

*Can there be joy without love?*



This allegorical story was written by Abraham Catulle Mendès (1841–1909), French poet and man of letters, under the title “Les Mots Perdus,” 1885.<sup>1</sup> A translation by Thomas Seltzer was published under the title “The Lost Words of Love,” in Willard Huntington Wright (*Comp. & Ed.*) *The Great Modern French Stories*. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1917; pp. 309-13. It was republished in the *World’s Great Romances*. New York: Black’s Readers Service Co., 1929; pp. 223-26. Many other publications elsewhere. Frontispiece by Robert Papp.

**ONCE UPON A TIME** a very cruel fairy, pretty as the flowers, but wicked as the serpents who hide in the grass ready to spring upon you, resolved to avenge herself upon all the people of a great country. Where was this country? On the mountain or in the plain, at the shore of the river or by the sea? This the story does not tell. Perhaps it was near the kingdom where the dressmakers were very skilful in adorning princesses’ robes with moons and with stars. And what the offence under which the fairy smarted? On this point also the story is silent. Perhaps they had omitted to offer up prayers to her at the baptism of the king’s daughter. Be this as it may, it is certain that the fairy was in a great rage.

At first she asked herself whether she should devastate the country by sending out the thousands of spirits that served her to set fire to all the palaces and all the cottages; or whether she should cause all the lilacs and all the roses to fade; or whether she should turn all the young girls into ugly old women. She could have let loose all the four winds in the streets and laid low all the houses and trees. At her command fire-spitting mountains would have buried the entire land under a mass of burning lava, and the sun would have turned from his path so as not to shine upon the accursed city. But she did still worse. Like a thief leisurely choosing the most precious jewels in a case, she removed from the memory of men and woman the three divine words:

I love you.

And having wrought this affliction, she removed herself with a smile that would have been more hideous than the church of the devil had she not had the most beautiful rosy lips in all creation.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.paulinedeysson.com/les-mots-perdus-de-catulle-mendes/>

## 2

At first the men and women only half perceived the wrong that had been done them. They felt they lacked something, but did not know what. The sweethearts who met in the eglantine lanes, the married couples who talked confidently to each other behind closed windows and drawn curtains, suddenly interrupted themselves and looked at each other or embraced. They felt, indeed, the desire to utter a certain customary phrase, but they had no idea even of what that phrase was. They were astonished, uneasy, but they asked no question, for they knew not what question to ask, so complete was their forgetfulness of the precious word. As yet, however, their suffering was not very great. They had so many other words they could whisper to each other, so many forms of endearment.

Alas! It was not long before they were seized with a profound melancholy. In vain did they adore each other, in vain did they call each other by the tenderest names and speak the sweetest language. It was not enough to declare that all the bliss lay in their kisses; to swear that they were ready to die, he for her and she for him; to call each other: "My soul; My flame! My dream!" They instinctively felt the need of saying and hearing another word, more exquisite than all other words; and with the bitter memory of the ecstasy contained in this word came the anguish of never again being able to utter or to hear it.

Quarrels followed in the wake of this distress. Judging his happiness incomplete on account of the avowal that was henceforth denied to the most ardent lips, the lover demanded from her and she from him the very thing that neither the one nor the other could give, without either knowing what that thing was, nor being able to name it. They accused each other of coldness, of perfidy, not believing in the tenderness which was not expressed as they desire it should be.

Thus the sweethearts soon ceased to have their rendezvous in the lanes where the eglantines grew, and even after the windows were closed the conjugal chambers echoed only with dry conversations from easy-chairs that were never drawn close to each other. Can there be joy without love? If the country which had incurred the hatred of the fairy had been ruined by war, or devastated by pestilence, it could not have been as desolate, as mournful, as forlorn as it had become on account of the three forgotten words.

## 3

There lived in this country a poet whose plight was even more pitiful than the plight of all the rest. It was not that having a beautiful sweetheart he was in despair at not being able to say and to hear the stolen word. He had no sweetheart. He was too much in love with the muse. It was because he was unable to finish a poem he had begun the day before the wicked fairy had accomplished her vengeance. And why? Because it just happened that the poem was to wind up with "I love you!" and it was impossible to end it in any other way.

The poet struck his brow, took his head between his hands, and asked himself: "Have I gone mad?" He was certain he had found the words that were to precede the last point of exclamation before he had commenced to write the stanza. The proof

that he had found them was that the rhyme with which it was to go was already written. There it was — it waited for them, nay, called aloud for them; it wanted no others, waiting for them like lips waiting for sister lips to kiss them. And this indispensable, fatal phrase he had forgotten ; he could not even recall that he had ever known it. Surely there was some mystery in this, the poet mused increasingly and with bitter melancholy — oh, the pang of interrupted poems! — as he sat at the edge of the forest near the limpid fountains where the fairies are wont to dance of an evening by starlight.

#### 4

Now as he sat one morning under the branches of a tree, the wicked, thieving fairy saw him and loved him. One is not a fairy for nothing; a fairy does not stand on ceremony. Swifter than a butterfly kisses a rose she put her lips on his lips, and the poet, greatly preoccupied though he was with his ode, could not help but feel the heavenliness of her caress. Blue and rose diamond grottos opened up in the depths of the earth, luminous as the stars. Thither the poet and the fairy were drawn in a chariot of gold by winged steeds who left the earth in their flight. And for a long, long time they loved each other, forgetful of all but their kisses and smiles. If they ceased for a moment to have their mouths united and to look into each other's eyes, it was but to take pleasure in more amiable diversions. Gnomes dressed in violet satin, elves attired in a misty haze, performed dances before them that fell in rhythm with the music of unseen orchestras, while flitting hands that had no arms brought them ruby baskets of snow-white fruit, perfumed like a white rose and like a virgin bosom. Or, to please the fairy more, the poet recited, while striking the chords of a theorbo, the most beautiful verses his fancy could conceive.

Fairy that she was, she had never known joy comparable to this of being sung by a beautiful young man who invented new songs every day. And when he grew silent, and she felt the breath of his mouth near her hair, felt it passing through her hair, she melted away in tenderness.

Their happiness seemed without end. Days passed by, many, many days, but nothing occurred to disturb their joy. And yet she had moments of gloom, when she would sit musing, with her cheek on her hand and her hair falling in streams down to her hips.

He cried:

O queen! what is it that makes you sad; what more can you desire, seeing that we are so happy in the midst of all our pleasures, you who are all powerful, you who are so beautiful?

At first she made no answer, but when he insisted, she sighed and said:

Alas! one always ends by suffering the evil that one has inflicted on others.  
Alas! I am sad because you have never told me: "I love you."

He did not pronounce the words, but uttered a cry of joy at having found again the end of his poem. In vain the fairy attempted to retain him in the blue and rose-diamond grottos, in the gardens of lilies that were as luminous as the stars. He re-

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turned to earth, completed, wrote and published his ode, in which the men and women of the afflicted country found again the divine words they had lost.

Now there were rendezvous again in the lanes, and warm, amorous conversations at the conjugal windows.

It is because of poetry that kisses are sweet, and lovers say nothing that the poets have not sung.

