



## TALES THE COUNTESS TOLD

By Stephen Wyatt

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# TALES THE COUNTESS TOLD

A play about the life and fairy tales of the  
Countess D'Aulnoy

By

STEPHEN WYATT

MARIE-CATHERINE LE JUMEL DE BARNEVILLE,

COMTESSE D'AULNOY

(1650 – 1705)

“The most famous French writer of fairy stories after Perrault”

(The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales)

## CHARACTERS

THE COUNTESS

LOUISE

THE STEWARD

PHILIPPE

THE CREATURES OF THE COUNTESS'S IMAGINATION

## NOTE ON THE STAGING

The suggestions for staging are only suggestions.. Use the resources you have.

The whole piece is intended as an invitation to the theatrical imagination.

## NOTE ON THE MUSIC

My experience has been that Rameau's music fits the play very well but feel free to ignore my suggestions and make your own choice of music.

## SCENE ONE

(DARKNESS. A CLAP OF THUNDER.)

(THE EARTHQUAKE MUSIC FROM RAMEAU'S *LES INDES GALANTES*.)

(A LIGHTNING FLASH SHOWS THE SILHOUETTE OF AN IMPERIOUS BEWIGGED FIGURE MAKING A GESTURE OF BANISHMENT.)

(THE COUNTESS'S VOICE IS HEARD IN THE BLACKNESS:)

COUNTESS:

Now the King was very angry and he looked everywhere for someone to blame. And, of course, he thought of the Countess. But the Countess had become older and wiser. Instead of waiting for a summons to the presence of the angry King, she decided to pack her bags and seek solace in the sleepy realms of Arcadia.

(THE EARTHQUAKE MUSIC STARTS TO SUBSIDE. THE ROYAL FIGURE STARTS TO FADE BACK INTO THE DARK. GRADUALLY PASTORAL MUSIC – RAMEAU AGAIN – STARTS TO SEEP IN)

(THE LIGHTS COME UP SLOWLY ON A STRANGE MAGICAL GARDEN, PART SEVENTEENTH CENTURY FORMAL WITH CLASSICAL STATUARY, PART A WILDERNESS OF BRIGHT, EXOTIC VEGETATION, MADE UP OF A DISCONCERTING MIX OF FOLIAGE AND HALF HIDDEN HUMAN BEINGS. THE MUSIC FADES.)

(THE COUNTESS SITS IN THE GARDEN, A HALF-WRITTEN  
LETTER IN HER HAND, LOST IN THOUGHT.)

(A SHEEP BLEATS)

(SHE TURNS ON IT IN FURY.)

COUNTESS: Baa! Baaaa! Baaaaa! Baaaaaa!!!

(THE SHEEP IS SILENCED. THE COUNTESS RETURNS TO HER  
LETTER, RE-READING WHAT SHE'S WRITTEN.)

COUNTESS: My dear Eloise, do you remember that time in our salon when we all discussed the merits of country life – its tranquillity, its honesty, its closeness to nature? I seem to remember I waxed eloquent on the subject of my own dear Barneville where I was born and brought up. But now I know the truth. A few days here in Barneville is a delight, an idyll. A few months in Barneville is a form of torture.

(A PAUSE. THEN SHE STARTS TO WRITE.)

COUNTESS: Many thanks for your news from Paris. I know you can tell me nothing of the matter which most concerns me – but I fear I have become like a starving dog skulking under the table – I am ravenous for even the merest scrap of gossip.

(THE SHEEP BLEATS. SHE GIVES IT A FILTHY LOOK.)

COUNTESS: For all I know the sheep here cherish any number of dark guilty secrets inside their woolly heads. But not being a sheep myself, I have no access to all the ovine gossip.

(THE COUNTESS'S STEWARD ENTERS.)

STEWARD: (HESITANTLY) My lady –

COUNTESS: (LOOKING UP) No, don't tell me –

STEWARD: The carriage you ordered for this afternoon –

COUNTESS: Is still broken down. The blacksmith has not yet mended the axle.

STEWARD: The axle is there, my lady, and fitted.

COUNTESS: You don't mean that it is going to be possible finally for me to take a drive in the country?

STEWARD: No, my lady. The black horse –

COUNTESS: Has lost a shoe?

STEWARD: Has sprained its fetlock.

COUNTESS: Which means -?

STEWARD: The black horse will not be fit to pull your carriage for another couple of weeks.

COUNTESS: And there is no other suitable horse?

STEWARD: No, my lady.

COUNTESS: Why did I know that?

STEWARD: I'm very sorry, my lady.

COUNTESS: I'm sure the two weeks will pass by in the blinking of an eye.  
You may go.

STEWARD: Thank you, my lady.

(THE STEWARD BOWS AND LEAVES. THE COUNTESS GIVES A SIGH OF SUPPRESSED EXASPERATION. THEN RETURNS TO HER LETTER)

COUNTESS: (WRITING) It is not possible to convey the snail like pace of life here. Taking my carriage out requires complex negotiation and if I rage, things go more slowly still. A day is an age – the cows moo, the sheep bleat, the horses whinny, my steward makes excuses for doing nothing. Of course, I try to write. But somehow Barneville reduces the fount of inspiration to a feeble muddy trickle.

(PAUSE)

What I lack more than anything is an audience. If only you were here – or I was back in Paris reading aloud to my friends in the salon. Exile was the safe option. But I'm not sure now whether it isn't a greater punishment than anything his majesty could think of.

(ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLY THE GARDEN STARTS TO MOVE.)

COUNTESS: If I could have a wish, this is what it would be. I want someone to talk to, a companion, a kindred spirit. I have as much chance

of finding such a person here as of encountering a beached whale. But then – I remember you telling me that I was a witch. If I set my mind to wishing for something, I was always sure to get it in the end. And I reminded you that I write fairy stories. And in fairy stories having a wish granted is not usually an unmixed blessing. But still – what do I have to lose?

(SHE CLOSES HER EYES.)

COUNTESS: I wish... I wish...

(THE GARDEN BECOMES MORE AGITATED. MUSIC CREEPS SOFTLY IN – THE ENTRY OF POLYMNIE FROM RAMEAU’S LES BOREADES.)

(THE STEWARD RE-ENTERS.)

(HE GIVES A DISCREET COUGH. THE COUNTESS OPENS HER EYES. THE MUSIC SLOWLY FADES. THE GARDEN CEASES ITS MOTION.)

STEWARD: Excuse me, my lady -

COUNTESS: Yes?

STEWARD: There’s a young gentlewoman asking to see you.

COUNTESS: (SLOWLY) A young gentlewoman?

STEWARD: Yes, she says she is your neighbour.

COUNTESS: Her name?

STEWARD: Madame de Ventadour.

COUNTESS: And she really arrived just now – unannounced.



STEWARD: She was most apologetic. She said that she hoped she might be forgiven for the unexpected intrusion.

COUNTESS: Forgiven? Thanked more like.

STEWARD: Shall I admit here?

COUNTESS: Of course.

(THE STEWARD LEAVES. THE COUNTESS TAKES UP HER PEN.)

COUNTESS: My dear Eloise, the most extraordinary thing. I – (PUTTING DOWN HER PEN) No, no, don't break the spell.

(THE STEWARD USHERS IN LOUISE DE VENTADOUR THEN LEAVES. THE COUNTESS RISES TO GREET HER. LOUISE IS YOUNG AND NERVOUS.)

COUNTESS: My dear Madame de Ventadour, welcome.

(SHE GESTURES FOR LOUISE TO SIT. LOUISE STILL TONGUE-TIED SITS BY HER SIDE.)

LOUISE: I feel quite embarrassed at my boldness in intruding in this way. I have seen your house in the distance on a number of occasions when I have been out in my carriage and I have to confess since we are neighbours, I have often wanted to make your acquaintance.

COUNTESS: You are lonely.

LOUISE: (THROWN BY THE BLUNTNESS) Yes, I suppose I am.

COUNTESS: And your husband?

LOUISE: He is often away. He likes to hunt.

COUNTESS: Deer? Boar? Other women?

LOUISE: I – I would not think ill of my husband.

COUNTESS: No, of course not. Forgive me. I have become a very inquisitive old woman.

LOUISE: Hardly old, madame.

COUNTESS: Old enough to be your mother.

LOUISE: My mother is not old, Madame.

COUNTESS: A good answer. Well done!

(PAUSE.)

COUNTESS: What is your name, child?

LOUISE: Louise, Madame.

COUNTESS: My dear Louise, delightful though your visit is to me, I have to ask you – do you know who I am?

LOUISE: You are my neighbour, Madame – and a lady of quality I feel confident I am privileged to visit.

COUNTESS: So your husband has said nothing?

LOUISE: Forgive me, I don't understand.

COUNTESS: I am Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville, Countess d'Aulnoy.

(AN IMPRESSIVE PAUSE.)

COUNTESS: The name means nothing to you?

LOUISE: (APOLOGETICALLY) No, madame.

COUNTESS: Well, thank heaven for that. (PAUSE) How old are you, my dear?

LOUISE: Eighteen.

COUNTESS: And your husband?

LOUISE: He is forty-five, Madame.

COUNTESS: A father figure?

LOUISE: He is my husband.

COUNTESS: Just so. And you were married...?

LOUISE: When I was seventeen.

COUNTESS: Ah - I was married at sixteen.

LOUISE: But, Madame, seventeen is only-

COUNTESS: I know, I know. But by your age I was in the Bastille on trial for conspiracy to murder my husband.

LOUISE: (SHOCKED) Madame, I-

COUNTESS: What?

LOUISE: I - I'm sure you were wrongfully accused.

COUNTESS: Alas, no. I did everything I could to see him dead. Unfortunately, I failed.

LOUISE: (STARTING TO RISE) Madame, I-

COUNTESS: You ought to go? Is that what you mean?

LOUISE: I don't wish to appear impolite but-

COUNTESS: You see why I asked about your husband. He is of an age to remember the Countess d'Aulnoy - and thoroughly disapprove.