

Matrimonial Adventures

The Bright Bees of Toupan

BY James Branch Cabell

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JUST A LITTLE ABOUT JAMES BRANCH CABELL

Mr. Cabell is to me a very pleasant voice over the telephone. I caught him up when I reached Richmond. He lives five miles out of town. He had already joined the Star Author Series of Matrimonial Adventures through the solicitation of Mr. Joseph Hergeshelmer.

I wanted to talk to Mr. Cabell about his story for the series, but the warm sunshine and the spring flowers that the New Yorker sometimes erroneously associates with Virginia were visiting elsewhere. It was snowing when I arrived and Richmond had become a jeweled city of gleaming icicles when I left the next morning. I did not meet Mr. Cabell, because the roads to town did not take kindly to the weather and motor traveling was unsafe.

If James Branch Cabell had written nothing else, as the author of "Jurgen" alone he would have a unique place in American letters.

But Mr. Cabell's other books are an additional reason for his high place in American literature. "The Bright Bees of Toupan" follows, and I know of no other writer who would have treated the very intricate subject of marriage in this perfectly delightful fairy-tale style.

After all, should artists marry? I leave it to you—and Mr. Cabell, MARY STEWART CUTTING, JR.

Miramón Lluigor had very wonderfully prospered at magic; he was, as they say, now blessed with more than any reasonable person would ask for, and the most clamant of these superfluities appeared to him to be his wife.

They tell how Miramón was one of the Lesby, born of a people that was neither human nor immortal, telling how his home was built upon the summit of the mountain called Vradex. Here in the old days dwelt Miramón Lluigor, at a discreet remove from the prudishness of men and the disreputable amours of the High Gods, retired in his Doubtful Palace; wherein, as they report also, this wizard designed the dreams for sleep.

His taste was for the richly romantic. But his wife Gisele had quite other notions, a whole set of notions, and her philosophy was that of beligerent individualism. And the wizard, to keep peace, at least in the intervals between his wife's more mordantly loquacious moments, would design such dreams as Gisele preferred. But he knew that these dreams did not express the small thoughts and fancies which harbored in the heart of Miramón Lluigor, and which would perish with the falling of his doom unless he wrought the fancies into dreams that, being fleshless, might evade carnivorous time. And Miramón hungered for the lost freedom of his bachelorhood.

His wife also was discontent, because the ways of the Lesby appeared to this mortal woman indecorous. The doom that was upon the Lesby seemed not entirely in good taste to her who had been born of a race about whom destiny did not bother; in fact, it was a continual irritation to her that her little boy Demetrius was predestinate to kill his father with the charmed sword Flamberge. This was a doom which Madame Gisele found not at all the sort of thing you cared to have imminent in your own family; and she felt that the sooner the gray Norns, who weave the fate of all that live, were spoken to quite candidly, the better it would be for everybody concerned.

She was irritated by the mere sight of Flamberge. So her thinking was not of silk and honey when, after polishing the sword as was her usage upon Thursday morning, she came into Miramón's ivory tower to hang the weapon in its right place. With Miramón sat that sleek person whom men called Ninzian. It was not known to all of Ninzian's friends that he was an evil spirit who had come out of the Bottomless Pit to work iniquity; but Miramón Lluigor knew this, and therefore he made appropriate use of the demon, and indeed upon this very afternoon the two were looking at that which Ninzian had procured for the wizard at a price.

"Good-day to you, Sir Ninzian," says Madame Gisele, politely enough. And then she spoke, in a different tone, to Miramón Lluigor. "And with what are you cluttering up the house now?" "Ah, wife," replies Miramón, "these are the bees of Toupan, a treasure beyond word or thinking. They are not as other bees, for theirs is the appearance of shining ice; and they crawl fretfully, as they have crawled since Toupan's downfall, about this cross of black stone."

"That is a very likely story for you to be telling me, who can see that the disgusting creatures have wings to fly away with whenever they want to. And besides, who in the world is Toupan?" "He is nobody in this world, wife, and it is wisest not to speak of him.

Let it suffice that he made all things as they were. Then Koshchel took the power from Toupan, and made all things as they are. Yet three of Toupan's servitors endure upon earth, where they who were once lords of the Vendish have now no power remaining save to creep humbly as insects; the use of their wings is denied them; the charmed stone holds them immutably. Oho, but wife, there is a contrap which would free them, a contrap which nobody has as yet discovered, and to their releaser will be granted whatever his will may desire."

"This is some more of your stuff and nonsense, out of old fairy tales, where everybody gets three wishes, and no good out of any of them." "No, my love, because I shall put them to quite practical uses. For you must know that when I have found out the contrap which will release the bees of Toupan—"

Gisele showed plainly that his foolishness did not concern her. She sighed, and hung the sword in its accustomed place. "Oh, but I am weary of this endless wizardry!"

"Then, wife," says Miramón, "then why are you perpetually meddling with what you do not understand?" "I think," said Ninzian, at once, for this demon, too, was married, "I think that I had best be going."

But Gisele's attention was reserved for her husband. "I meddle, as you so very politely call it, because you have no sense of what is right and proper, and no sense of morals, and no sense of expediency, and in fact, no sense at all."

Miramón said, "Now, dearest—" Sir Ninzian was hastily picking up his hat. But Gisele continued, with that resistless and devastating outflow which is peculiar to tidal waves and the tongue of her who speaks for her husband's own good.

"Women everywhere have a hard time of it, but in particular do I pity the woman that is married to one of your moonstruck artists. She has not half a husband, she has but the tending of a baby with long legs—"

"It is so much later than I thought, that really now—" observed Ninzian, ineffectively.

"—And I might have had an earl, or a well-thought-of baron, who would have had the decency to remember our anniversary and my birthday, and in any event would never have been in the house twenty-four hours a day. Instead here I am tied to a middle-aged who fritters away his time contriving dreams that nobody cares about one way or the other. Yet if only you would be sensible about your silly business I could put up with the inconvenience of having you underfoot every moment. People need dreams to help them through the night, and nobody enjoys a really good dream more than I do when I have time for it, with the million and one things that are put upon me. But dreams ought to be wholesome, they ought to point an uplifting moral, and certainly they ought not to be about incomprehensible thin nonsense that nobody can half-way understand. They ought, in other words, to make you feel that the world is a pretty good sort of place after all—"

"But, wife, I am sure that it is," says Miramón, mildly.

"Then the more shame to you! and the very least you can do is to keep such morbid notions to yourself, and not be upsetting other people's repose with them."

"I employ my natural gift. I express myself and none other. The rosebush does not put forth wheat, nor flux either," returned the wizard, with a tired shrug. "In fine, what would you have?"

"Oh, a great deal it means to you what I prefer! But if I had my wish your silly dream-making would be taken away from you so that we might live sensibly."

Now as she spoke Gisele slapped viciously at the black cross. And a thing happened to behold which would have astonished the magi and the enchanters who had given over centuries to searching for the contrap which would release the bees of Toupan. For now without any exercise of magic the scouring rag swept from the stone one of these insects, Koshchel, who made all things as they are, had decreed, they report, that these bright perils could be freed only in the most obvious way, because he knew this would be the last method attempted by any learned persons.

Now for an instant the walls of the Ivory tower were a-quiver like blown vells. And the bee passed glittering to the window, and through the clear glass of the closed window, leaving a small round hole there as the creature went to join its seven fellows in the Pleiades.

Toupan, afloat in the void, unclosed his ancient unappassable eyes; and Jay returned to his aforesaid estate in the moon, and all plants and trees everywhere were withered, and the sea also lost its greenness, and there were no more emeralds. And the High Gods were appalled to see their doom so near at hand, and they cried out to Koshchel who devised them.

Koshchel answered: "Have patience! When Toupan is released I fall with you. Meanwhile I have made all things as they are."

And that instant Miramón Lluigor, as he stood blinking in his Ivory tower, was aware of a touch upon his forehead, as if a damp sponge were passing over it, and he perceived that he had forgotten the secret of his wizardry. Something he could yet recall, they say, of the magic of the Purin and the cast stones, of the Horse and the Bull, of the Water, and most of the lore of the Asuras and the Faidhin rune remained to him. He could still make shift, he knew, to control the bitter Duerger, to build the fearful bridge of the White Ladies, or

to contrive the dance of the Korred. He kept his mastery of the Sheedem who devastate, of the Shehream who terrify, and of the Mazkeen who destroy. But such accomplishments, as he despairingly knew, were the stock in trade of any fairly competent sorcerer anywhere; and that supreme secret which had made Miramón Lluigor the master of all dreams was gone away from him completely.

He was very angry. "Accursed woman!" he cried out, "now indeed has your common sense completed what your nagging began. This is the doom of all artists that have to do with well-connected women. Truly has it been said that the marriage bed is the grave of art. Well, I have put up with much from you, but this settles it, and I wish you were in the middle of next week!"

With that he caught the soiled scouring rag from the hand of Gisele, and he slapped at one of the remaining bees, and brushed it from the black cross. And this bee departed as the other had done.

Toupan now moved his wings, exulting, and by his moving the worlds in that part of the universe were dislodged and ran melting down the sky; Gauracy swept the fragments together and formed a sun immeasurably greater than that which he had lost. And the High Gods were frightened now with reason, for in this intolerable glare they showed as flimsy and incredible inventions, and they knew that if ever the last remaining bee were freed from the cross, the din of the Pleiades would be completed, and their day would be over, and the power would return to Toupan.

Yet Koshchel, lifting never a finger, said only: "Eh, sirs, have patience! For I made all things as they are, and I know now it is my safeguard that I have made them in two ways."

But Miramón, in his ivory tower upon Vradex, knew only that his wish had been granted, for Gisele had gone just as a bubble breaks.

"And a good riddance, too," says Miramón. He turned to Ninzian, that smiling fiend. "Why, did you ever see the like of such outrageousness?"

"Oh, very often," replied this Ninzian, who too was married. Then Ninzian asked, "But what will you do next?"

Says Miramón, "I shall wish to have back the secret and the solace of my art."

But to Ninzian this seemed less obvious. "You may do that by releasing the third bee. Yes, Miramón, you can get back your art, but you will be left defenceless against the doom which is appointed. No, friend, by my advice you will employ the contrap as you at first intended, and will secure for yourself eternal life by wishing that Flamberge may vanish from this world of men." And Ninzian waved toward the sword with which the Norns had foreordained that Miramón Lluigor must be killed by his own son.

The fallen wizard answered: "Of what worth is life if it breed no more dreams?" And Miramón said also, "I wonder, Ninzian, just where is the middle of next week?"

Sleek Ninzian spoke, secure in his infernal erudition. "It will fall upon a Wednesday, but nobody knows whence. Olybrius states that it is now in Aratu, where all that enter are clothed like a bird with wings, and have only dust and clay to eat in the unchanging twilight—"

"She would not like that. She had always a delicate digestion."

"—Whereas Asinius Pollio suggests, not unaptly, that it waits beyond Sid and Ghold, in the blue house of Nostrand, where Sereda herds the unborn Wednesdays, under a roof of plaited serpents—"

"Dear me, now that would never suit a woman who had an almost morbid aversion to reptiles!"

"—But Societes declares it is in Nibaba, where Zipena and Cabrakam play at handball, and the earthquakes are at nurse—"

"She would be none the happier there. She does not care for babies, she would not for one moment put up with a fractious young earthquake, and would make things most unpleasant for everybody. Ninzian"—and Miramón coughed—"Ninzian, I begin to fear I have been a little hasty."

"It is the frailty of all you artists," the fiend replied. "In any event you have one wish remaining, and no more. You can at will desire to have back again the control of your lost magies, or you can have back your wife to control you."

"Yes," says Miramón, forlornly. "And indeed," the demon went on, with that glib optimism reserved for the dilemmas of one's friends, "indeed it is in many ways a splendid thing for you to have the choice clear cut. Nobody can succeed alike at being an artist and a husband. I hold no brief for either career, because I think that art is an unreasonable mistress, and I think also that a wife is amenable to the same description. But I am certain no man can serve both."

Miramón sighed. "That is true. There is no marriage for the maker of dreams, because he is perpetually creating finer women than earth provides. The touch of flesh cannot content him who has arranged the shining hair of angels and modeled the breasts of the sphinx. The woman that shares his bed is there, of course, much as the blanket or the pillow is there, and each is an aid to comfort. But what has the maker of dreams, what has that troubled being who lives inside the creature which a mirror reveals to him, to do with women? At best, these animals afford him models to be idealized beyond the insignificant truth, somewhat as I have made a soul-containing portent with only a lizard to start on. And at worst, these animals

can live through no half-hour without meddling where they do not understand."

Now Miramón kept silence. He was fingering the magic colors with which he blazoned the first sketches of his dream. Here was his white, which was the foam of ocean made solid, and the black he had wrung from the burned bones of nine emperors. Here was the yellow slime of Scyros, and crimson cinnabaris composed of the mingled blood of behemoths and dragons, and here was the poisonous blue sand of Puteoli. And Miramón, who was no longer a potent wizard, considered that loveliness and horror which a moment ago he had known how to evoke with these pigments, he who had now no power to lend life to his designs, and kept just skill enough it might be to place the stripings on a barber's pole.

And Miramón Lluigor said: "It would be a sad happening if I were never again to sway the sleeping of men, and grant them yet more dreams of distinction and clarity, of beauty and symmetry, of tenderness and truth and urbanity. For whether they like it or not, I know that it is good for them, and it affords to their starved living that which they lack and ought to have."

And Miramón said also: "Yet it would be another sad happening were my poor wife permitted eternally to scold the shivering earthquakes in the middle of next week. What does it matter that I do not especially like her? There is a great deal about myself that I do not like, such as my body's flabbiness, and the small nose which makes ludicrous the face I wear; but do I banker to be transformed into a sturdy man-at-arms? Do I view the snout of an elephant with covetousness? Why, but, Ninzian, I am astonished at your foolish talking! What need have I of perfection? What would I have in common with anybody who was patient with me and thought highly of my doings? No, Ninzian, it is in vain that you pester me with your continuous talking, for I am as used to her shortcomings as I am to my own shortcomings. I regard her tantrums with the resignation I extend to inclement weather. It is unpleasant. Ah, yes, but if life should become an endless clear May afternoon we could not endure it; we who have once been lashed by storms would cross land and sea to look for snow and pelting hail. Just so, to have Gisele about keeps me perpetually fretted, but now that she is gone I am miserable. No, Ninzian, you may spare your talking, you need say no more, for I simply could not put up with being left to live in comfort."

Sir Ninzian had heard him through, with that patience which is requisite to friends. And Ninzian, shrugging, said, "Then do you choose Miramón for your wife and no more dreams, or for your art and loneliness?"

"Such wishing would be overwasteful," Miramón replied, as he dusted away the third bee. "Since I can bear to give up neither my wife nor my art, no matter how destroyingly they work against each other, I wish for everything to be put back just where it was an hour ago."

The last bee flew in a wide circle, and returned to the cross. Life reawoke in all which had perished in that hour, and Gauracy's baleful sun was gone, and the dislodged worlds and satellites were revolving trimly in their former places. And the High Gods rejoiced; for there were only seven Pleiades, and Toupan, afloat in the void, again seemed harmless enough, because the eyes were closed wherein is tireless and unappassable malignity, and a foreknowledge which is perturbing to the Gods.

Koshchel said only: "What need was there to worry? Did I not make my creatures male and female? And did I not make the tie which is between them, that cord which I wove equally of love and of distilling? Eh, sirs, but that is a strong cord, and though all things that are depend upon it, my weaving holds."

But Miramón in his Ivory tower knew nothing of how he had played havoc with the universe; he only knew that upon the black stone cross three bees were crawling fretfully, and that his wife Gisele had come back to him enraged.

"A pretty trick that was to play on me!" she says. "Oh, but I pity the woman that is married to an artist!"

"But why do you perpetually meddle without understanding?" he replied, as fretful as the accursed bees, as angry as the intolerable woman.

"And they wear on very much as before."

Ireland's Famine of 1847. In 1847, famine in Ireland shocked the sensibilities of the people of the United States, who devised means to relieve some portion of the distress, concerning which many painful accounts were printed in the papers at the time, the Detroit News recalls American vessels were freighted by private subscriptions in the United States and were sent on errands of mercy to Ireland, where entire families were howling with the pangs of hunger, and dying upon the pavements of a crowded city, while speculators in breadstuffs furtively cast the "sweated" portions of their granaries into the nighttide that it might be carried out to sea.

It was said that 200,000 pounds sterling were due to the Provincial Bank of Ireland by one house engaged in the importation of corn, which was bought by the cargo at £13 per ton, merely to be hoarded for a rise in prices. No satisfactory report of the distribution of the articles sent from America was ever made.

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Her Reason for Spinsterhood. "Think you'll ever marry, Eleanor?" "No probably not. Men don't like women with brains."—Life.

Harold! He gasped, stood stock still and looked pained. "You told me you got in last night at 10 o'clock. Yet I distinctly heard the clock strike 2!" "That's right, Mabel," he nodded, "it started to strike 10, but I stopped it to keep from disturbing you."—Richmond Times-Dispatch.

A gossip never seems to have time to investigate the facts.

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