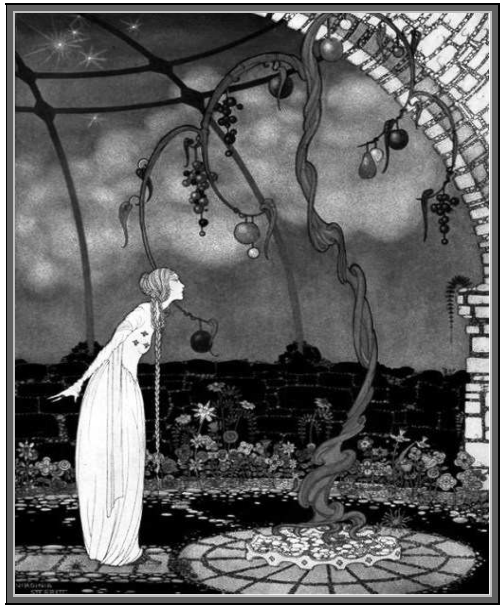
Old French Fairy Tales

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Comtesse de Ségur

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Virginia Frances Sterrett

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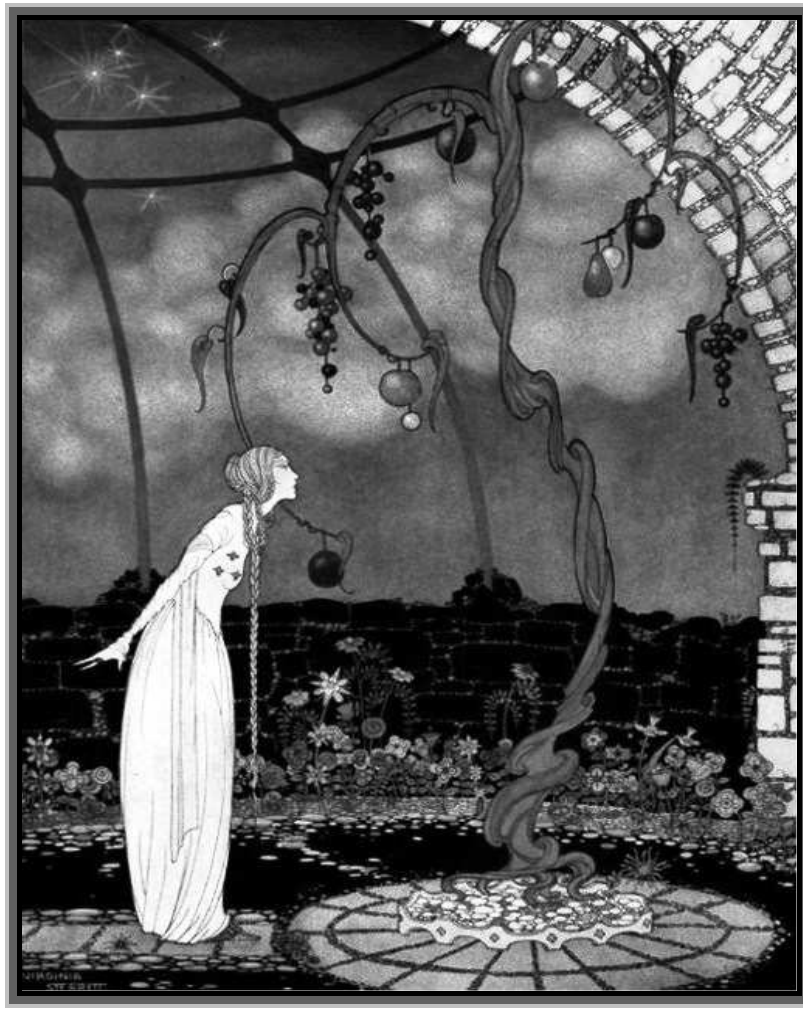
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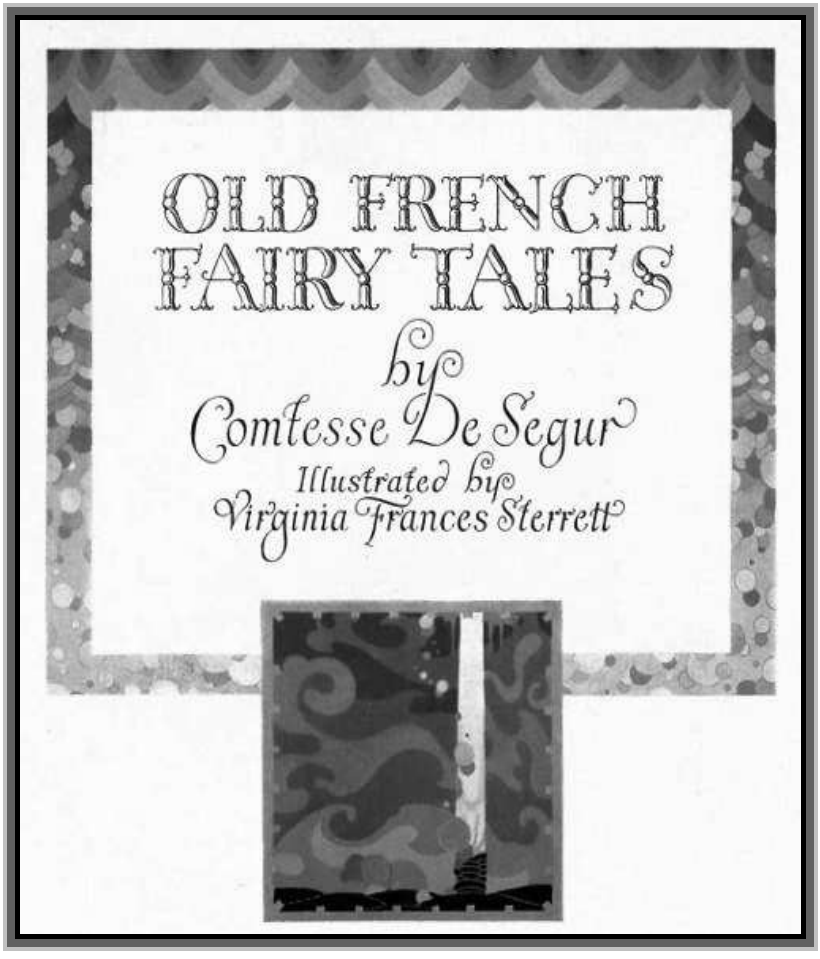
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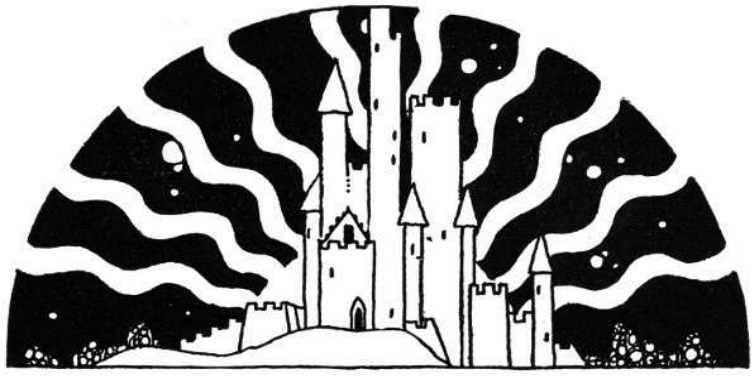
Rosalie saw before her eyes a tree of marvellous beauty


OLD FRENCH
FAIRY TALES
by
Comtesse De Segur
Illustrated by
Virginia Frances Sterrett

THE STORY OF BLONDINE, BONNE-BICHE, AND BEAU-MINON

BLONDINE





There was once a king called Benin. He was good and all the world loved him; he was just and the wicked feared him. His wife, the Queen Doucette, was also good, and much beloved.

This happy pair had a daughter called the Princess Blondine, because of her superb fair hair, and she was as amiable and charming as her father the king and her mother the queen.

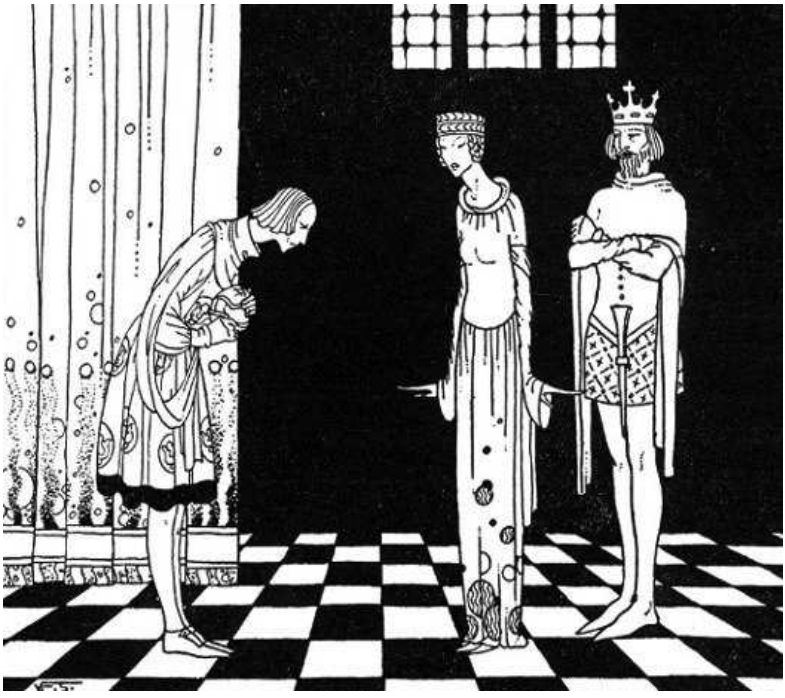
Unfortunately, the poor queen died a short time after the birth of Blondine and for a long time the king wept bitterly at his great loss. Blondine was too young to understand her mother's death: she did not weep but continued to laugh, to play and to sleep peacefully. The king loved her tenderly and she loved him more than all the world. He gave his little daughter the most beautiful jewels, the finest bonbons, and the most rare and delicious fruits. Blondine was very happy.

One day it was announced to the king, that all his subjects demanded that he should marry again in order to have a son who should reign after him. He refused at first but finally yielded to the pressing desires of his people and said to his minister Leger:—

"My dear friend, my subjects wish me to marry again but my heart is so sad because of the death of my cherished queen Doucette that I cannot undertake the task of seeking another wife. Go, then, my good Leger and find me a princess who will make my sweet Blondine happy. Go; I ask for nothing more. When you have found a perfect woman, you will demand her hand in marriage and conduct her to my court."

Leger set off immediately, visited many courts and saw innumerable princesses—ugly, humpbacked and wicked.

At last he arrived at the kingdom of the monarch Turbulent, who had a lovely daughter, bright, winning and apparently good. Leger found her so charming, that he asked her hand in marriage for his king Benin, without sufficiently inquiring into her real character.



Leger meets the wicked princess, Fourbette

Turbulent was enchanted at the prospect of getting rid of his daughter who was jealous, proud and wicked. Also, her presence often interfered with his excursions for pleasure, with the chase and with his various entertainments at the palace.

Without a moment's hesitation, he acceded to the Prime Minister's request, and he returned with the princess to the kingdom of the good king Benin.

The princess Fourbette was accompanied by four thousand mules, loaded with the jewels and wardrobe of the charming bride.

King Benin had been apprised of their approach by a courier and went forward to receive the princess Fourbette. He found her beautiful but he noted the absence of the mild and attractive expression of the poor lost Doucette.

When Fourbette's eyes fell upon Blondine her glance was so cruel, so wicked, that the poor child, who was now three years old, was greatly terrified and began to weep bitterly.

"What is the matter?" said the king. "Why does my sweet and sensible Blondine weep like a bad little girl?"

"Papa! dear papa!" cried Blondine, throwing herself into the arms of the king, "do not give me into the hands of this princess. I am afraid of her—her eyes are cruel!"

The king was much surprised. He turned so suddenly towards the princess Fourbette that she had no time to control herself and he perceived the terrible glance with which she regarded the little Blondine.

Benin immediately resolved that Blondine should be wholly separated from the new queen and remain as before under the exclusive protection of the nurse who had taken care of her and who loved her tenderly.

The queen thus saw Blondine rarely, and when she met her by chance she could not wholly dissimulate the hatred she felt for her.

About a year from that time a daughter was born to the queen Fourbette. She was named Brunette, because of her dark hair which was black as the raven's wing.

Brunette was pretty but not so lovely as Blondine; moreover she was as wicked as her mother. She detested Blondine and played all sorts of cruel tricks upon her, bit her, pinched her, pulled her hair, broke her toys and tore her beautiful dresses.

The good little Blondine was never in a passion with her sister but always tried to make excuses for her conduct.

"Oh, papa!" she said to the king, "do not scold Brunette; she is so little! she does not know that she grieves me when she breaks my toys! It is only in play that she bites me, pulls my hair and pinches me."

The good king embraced his little daughter, and was silent but he knew that Brunette was cruel and wicked; that Blondine was too gentle and good to accuse her. He loved Blondine, therefore, more and more from day to day and his heart grew cold to Brunette.

The ambitious queen Fourbette saw all this clearly and hated intensely the innocent and gentle Blondine. If she

had not feared the rage of the king she would have made Blondine the most wretched child in the world.

Benin had commanded that Blondine should never be left alone with the queen. He was known to be just and good but he punished disobedience severely and the queen herself dared not defy his commands.





BLONDINE LOST

Blondine grew to be seven years old and Brunette three.

The king had given Blondine a charming little carriage drawn by ostriches, and a little coachman ten years of age, who was the nephew of her nurse.

The little page, who was called Gourmandinet, loved Blondine tenderly. He had been her playmate from her birth and she had shown him a thousand acts of kindness.

But Gourmandinet had one terrible fault; he was a gourmand—was so fond of dainties and sweet things, that for a paper of bonbons he would commit almost any wicked action. Blondine often said to him:

"I love you dearly, Gourmandinet, but I do not love to see you so greedy. I entreat you to correct this villainous fault which will make you despised by all the world."

Gourmandinet kissed her hand and promised to reform. But, alas! he continued to steal cakes from the kitchen and bonbons from the store-room. Often, indeed, he was whipped for his disobedience and gluttony.

The queen Fourbette heard on every hand the reproaches lavished upon the page and she was cunning

enough to think that she might make use of this weakness of Gourmandinet and thus get rid of poor Blondine.

The garden in which Blondine drove in her little carriage, drawn by ostriches and guided by her little coachman, Gourmandinet, was separated by a grating from an immense and magnificent forest, called the Forest of Lilacs because during the whole year these lilacs were always covered with superb flowers.

No one, however, entered these woods. It was well known that it was enchanted ground and that if you once entered there you could never hope to escape.

Gourmandinet knew the terrible secret of this forest. He had been severely forbidden ever to drive the carriage of Blondine in that direction lest by some chance Blondine might pass the grating and place her little feet on the enchanted ground.

Many times the king Benin had sought to build a wall the entire length of the grating or to secure it in some way so as to make an entrance there impossible. But the workmen had no sooner laid the foundation than some unknown and invisible power raised the stones and they disappeared from sight.

The queen Fourbette now sought diligently to gain the friendship of Gourmandinet by giving him every day some delicious dainties. In this way she made him so complete a slave to his appetite that he could not live

without the jellies, bonbons and cakes which she gave him in such profusion. At last she sent for him to come to her, and said:—

"Gourmandinet, it depends entirely upon yourself whether you shall have a large trunk full of bonbons and delicious dainties or never again eat one during your life."

"Never again eat one! Oh! madam, I should die of such punishment. Speak, madam, what must I do to escape this terrible fate?"

"It is necessary," said the queen, looking at him fixedly, "that you should drive the princess Blondine near to the Forest of Lilacs."

"I cannot do it, madam; the king has forbidden it."

"Ah! you cannot do it; well, then, adieu. No more dainties for you. I shall command every one in the house to give you nothing."

"Oh! madam," said Gourmandinet, weeping bitterly, "do not be so cruel. Give me some order which it is in my power to execute."

"I can only repeat that I command you to lead the princess Blondine near to the Forest of Lilacs; that you encourage her to descend from the carriage, to cross the grating and enter the enchanted ground."

"But, madam," replied Gourmandinet, turning very pale, "if the princess enters this forest she can never

escape from it. You know the penalty of entering upon enchanted ground. To send my dear princess there is to give her up to certain death."

"For the third and last time," said the queen, frowning fearfully, "I ask if you will take the princess to the forest? Choose! either an immense box of bonbons which I will renew every month or never again to taste the delicacies which you love."

"But how shall I escape from the dreadful punishment which his majesty will inflict upon me?"

"Do not be disquieted on that account. As soon as you have induced Blondine to enter the Forest of Lilacs, return to me. I will send you off out of danger with your bonbons, and I charge myself with your future fortune."

"Oh! madam, have pity upon me. Do not compel me to lead my dear princess to destruction. She who has always been so good to me!"

"You still hesitate, miserable coward! Of what importance is the fate of Blondine to you? When you have obeyed my commands I will see that you enter the service of Brunette and I declare to you solemnly that the bonbons shall never fail."

Gourmandinet hesitated and reflected a few moments longer and, alas! at last resolved to sacrifice his good little mistress to his gluttony.

The remainder of that day he still hesitated and he lay awake all night weeping bitter tears as he endeavored to discover some way to escape from the power of the wicked queen; but the certainty of the queen's bitter revenge if he refused to execute her cruel orders, and the hope of rescuing Blondine at some future day by seeking the aid of some powerful fairy, conquered his irresolution and decided him to obey the queen.

In the morning at ten o'clock Blondine ordered her little carriage and entered it for a drive, after having embraced the king her father and promised him to return in two hours.

The garden was immense. Gourmandinet, on starting, turned the ostriches away from the Forest of Lilacs. When, however, they were entirely out of sight of the palace, he changed his course and turned towards the grating which separated them from the enchanted ground. He was sad and silent. His crime weighed upon his heart and conscience.

"What is the matter?" said Blondine, kindly. "You say nothing Are you ill, Gourmandinet?"

"No, my princess, I am well."

"But how pale you are! Tell me what distresses you, poor boy, and I promise to do all in my power to make you happy."

Blondine's kind inquiries and attentions almost softened the hard heart of Gourmandinet, but the remembrance of the bonbons promised by the wicked queen, Fourbette, soon chased away his good resolutions. Before he had time to reply, the ostriches reached the grating of the Forest of Lilacs.

"Oh! the beautiful lilacs!" exclaimed Blondine; "how fragrant—how delicious! I must have a bouquet of those beautiful flowers for my good papa. Get down, Gourmandinet and bring me some of those superb branches."

"I cannot leave my seat, princess, the ostriches might run away with you during my absence."

"Do not fear," replied Blondine; "I could guide them myself to the palace."

"But the king would give me a terrible scolding for having abandoned you, princess. It is best that you go yourself and gather your flowers."

"That is true. I should be very sorry to get you a scolding, my poor Gourmandinet."

While saying these words she sprang lightly from the carriage, crossed the bars of the grating and commenced to gather the flowers.

At this moment Gourmandinet shuddered and was overwhelmed with remorse. He wished to repair his fault

by calling Blondine but although she was only ten steps from him,—although he saw her perfectly—she could not hear his voice, and in a short time she was lost to view in the enchanted forest.

For a long time Gourmandinet wept over his crime, cursed his gluttony and despised the wicked queen Fourbette.

At last he recalled to himself that the hour approached at which Blondine would be expected at the palace. He returned to the stables through the back entrance and ran at once to the queen, who was anxiously expecting him.

On seeing him so deadly pale and his eyes inflamed from the tears of awful remorse, she knew that Blondine had perished.

"Is it done?" said she.

Gourmandinet bowed his head. He had not the strength to speak.

"Come," said she, "behold your reward!"

She pointed to a large box full of delicious bonbons of every variety. She commanded a valet to raise the box and place it upon one of the mules which had brought her jewelry.

"I confide this box to Gourmandinet, in order that he may take it to my father," she said. "Go, boy, and return in

a month for another." She placed in his hand at the same time a purse full of gold.

Gourmandinet mounted the mule in perfect silence and set off in full gallop. The mule was obstinate and wilful and soon grew restive under the weight of the box and began to prance and kick. He did this so effectually that he threw Gourmandinet and his precious box of bonbons upon the ground.

Gourmandinet, who had never ridden upon a horse or mule, fell heavily with his head upon the stones and died instantly.

Thus he did not receive from his crime the profit which he had hoped, for he had not even tasted of the bonbons which the queen had given him.

No one regretted him. No one but the poor Blondine had ever loved him.





THE FOREST OF LILACS

When Blondine entered the forest she commenced gathering the beautiful branches of lilacs. She rejoiced in their profusion and delighted in their fragrance.

As she made her selection, it seemed to her that those which were more distant were still more beautiful so she emptied her apron and her hat, which were both full and filled them again and again.

Blondine had been thus busily occupied for about an hour. She began to suffer from the heat and to feel great fatigue. She found the branches of lilacs heavy to carry and thought it was time to return to the palace. She

looked around and saw herself surrounded with lilacs. She called Gourmandinet but no one replied.

"I have wandered further than I intended," said Blondine. "I will return at once, though I am very weary. Gourmandinet will hear me and will surely come to meet me."

Blondine walked on rapidly for some time but she could not find the boundaries of the forest.

Many times she called anxiously upon Gourmandinet but he did not respond and at last she became terribly frightened.

"What will become of me, all alone in this vast forest? What will my poor papa think when I do not return? And Gourmandinet, how will he dare go back to the palace without me? He will be scolded, perhaps beaten and all this is my fault because I would leave my carriage to gather lilacs? Unfortunate girl that I am! I shall die of hunger and thirst in this forest if the wolves do not eat me up this night."

Weeping bitterly, Blondine fell on the ground at the foot of a large tree. She wept a long time. At last her great fatigue mastered her grief. She placed her little head upon her bundle of lilacs, and slept peacefully.





BLONDINE'S AWAKENING—BEAU-MINON

Blondine slept calmly all night; no ferocious beast came to trouble her slumbers. She did not suffer from the cold and awakened at a late hour in the morning. She rubbed her eyes, much surprised to see herself

surrounded by trees, in place of being in her own room in the palace, and upon her own bed.

She called her nurse and a soft mewing was the only response. Astonished and almost frightened, she looked around and saw at her feet a superb white cat, looking gently upon her and continuing to mew plaintively.

"Ah! pretty puss! how beautiful you are!" cried Blondine, placing her little hand caressingly upon the soft fur, white as snow. "I am so happy to see you, pretty puss, for you will conduct me to your home. I am indeed very hungry and I have not the strength to walk much further without food."

Blondine had scarcely uttered these words, when the white pussy mewed again and pointed with her little paw to a small package lying near her, wrapped neatly in fine white linen. She opened the parcel and found it contained bread and butter which she found delicious. She gave the crumbs to pussy, who munched them with seeming delight.

When they had finished their simple meal, Blondine leaned over towards her little companion, and said, caressingly:

"Thanks, pretty puss, for the breakfast you have given me. Now, can you conduct me to my papa, who is certainly in despair because of my absence?"

Pussy, whom Blondine named Beau-Minon, shook her head and mewed plaintively.

"Ah! you understand me, Beau-Minon," said Blondine. "I entreat you to have pity upon me and lead me to some house before I perish with hunger, cold and terror in this vast forest!"

Beau-Minon looked at the princess fixedly and made a sign with her little graceful white head which seemed to say, "I understand you." She rose, advanced a few steps and paused to see if Blondine followed her.

"I am here, Beau-Minon; I am following you gladly," said Blondine; "but how can we pass through these bushy thickets? I see no path."

Beau-Minon made no reply but sprang lightly into the thicket which opened of itself to allow Blondine and Beau-Minon to pass, and then closed up immediately.

Blondine walked on for about half an hour. As she advanced, the forest became lighter, the grass was finer and the flowers more abundant. She saw many pretty birds singing melodiously and graceful squirrels, bounding along the branches of the trees.

Blondine, who had no doubt that she was about to leave the forest and see her dear father again, was enchanted with all that she saw; she wished to pause and gather the lovely wild flowers; but Beau-Minon advanced

steadily and mewed plaintively whenever Blondine relaxed her speed.

In about an hour Blondine perceived an elegant castle. Beau-Minon led her to the gilded grating. However, Blondine did not know how to enter. There was no bell and the gate was closed. Beau-Minon had disappeared and Blondine was once more alone.



BONNE-BICHE

Beau-Minon had entered by a little passage, which seemed made expressly for him and had probably given notice to some one at the castle, as the gate opened without Blondine having called.

She entered the court-yard but saw no one.

The door of the castle opened of itself. Blondine entered the vestibule which was of rare white marble. All the doors of the castle now opened like the first and the princess passed through a suite of beautiful rooms.

At last, in the back part of a charming salon, furnished with blue and gold, she perceived a white hind, lying upon a bed of fine and fragrant grasses. Beau-Minon stood near her. The pretty hind saw Blondine, arose, and approached her.

"You are most welcome, Blondine," said she. "My son Beau-Minon and I have expected you for a long time."

At these words, Blondine was much frightened.

"Take courage, princess; you are with friends. I know the king your father and I love him and I love you also."