



# *Celindre*

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Retold Fairy Tales

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## Célinde

It has fallen to me to correct certain misapprehensions about the recent history of our family: so let me begin by saying that our difficulties began when our younger sister – *\_not\_* step-sister – became a devotee of a certain genre of English novel. One knows the kind: the dignity of labour, the heroism of suffering, the greater nobility of the poor. The richly romantic lives of shepherdesses. Or perhaps it was a surfeit of that so impudently readable *Monsieur Rousseau*? She took, at any rate, to dressing in rags – in which she looked very fetching, since she is terribly pretty, and she was careful to choose the rags which best matched her eyes and hair. Shortly afterward, she began acting as if she were a servant, busily sweeping and dusting all around us, curtsying, adopting a terribly common accent, and talking to the real servants in a most menial way, which confused them awfully; finally, she was to be found sleeping, barefoot, in the kitchen-hearth.

We are an enlightened, liberal-minded family: Father is not even averse to Chateaubriand. Consequently, we teased her a little, but allowed her to carry on with her amusement. It is a way, said Sophie, who is formidably enlightened, of testing out roles. She is feeling anxious about her social position, about the unfairness of the world. She is young and tender. The most recent riots, the famines, and that minor massacre in the South, have made a considerable impression on her. It will pass.

When, after several months, it did not, our concern began to augment. It increased further when she would continue her caprice even when paying and receiving visits; it was not always expedient to explain the reason for her absence from the company. At the arrival of the Count of Cheriennes, an old friend from his military career whom Father had considered a future suitor for her, Célinde did deign to appear, but in her servant-

girl costume. The Count is a man of fine manners and admirable strength of character, but his right hand shook noticeably while holding the dish of tea, and he remained with us a considerably shorter time than had been his wont.

As if that were not sufficient, at the very age most young women are keenest to see the world, she forbore to go out. She called assemblies 'dissipation' and averred a severe hatred of balls.

I should add here that our concern, besides our natural sibling feelings, had something of a selfish aspect. Sophie was twenty-eight at this time, and I was twenty-seven and, to speak frankly, we are far from being of goddess-like beauty, so that our former mild expectations were quite extinguished. To continue equally frankly, we did not repine as much as might conventionally be imagined. If there were to exist in real life any suitors akin to those in the novels of Mme Fanny Burney, I might have been more than cursorily interested, but there are not. (Besides, with the decease of our beloved mother, I have the care of my father.) And Sophie is more interested in Father's scientific instruments than either in men themselves or the benefits (precisely which, I pray?) they purportedly bring to one's life.

Nonetheless, it was necessary that someone in the family should make an advantageous match. And we felt Célinde, with her comeliness, might do so. The estate was not prospering. The grounds were untended. The house was crumbling. And then the occasion arose: His Majesty honoured us most agreeably with an invitation to his birthday celebration at the Palace.

A royal ball is a very marvellous thing. We adjudged that Célinde's alleged hatred for entertainment would make an exception for it. It was the first year she was of age to attend; and it would be overflowing, of course, with eligible gentlemen from the highest families, and would provide the very best opportunity to initiate, at the least, an excellent match.

Oh, our contrary sister! Of course she would not. She would not, not, not. And now she honestly did leave us in a difficult position. For her not to attend would not merely be ill-mannered; it would probably be treason. No-one but a Jacobin would reject such an invitation! Desperately, we regaled her with tempting stories: the orchestras, the clothes, the chandeliers, the banqueting. She was unmoved. Youth, we said to each other, is strange and inexplicable, so often seeking unhappiness in the midst of its bloom.

Notwithstanding, we pursued our efforts. Cajoling, threats and appeals to family honour had no effect. She was called stubborn, selfish and unhinged, to no avail. We invited her beloved godmother to stay, in the hope

that she might persuade her. Yet the day grew nearer and there was no hope of a cure.

Eventually, on the afternoon before the ball, we prepared ourselves ostentatiously in a last attempt to kindle her interest. She was knelt at the hearth, darning a ragged dress. Darning, indeed! Beside her, albeit on a chair, sat her doting godmother, whose influence on her, however, appeared to have been negligible. We accepted defeat. As a final gesture, we left the spare carriage for Céindre, should she unaccountably change her opinion, and set off.

The ball, on our arrival, was everything we had anticipated. It was glorious! The Palace Ballroom itself: so grand, so elegant and so refined! The music, so delightful! It was perhaps a little warm, and a little overcrowded, but then of course, the whole world was there – or the whole world, I should say, excepting our sister.

And finally the Prince himself made his appearance. What a beautiful young man! Tall, with dark curly hair, and naturally, so richly well-costumed. Yet, as Sophie remarked to me quietly, rather less unaffectedly joyful than one might have assumed. Rather brooding, she felt. Rather haughty, for all his royal blood. He seemed to look through the company as if in search of something... different. Perfidious rumour held that he read the works of Rousseau, or certain English novels.

Our eyes, as we sat at the edge of the room, were still on him when a new arrival was announced. A murmur began. To arrive after the Prince! The unaccompanied young lady now at the head of the stairs was risking ostracism or perhaps imprisonment. However she could not fail, in this manner of entry, to be noticed. She was of extraordinary beauty, moreover, and vested in the very latest of Paris: an extraordinary impression of simplicity and unaffectedness that must have taken heroic efforts of design and consideration to perfect so skilfully.

She looked familiar, somehow?

The Prince, as was immediately evident, had without hesitation forgiven her error. We watched him depart from his present company and attend to the late arrival before she had even reached the foot of the stairs. A murmur began again, as he took her hand, and spoke some words we could not hear. She favoured him, in return, with a glance of such modesty, charm and pure goodness that the murmur in the room modulated swiftly from curiosity to enchanted approval. It was such a glance that we had only before seen practised and refined endlessly, in her maidservant persona, by—

Sophie and I, in a single movement, turned our faces toward each other.

How thrilling! How clever! And how typical of our capricious Céindre! Delighted, we stood, to make our way across the room to greet and welcome her – but Father held us back. “Leave your sister,” he said. “She affects not to know us. There is perhaps a rationality to her game.”

Sophie and I were both a little hurt but, as good daughters, we obeyed. Father was conceivably right in this, since the Prince’s attention was still caught by her. When the dancing recommenced, she was his partner. Their faces approaching and retiring in the flow had a light around them that outsparkled the chandeliers. It was either love at first sight, or as fine a simulation of it, said Sophie, as a world such as ours could countenance.

It is not true, I should add, that His Highness danced with no-one else. Noblesse oblige, after all. He did, however, dance with Céindre many, many times, while we sat at the edge of the assembly, never asked to dance ourselves, of course, but enjoying the spectacle, and attempting to anticipate our sister’s next move.

When it came, we were once again full of admiration. It now became clear why she had not wished to arrive with us. It was not only mystery and distinctiveness that she wished to stimulate, but the opportunity of pursuit. Under cover of the celebratory tolling of midnight, with the concomitant toasts to the Prince’s anniversary, she made a well-timed and dramatic disappearance, and capped her success by judiciously leaving behind her one of her dancing shoes. It was a slim, almost transparent slipper, with the not inconsiderable advantage, as we later learned, of having the cordwainer’s highly exclusive Rue de Rivoli direction embroidered in the insole.

This time, it was Father who did not understand. “Why did she run off?” he complained to us, on the way home. “I was beginning to think that I understood her, for the first time in my life.”

“Fear not, Father,” said Sophie. “I think she has the measure of His Highness’ romantic soul.”

At home, her godmother, who was exceptionally generous and, as I said, very fond of her, admitted laughingly to the conspiracy, and was liberally forgiven, but Céindre herself had retired to bed, and was not available.

At least she was in bed, said Sophie, and not in the fireplace. That was a good sign.

The following morning, as Sophie had predicted, we had a royal visitor. The Prince, like one of Monsieur Maillardet’s automata, had pursued the unsubtle clue to the guildsman of the Rue de Rivoli, who directed him toward our castle. Lover of the hunt that he was, he rode directly to us, his retinue awaiting in the grounds like a delegation of petitioners.

Our sister was summoned.

And we, and our Royal Visitor, awaited her.

And awaited her.

And awaited her. The Prince became impatient, as Princes tend to. Just as his face began to reach a pitch of well, broodingness, our sister, as if she herself were the princess, condescended to appear. And yet! We had assumed she would be attired, once again, in the costume of the previous evening. Imagine our consternation to see her appearance in a new costume of rags! Delightful rags, as I have said before; rags, as we later learned, designed and cut by one of Paris’ most forward-thinking and talented young couturiers. Rags made of the finest silk, as one could see when one looked closely, and shaped perfectly to Céindre’s lovely form. But rags nonetheless.

I saw Father’s face fall: in embarrassment, then disappointment, then fear. This was going to be worse, he was thinking, than the visit of the Count of Cheriennes.

Of course, he was wrong again.

It was love at second sight, stronger even than first. The Prince’s broodingness had been entirely conquered.

“Goddess and shepherdess!” declaimed His Highness in agonized and unconstrained tones. “O what goodness and simplicity! So well-born, yet so unaffected! How can it be?”

There was more like this, but I shall spare the reader, lest she swoon entirely away, and shall preserve, henceforth, the Prince's privacy of feeling and expression. He did not say, in quite so many words, 'let me take you away from all this', and he did not, beyond a haughty glance, comment exactly on the dilapidation of the château, but civilisation is, as Sophie would aver, the manner of saying the unsaid and, for my part, I marvelled increasingly at our sister's genius in turning our penury to good account. Imagine indigence being fashionable! These, as some claim, truly are revolutionary times.

Our sister, meanwhile, produced a wondrous glance of sweet innocence and modesty, made still more effective, of course, by her judicious raiment. The Prince's returning gaze was one of utter adoration and rapture.

And the rest, I have to admit, truly is a fairy-tale.

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