By whom is my life threatened?”

“Listen! I was sleeping and a toad—still a toad—always a toad—came to me and said:

“The moment approaches when your dear Ourson is to resume his natural skin. To you he is to be indebted for this change. I hate him! I hate you! You shall not make each other happy! Ourson shall perish and you cannot

accomplish the sacrifice which in your folly you meditate. In a few days, yes, perhaps in a few hours I shall take a signal vengeance upon you both. Good-bye—do you hear?—till we meet again!

“I awoke, suppressed a cry which was about to issue from my lips and saw, as I saw on that day in which you saved me from the water, the hideous toad creeping upon the shutter and gazing at me menacingly. It disappeared, leaving me more dead than alive. I arose dressed myself and came to find you my brother, my friend to warn you against the vengeance of the fairy Furious and to entreat you to seek the aid of the good fairy Drolette.”

Ourson listened in great alarm. He was not frightened by the fate which menaced himself—he was agitated by the sacrifice which Furious announced and which he understood but too well. The thought alone of his dear and lovely Violette being muffled up in his hideous bear’s skin through devotion to him made him tremble and he preferred death. Ourson’s anguish was pictured in his countenance, and Violette, who was watching him closely, threw herself upon his neck and sobbed violently.

“Alas! my brother, my dear brother, you will soon be torn from me. You, who do not know what it is to fear, now tremble. You who comfort me encourage me and sustain me in all my fears have now no word to utter to restore my failing courage. You who have combated the most terrible dangers now bow your head and are resigned to fate.”

“No, Violette, it is not fear which makes me tremble—it is not fear which agitates me. It is a word which the fairy Furious has uttered, of which you do not comprehend the meaning but which I understand perfectly. The threat was addressed to you, my Violette. It is for you I tremble!”

Violette divined from this that the moment of sacrifice had come, that she was about to be called upon to keep the promise she had made to the fairy Drolette. In place of trembling and shrinking, she felt the most lively joy. She could now at last make some return for the devotion, the incessant watchful tenderness of her dear Ourson—could in her turn be useful to him. She made no response to the fears expressed by Ourson but thanked him and spoke to him more tenderly than ever before, thinking that soon perhaps she would be separated from him by death. Ourson had the same thought. They both fervently invoked the protection of the fairy Drolette. Ourson, indeed, called upon her in a loud voice but she did not respond to his appeal.

The day passed away sadly. Neither Ourson nor Violette spoke to Agnella on the subject of their disquiet for fear of aggravating her melancholy which had been constantly increasing as Ourson grew to manhood.

“Already twenty years old!” thought she. “If he persists in living in this solitude and seeing no one and in refusing to change with Violette, who asks nothing better, I am certain, I am convinced, he will wear this bear-skin till his death.”

Agnella wept, often wept; but her tears brought her no remedy.

The day Violette had her frightful dream, Agnella also had a dream. The fairy Drolette had appeared to her:

“Courage, queen,” she said to her, “in a few days Ourson will lose his bear’s skin and you can give him his true name of Prince Marvellous.”

Agnella had awaked full of hope and happiness. She redoubled her tenderness to Violette, believing that it was to her she would owe the happiness of her son.

Every one retired at night with different feelings. Violette and Ourson, full of anxiety for the future which appeared so threatening, Agnella’s heart bounding with joy at that same future which appeared so near and so replete with happiness, Passerose, astonished at the melancholy of the one and the joy of the other and ignorant of the cause of both.

All slept, however. Violette after weeping profusely. Ourson after having invoked the fairy Drolette; Agnella after smiling and thinking of Ourson handsome and attractive and Passerose after saying to herself a hundred times: “But what is the matter with them all to-day?”

Scarcely an hour after all at the farm were asleep, Violette was aroused by the smell of fire and smoke. Agnella awoke at the same moment.

“Mother,” said Violette, “do you not smell something?”

“The house is on fire,” said Agnella. “Look what a light is round about us!”

They sprang from their beds and ran to the parlor. The flames had already taken possession of it and of the

neighboring chambers.

“Ourson! Passerose!” cried Agnella.

“Ourson! Ourson!” exclaimed Violette.

Passerose sprang half clothed into the parlor.

“We are lost, madam! The flames are all through the house. The doors and windows are firmly closed—it is impossible to open them.”

“My son! my son!” cried Agnella.

“My brother! my brother!” exclaimed Violette.

They ran to the doors; all their efforts to open them or the windows were ineffectual.

“Oh! my terrible dream!” murmured Violette. “Dear Ourson, adieu for ever!”

Ourson had also been awakened by the flames and smoke. He slept out of the farm-house, and near the stable. His first impulse was to run to the front of the house but notwithstanding his extraordinary strength he could not open it. One would have thought that the door would break to pieces under his efforts. It was evidently held fast by the fairy Furious.

Ourson sprang upon a ladder and passed across the flames into a granary through an open window, then descended into the room where his mother and Violette were embracing, expecting instant death. Before they had time to recognize him he seized them in his arms and cried to Passerose to follow him. He ran along the granary and descended the ladder with his mother in one arm and Violette in the other and followed by Passerose. The moment after they reached the ground in safety, the ladder and granary became a prey to the flames.

Ourson led Agnella and Violette some distance from the fire. Passerose was self-possessed: she had quite a large package of clothing which she had collected at the commencement of the fire. Agnella and Violette had escaped barefooted and in their night robes, and the clothing brought by Passerose was thus very necessary to protect them from the cold. After having thanked Ourson for saving their lives at the peril of his own they

complimented Passerose upon her forethought.

“See,” said Passerose, “the advantage of not losing one’s senses. Whilst you two were only thinking of your Ourson, I made up this package of necessary things.”

“That is true, my good Passerose; but what purpose would your package have served, if my mother and Violette had perished in the flames?”

“Oh, I knew very well that you would not allow them to be burned up alive. Is any one ever in danger when you are present? Is not this the third time you have saved Violette’s life?”

Violette pressed Ourson’s hands tenderly and carried them to her lips. Agnella embraced her and said:

“Dear Violette, Ourson is happy in your tenderness which fully rewards him for all he has done for you. I feel assured that on your part you would be happy to sacrifice yourself for him if an occasion offered, that only too willingly would you help him.”

Before Violette could speak, Ourson said with animation:

“Mother, do not say anything to Violette of sacrificing herself for me. You know the thought alone makes me wretched.”

In place of replying to Ourson, Agnella placed her hand on her forehead and cried out anxiously:

“The casket, Passerose! the casket! Have you saved the casket?”

“I forgot it, madam,” said Passerose.

The countenance of Agnella expressed such regret and anxiety, that Ourson questioned her as to this precious casket which seemed to trouble her so much.

“The casket was a present of the fairy Drolette. She told me that the happiness of Violette was contained in it. It was in the wardrobe, at the foot of my bed. Alas! by what fatality did I forget it?”

She had scarcely uttered these words when the brave Ourson sprang towards the burning house and notwithstanding the tears and supplications of Agnella, Violette and Passerose, disappeared in the flames

exclaiming:

“You shall have the casket, mother, or I will perish with it!”

A horrible silence followed this act of Ourson. Violette fell on her knees with her arms extended towards the burning house, Agnella with her hands clasped looked with straining eyes at the opening through which Ourson had entered while Passerose was motionless, hiding her face with her hands. Some moments passed thus and they appeared ages to the three women who were expecting a sentence of life or death.

Ourson did not reappear. The crackling of the burning wood, the flashing of the flames, increased in violence. Suddenly, a frightful noise made Violette and Agnella utter a cry of despair.

The roof, covered with flames, had fallen in and Ourson was buried under the ruins—crushed by the ruins, consumed by the fire.

The silence of death succeeded this dreadful catastrophe. The flames diminished, then died away—no sound now interrupted the despair of Agnella and Violette.

Violette had fallen into the arms of Agnella and they sobbed thus a long time in silence. Passerose contemplated the smoking ruins and wept. Poor Ourson was buried there a victim of his courage and his devotion! Agnella and Violette still wept bitterly; they appeared neither to hear nor understand what was passing around them.

“Let us leave this place,” said Passerose, at last.

Agnella and Violette made no response.

Passerose tried to lead Violette away.

“Come,” said she; “come, Violette, let us seek a shelter for the night—the evening fortunately is mild.”

“What shelter do I want?” said Violette. “What is the evening to me or the morning? There are no more beautiful days for me! The sun will shine no more but to illumine my despair!”

“But if we remain here weeping we shall die of hunger, Violette, and in spite of the bitterest grief, we must

think of the necessities of life.”

“Better to die of hunger than of grief! I will not leave this place where I saw my dear Ourson for the last time—where he perished, a victim of his tenderness for us.”

Passerose shrugged her shoulders; she remembered that the stable had not been burned so she ran there with all speed, milked the cow, drank a cupful of milk and tried in vain to make Agnella and Violette do the same.

Agnella rose and said to Violette in a solemn tone:

“Your grief is just, my daughter. Never did a more noble or generous heart beat in a human form than Ourson’s and he loved you more than he loved himself—to spare your grief he sacrificed his happiness and his life.”

Agnella now recounted to Violette the scene which preceded Ourson’s birth, the power Violette had to deliver him from his deformity by accepting it for herself and Ourson’s constant prayer that Violette should never be informed of the possibility of such a sacrifice.

It is easy to comprehend the feelings of loving tenderness and regret which filled the heart of Violette after this confidence and she wept more bitterly than ever.

“And now, my daughter,” continued Agnella, “there remains one duty to fulfil, that is to give burial to my son. We must clear away these ruins and remove the ashes and when we have found the remains of our well-beloved Ourson——”

Sobs interrupted her speech; she could say no more.

Note: The story continues in Ourson Part IX: The Well

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