

Masks in the Tapestry

Jean Lorrain

Brian Stableford, Translator

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Jean Lorrain is the pen name of Paul Alexandre Martin Duval (1855-1906), a French writer and journalist who, though he was one of the leading figures of the Decadent Movement, is remembered today mainly for his duel with Marcel Proust (both survived). His tales of queens, knights, princes, princesses, visions, and quests, ably translated by Brian Stableford, are almost trance-inducing in the beauty of their language, and their overall effect is that of gazing on stained-glass windows, each depicting a mythical adventure as they glow and dip into shadow with the changing light.

A young prince, the fruit of his mother's adultery, was harshly raised in a cloister according to her orders. He has been taught to hate love, women, and "everything that flourishes under heaven." Having vowed to kill the unfaithful knight who fathered him, he sets off on a quest seeking vengeance but finds something very different. Other tales include that of a young woman whom jealous fays have transformed into a hideous serpent awaiting only the kiss of her rescuer, of journeys to mysterious forests where luminous female forms appear in the treetops, and of the promise of a sleep that will "close the wounds of memory," an offer that is tempting but is refused in favor of the rigors of life.

Such tales of enchantment and intoxicating beauty are typically thought to be for children, but it would be a precocious child indeed who would appreciate Lorrain's masterful use of language or comprehend the situations that drive the protagonists' quests.

Best enjoyed in a quiet place, these are fairy tales for adults to savor.

KRISTINE MORRIS (July/August 2017)

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