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Bitter Greens

Written by Kate Forsyth

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BITTER GREENS



Kate Forsyth

FOREWORD



The first known version of the Rapunzel fairy tale was ‘Petrosinella’ (‘Little Parsley’), by the Italian writer Giambattista Basile (c.1575–1632), published posthumously in 1634.

Sixty-four years later, in 1698, it was retold under the name ‘Persinette’ by the French writer Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de la Force (1650–1724), written while she was locked away in a nunnery as punishment for her scandalous life. She changed the ending so that her heroine’s tears healed the eyes of the blinded prince and the witch was redeemed.

Fairy-tale scholars have always been puzzled by how Mademoiselle de la Force could have come to know Basile’s story. His work was not translated from his native Neapolitan dialect for many years after Mademoiselle de la Force’s death, and, although she was unusually well educated for her time, she never travelled to Italy, nor could she speak Neapolitan. It is her version of the tale that we now know as ‘Rapunzel’.

As well as being one of the first writers of literary fairy tales, Mademoiselle de la Force was one of the first writers of historical fiction and was known to be a major influence on Sir Walter Scott, who is commonly regarded as the ‘father’ of historical fiction.

A HEART OF GALL



Château de Cazeneuve, Gascony, France – June 1666

I had always been a great talker and teller of tales.

‘You should put a lock on that tongue of yours. It’s long enough and sharp enough to slit your own throat,’ our guardian warned me, the night before I left home to go to the royal court at Versailles. He sat at the head of the long wooden table in the chateau’s arched dining room, lifting his lip in distaste as the servants brought us our usual peasant fare of sausage and white-bean cassoulet. He had not accustomed himself to our simple Gascon ways, not even after four years.

I just laughed. ‘Don’t you know a woman’s tongue is her sword? You wouldn’t want me to let my only weapon rust, would you?’

‘No chance of that.’ The Marquis de Maulévrier was a humourless man, with a face like a goat and yellowish eyes that followed my sister and me as we went about our business. He thought our mother had spoilt us, and had set himself to remedy our faults. I loathed him. No, loathe is far too soft a word. I detested him.

My sister, Marie, said, ‘Please, my lord, you mustn’t mind her. You know we’re famous here in Gascony for our troubadours and minstrels. We Gascons love to sing songs and tell stories. She means no harm by it.’

‘I love to tell a gasconade,’ I sang. ‘A braggadocio, a fanfaronade . . .’

Marie sent me a look. ‘You know that Charlotte-Rose will need honey on her tongue if she’s to make her way in this world.’

‘*Sangdiu*, but it’s true. Her face won’t make her fortune.’

‘That’s unfair, my lord. Charlotte-Rose has the sweetest face . . .’

‘She might be passable if only she’d pluck out that sting in her tail,’ the Marquis de Maulévrier began. Seeing that I had screwed up my face like a gargoyle, wagging my tongue at him, he rapped his spoon on the pitted tabletop. ‘You’d best sweeten your temperament, *mademoiselle*, else you’ll find yourself with a heart of gall.’

I should have listened to him.



Palais de Versailles, France – January 1697

Full of regret, I clung to the strap as my carriage rolled away from the Palais de Versailles. It was a bleak and miserable day, the sky bruised with snow clouds. I was sure my nose must be red; it certainly *felt* red. I drew my fur-edged cloak closer about me, glad that I would not, at least, arrive at my prison looking like a pauper.

I still could not believe that the King would order me to a nunnery. Apparently, it was in punishment for some impious Noël’s that I had written, but all the women of the salons made subtle mock of the church. It seemed a harsh punishment for such a petty crime. Surely the King did not believe the rumours that I was having an affair with his son? The Dauphin and I were friends, drawn together by our love of art and music and novels, and our hatred of the King. Perhaps I had been too bold in expressing my views. Perhaps my tongue – and my quill – had grown a little sharp. I had thought myself safe under the Dauphin’s protection. The Dauphin always said, though, that the one way for him to ensure his father punished someone was to beg his father to offer that person a favour.

Perched on the other seat, my maid, Nanette, gazed at me unhappily

but I would not meet her eyes. ‘It’s all a great misunderstanding,’ I said. ‘The King will soon summon me back.’ I tried to smile.

‘Couldn’t you have gone to him and begged his pardon, Bon-bon?’ Nanette asked.

‘I did try,’ I answered. ‘But you know the King. He must be the most unforgiving man in Christendom.’

‘Bon-bon!’

‘It’s no use scolding me, Nanette. I’m simply telling the truth.’

‘But to be locked up in a convent. To become a nun.’ Nanette’s voice was faint with horror. ‘Your parents must be rolling in their graves.’

‘What were my choices? Exile or the convent. At least, this way, the King will still pay my pension and I’ll be on French soil, breathing French air. Where else could I have gone? What could I have done to support myself? I’m too old and ugly to walk the streets.’

Nanette’s face puckered. ‘You’re not old or ugly.’

I laughed. ‘Not to you, perhaps, Nanette. But, believe me, most people at Versailles consider me a hideous old hag. I’m forty-seven years old, and not even my closest friends ever thought I was a beauty.’

‘You’re not a hideous old hag,’ Nanette protested. ‘Not beautiful, no, but there’s better things than beauty in this world.’

‘*Belle laide*, Athénaïs calls me,’ I replied with a little shrug. The expression was usually used to describe a woman who was arresting despite the plainness of her looks. My guardian had spoken truly when he said my face would never be my fortune.

Nanette made a little *tsk tsk* with her tongue. ‘You’re worth twice the Marquise de Montespan. Don’t you listen to a word she says. And don’t you go thinking you’re a hideous old hag either. I wouldn’t permit anyone to say that about me, and in my case it’s true.’

I smiled despite myself. Nanette was not the most attractive of women. She was tiny and gaunt, dressed always in black, with sparse white hair screwed back into a knob at the back of her head. Her face and body were so thin that you could see all the bones underneath her withered skin, and she had lost quite a few teeth. Her black eyes were fierce, but her hands

were always tender and her brain quite as nimble as it had ever been.

Nanette had been my maid ever since I was weaned from my wet-nurse. As a child, I would lie in my vast shadowy bed, a flame floating in the old glass lantern, and sleepily listen as she sang, ‘You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.’ Nanette was like the Lord in that psalm. Before a word was on my tongue, she knew it completely. She hemmed me in behind and before, and her hand held me fast.

‘You’d best write to your sister straightaway and let her know what’s happened,’ Nanette went on. ‘Marie’s not clever like you, but she’s got a good heart. She’ll beg that fat husband of hers to petition the King.’

‘I’ll write to the Princesses too,’ I said. ‘They’ll be furious with their father. He simply cannot go around banishing all the most interesting people from court, can he?’

Nanette humphed, but the thought of the King’s three pipe-smoking, bastard-born daughters lifted my spirits a little. Born of two of the King’s mistresses, they had been legitimised and married off to various dukes and princes, and they enlivened the court with their scandalous love affairs, their extravagance, their gambling and their constant bickering over precedence. Although they were much younger than me, we had become good friends, and I often attended their soirées and salons.

My smile slowly faded. The Princesses de Conti were no longer in favour with the King and his reigning mistress, Françoise de Maintenon, who had been queen in all but name for more than fifteen years now. Some even whispered that Louis had married her in secret. Yet Françoise had none of the beauty and brilliance of the King’s earlier mistresses. Not only was she over sixty, but she was also rather plain and dumpy, and altogether too pious for the King’s bastard daughters.

Remembering the Princesses, it occurred to me that their mothers, the royal mistresses, had all ended their dazzling careers within the austere confines of a convent.

Louise de la Vallière, the King’s first mistress and mother of Princesse

Marie-Anne, had been transformed into Sœur Louise de la Miséricorde.

Athénaïs, the Marquise de Montespan, mother of Princesse Louise Françoise and Princesse Françoise Marie, had been forced to the nunnery by scandal and rumours of black magic and poison.

The frivolous Angélique de Fontanges, the girl who had supplanted Athénaïs in the King's affection, had died in a convent at the age of nineteen. Poisoned, it was said.

I was a fool. Why would the King hesitate to banish *me* to a nunnery, when he had no problem sending his discarded mistresses, the mothers of his children? Women were locked up in convents all the time. Younger daughters sent as babies, so their parents did not have to pay so rich a dowry as they would for their wedding day. Rebellious young women, cloistered away as punishment for their disobedience. Widows, like my poor mother, banished by the King to a convent, even though she was a Huguenot and so feared and hated the Roman Catholic Church with all her heart.

Although I was pretending not to care, my stomach was knotted with anxiety. I knew little about convents except that once a woman disappeared inside, she stayed inside. Nanette had often told me the story of how Martin Luther's wife, a former nun, had only been able to escape by hiding in an empty fish barrel. Certainly, I had never seen my own mother again.

The only life I knew was the court of the Sun King. I had lived at court since I was sixteen years old. What did I know about spending my days on my knees, praying and clicking away at a rosary?

I'd never make love again, or dance, or gallop to the hounds, or smile as I made a whole salon of Parisian courtiers laugh and applaud one of my stories. I'd never rest my folded fan against my heart, saying in the silent language of the court that my heart was breaking with love. I'd never be kissed again.

The tears came at last. Nanette passed me the handkerchief she had kept ready on her knee. I dabbed at my eyes, but the tears kept coming, making my chest heave in its tight cage of lacing, and no doubt making a terrible mess of my maquillage.

The carriage paused and I heard the sound of the palace gates being opened. Casting down the handkerchief, I swung aside the curtain that hid the view from my sight. Footmen in curly wigs and long satin vests stood to attention as the side wing of the golden gates was swung open by guards. Crowds of shabby peasants shoved forward, eager to see which fine lord or lady was leaving Versailles.

Holding my lace headdress in place, I leant out the coach window for one last glimpse of the palace at the end of the avenue, the marble forecourt, the prancing bronze horse, the green triangles of topiary in pots marching past like dragoons. The carriage rolled forward, the sounds of the wheels changing as they left the smooth marble flagstones and began to rattle over the cobblestones of the Avenue de Paris. I sank back into my seat. ‘Adieu, Versailles, adieu,’ I cried.

‘Come, my little cabbage, you must stop.’ Nanette took her handkerchief and mopped my face as if I was a child. ‘I thought you hated court. I thought you said it was filled with empty-headed fools.’

I jerked my face away and stared out at the tall crowded houses of Versailles. It was true that I hated the royal court. Yet I loved it too. The theatre, the music and dancing, the literary salons . . .

‘I should’ve whipped you more often as a child,’ Nanette said sadly.

‘More often? You never whipped me, though you threatened to often enough.’

‘I know. That’s what I mean. Such a tempestuous little thing you were. Either up in the boughs or down in the dumps – there was never any middle ground for you. I should’ve taught you better.’

‘Well, Maulévrier did his best to beat some sense into me.’

‘That cold-hearted snake.’

‘I always thought he looked more like a goat.’ I took the handkerchief back from Nanette and blew my nose.

‘Yes, a goat, an old devil goat. I bet he had horns under that velvet hat of his.’

Normally, I would have said, ‘Yes, and cloven hooves instead of feet, and a tail sticking out of his arse.’ Instead, I sighed and leant my aching

head against the cushion. All I could see out the window were dreary fields under a dismal sky. Snow floated past, melting as soon as it hit the wet cobblestones. The clop of the horses' hooves and the rattle of the wheels were the only sounds.

'Ah, my poor little Bon-bon,' Nanette sighed, and I passed her back her handkerchief so she could mop her own eyes.

Soon, we passed the turn-off to Paris, and I caught my breath with pain. *Would I ever see Paris again?* I remembered when I had first come to the royal court, still resident then in Paris. My sister had warned me to be careful. 'It's a dangerous place, Bon-bon. Keep a guard on your tongue, else you'll be in trouble, just like the Marquis says.'

I had been on my best behaviour at first, charming and amusing at all times. I had thought the court like a gilded cage of butterflies, all beauty and wonder and movement. I had grown careless. I had enjoyed my own sharp wit, my boldness. I had played with words like a jongleur juggled swords, and I had cut myself.

A fool's tongue is long enough to slit his own throat, the Marquis de Maulévrier had always said. I hated to admit that he could be right.

We crossed the River Seine and headed south through a dark and dripping forest. Although Nanette had packed a basket of provisions, I could not eat. The carriage came slowly down a hill, the postilion dismounting to lead the horses, and then we swayed and jolted forward on execrable roads into an early dusk. I shut my eyes, leant my head back against the wall and determined to endure. My name meant strength. I would be strong.

When the carriage came to a halt, I jerked awake. My heart constricted. I peered out the window but all I could see was the hazy yellow light of a single lantern, illuminating a stone wall. It was freezing.

'Quick, my powder, my patches!'

Nanette passed me my powder box and I flicked the haresfoot over my face, squinting into the tiny mirror at the back of the box. My hands were deft and sure; this was not the first time I had had to repair my maquillage in the dark.

I snapped my powder box shut and thrust it at her, snatching the small

jewelled container in which I kept my patches, the little beauty spots made of gummed taffeta that were very useful for hiding pimples or smallpox scars. My fingers were trembling so much I could hardly pluck out one of the tiny black shapes. For a moment, I hesitated. Normally, I would press my patch to the corner of my mouth, *à la coquette*, or beside my eye, *à la passionnée*, but it was a convent I was about to sweep into, not a salon or ballroom. Carefully, I fixed the patch in the centre of my forehead, just under my hairline, *à la majestueuse*.

I was Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de la Force. My grandfather had been the Marshal of France, my cousin was a duke, my mother second cousin to the King himself. If I must enter a nunnery – quite against my own wishes – it would be in my finest clothes, with my head held high and no traces of tears on my face.

The postilion opened the carriage door. I descended as gracefully as I could in my high heels, though my feet were numb and my legs trembled after the long hours rattling over potholes. Nanette caught up my train to stop it dragging in the snow.

The yard was deserted, a lantern hanging above a barred oaken door providing the only light. Above the door were carved rows of stern-faced saints sitting in judgement upon cringing devils and sinners, who pleaded for mercy below. In the wan and flickering light, the sinners' stone limbs seemed to writhe and their faces grimace. Some had bat wings and goblin faces. One was a woman on her knees, hair flowing unbound down her back. Many had their noses smashed away, or their pleading hands broken. It looked as if the Huguenots had been here with their hammers and slingshots, seeking to destroy all signs of idolatry.

The postilion rang a bell beside the doorway, then came back to heave my trunk off the roof of the coach. Then we stood waiting, the postilion, Nanette and I, shifting from foot to foot, rubbing our hands together, our breath hanging frostily in the air before us. Minutes dragged by. I felt a surge of anger and lifted my chin.

‘Well, we shall just have to return to Versailles and tell the King no one was home. What a shame.’

As if in response to my words, I heard keys being turned and bolts being drawn. I fell silent, trying not to shiver. The door opened slowly, revealing a bent woman shrouded all in black. The glow of the lantern showed only a sunken mouth drawn down at the corners by deep grooves. The rest of her face was cast in shadow by her wimple. She beckoned with a bony hand and reluctantly I moved forward.

‘I am Mademoiselle de la Force. I come at the bidding of the King.’

She nodded and gestured to me to follow. Gathering up the folds of my golden satin skirt, I swept forward. Nanette came after, carrying my train, while the postilion struggled with my trunk and portmanteau. The bony hand was flung up, in a clear gesture of refusal. The postilion halted, then shrugged, letting fall the end of the trunk.

‘Sorry, *mademoiselle*, I guess no men allowed.’

I stopped, confounded. ‘Who, then, will carry my trunk?’

The black-clad nun did not speak a word. After a moment, Nanette released my train and bent to take hold of the end of the trunk. The postilion saluted and ran back to his horses, standing with heads bowed in the dusk, snorting plumes of smoke like ancient dragons. Biting my lip, I draped my portmanteau over my arm and seized the other end. Thus burdened, we crossed the step into a dimly lit corridor, as cold as the yard outside. The nun slammed the door shut and bolted it, secured three heavy iron locks and returned the jangle of keys to her girdle. I saw a flash of a scornful eye and then the nun jerked her head, indicating I should follow her. As we walked, she rang a handbell, as if I was a leper or a plague-cart. Swallowing angry words, I followed her.

I now understood what my guardian had meant by a heart of gall.

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