

NEVER GO BACK

A Short Story

by

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Years ago, travelling through France, a strange event happened. Soon after leaving Poitiers, my second-hand Vespa began to fail. It went slower and slower and eventually spluttered up a hill into a small town and died in the main square. As I looked around for a garage, a young woman rushed across the dusty square and shouted something at me.

‘Let me guess. You’re Yugoslavian?’

I shook my head and told her that my scooter had broken down.

‘My cousin’s a mechanic.’ She pointed to a narrow road off the square.

I asked her name.

She hesitated. ‘I don’t usually tell strangers.’

‘Don’t worry. It’s not important,’ I answered. A few drops of rain began to fall.

‘On the contrary, it is extremely important!’ She rushed away holding a newspaper over her hair as it had just started to rain.

The garage comprised of one old man working in a sort of cage and a boy about sixteen. ‘Probably the exhaust,’ the boy mumbled, without enthusiasm.

I visited the 11th century Romanesque church and admired its triple nave of seven bays.

Later, the café was quite full and I had to sit in a dark corner at the back.

The girl I had met earlier came in with the mechanic. They seemed quite agitated. She swallowed her drink in one gulp. I tried to read my guide book. The patron was rushing round securing doors and windows as the wind had increased alarmingly. I planned the next stage of my journey. Tomorrow, the three Romanesque churches at Melle, then Angoulême... Suddenly, the man opposite me got up abruptly, spilling his wine.

‘So we meet again,’ the girl said, sitting down in his place. The café lights had come on and I saw how amazingly fair-skinned she was, her hair seemed almost bleached white and her eyes were incredible; light green and watery.

She held out her hand. ‘My name’s, Melusine.’

‘And I am...’

‘The King of Cyprus!’ she laughed. ‘No, you’re English. The first thing I noticed was the GB plate on your scooter which by the way should be ready to collect by late afternoon. You are curious about my name? Let’s go up to the old castle and I’ll tell you a story.’

The weather had cleared. The castle was in ruins but there was a wonderful long promenade of lime trees surrounded by fragrant flower beds. We sat on the terrace overlooking the Vonne Valley. She put her arm through mine. ‘I chose you,’ she whispered.

I had developed a pounding headache. She made up a poultice of wet leaves and sitting slightly behind me held it against my forehead. ‘The story goes that years ago...’ her voice seemed to drift about my head, ‘the people here gave their town’s name to the Kings of Cyprus... everybody here is descended from a water-fairy called Melusine who possessed the rare power to change herself into a serpent every