

THE MARVELOUS STORY OF CLAIRE D'AMOUR

I. Which names the illustrious godfather of the hero of this story

There was once a very pious, very noble and very poor lady. She lived in a dilapidated château surrounded by a large park, where she lived in holy meditation. Her husband had left for the war, where he died, and she had a son.

She had great difficulty finding a godfather or a godmother, because she had ceased all communication with the noble families of the land. She therefore summoned her old maidservant Gothon and said to her: "Go to the village and try to find an honorable godfather and godmother for my son, of good morals.

Gothon went at a run, and encountered on the way a man riding a donkey who was clad in a robe and had a blond beard. Gothon liked him because he had a pleasant face, and he seemed to enter into conversation easily.

"Where are you going in such a hurry, Madame Gothon," he said to her.

Flattered to be called by her name like that, Gothon replied: "I'm looking for a godfather for the son of my mistress. She will be lucky if I can find one of your merit."

The man smiled. He was Jesus Christ, who was visiting the earth to study the mores of humans.

"I accept," he said. And there's a lady over there who is known to me, and will gladly agree to serve as godmother."

He had perceived the Holy Virgin. She had come to a neighboring field to pick a bouquet of terrestrial flowers because, being perishable, they are more charming than divine flowers, which are eternal.

All three, therefore, went together to the pious lady's château, and the baptism of the child was celebrated; he was named Maurice, because it was Saint Maurice's Day. After that, Jesus Christ and the Holy Virgin identified themselves, and the pious lady and Gothon threw themselves down and prostrated themselves.

Gothon ran to the cellar to fetch a bottle of old wine. Jesus Christ drank joyfully and in abundance, for he liked feasting and conversation at table; and the Holy Virgin accepted a bouquet of roses from the park. After that, they departed, chatting together, for Heaven. The pious lady and Gothon were both very happy that Maurice had such a godfather and godmother.

At dusk, Gothon was rocking the child by the gate of the park when an old man went by. He was dressed like a beggar, with a long beard, and was carrying a heavy sack on his back. He stopped and smiled at the child.

At the same moment, the sun disappeared over the horizon; the fir trees murmured with unaccustomed softness, and the evening dressed everything in an incomparable beauty.

Gothon ran to the kitchen and brought a glass of wine to the old man, less for the joy she had just experienced than because of her natural generosity.

Having drunk it, the old man said: "If that child has no godfather, I would gladly serve in that capacity."

Gothon laughed loudly and for a long time, and when her hilarity had calmed down she replied: "Do you think my mistress would take for a godfather a poor man who travels the roads with a sack and a staff? Know this, and you can repeat it to anyone who asks you: today, our little Maurice has had for a godfather and godmother Jesus Christ and the Holy Virgin."

Gothon looked at the man curiously in order to enjoy his astonishment and admiration, but he did not seem at all wonderstruck. He shook his head several times, looked at the child and said: "Poor child! Poor child!"

Night had now fallen completely, but the man's face was illuminated by a supernatural light; his eyes shone and radiance ran through his beard.

"That's something that doesn't promise you a joyful life exempt from cares," he said to the child. "Those who are consecrated to Jesus Christ lead a bitter life of good works, prayers and penitence. They have a rope around the body and the top of the head shaven. I'll make you a very precious gift; you'll thank me later from the bottom of your heart."

He unfastened his sack and Gothon saw, with surprise, that the sack was full of sand. He took out a handful of it; the sand sparkled like gold. He threw it over Maurice's face, saying: "I give you the gift of illusion; I am the sandman; I am the one who passes in the mist and throws that gilded dust into human eyes. I pour with it crazy imaginations, surprising dreams and winged chimeras. I show the unhappy lover the smile of his mistress; by virtue of my magic the ambitious man becomes king for a night, the beggar eats and warms himself in a palace. I dispense sleep, the marvel of life. Thanks to me, reality is transformed at the whim of the imagination, one prefers the moon to the sun, deserted woods to populous towns, silent pools to rivers full of ships. You, child, are receiving the divine illusion that will permit you never to see life as it is."

Having said that, the sandman drew away, not without throwing a little of his sand into Gothon's eyes. She dreamed that Jesus Christ summoned her to paradise and sat her down in a sparkling robe among pink angels and bearded saints.

From his infancy, Maurice was brought up in religion. The bishop of the region, having learned what an illustrious godfather he had, came to see him several times, in order to instruct him in divine matters. Gothon took him to church every day, and he spent long hours during the day praying with his mother.

In the evening, however, when he wandered in the park, alone, he forgot sacred thoughts and, because of the sandman's gift, his mind flew away to distant marvels.

Once, when he was gazing at the distant countryside, at a place where the wall surrounding the park had partly collapsed, he perceived a girl almost the same age as himself sitting in the heather. She had strange dark eyes, unkempt hair and was dressed like a pauper.

On seeing Maurice she stood up and beckoned to him imperiously. As he appeared hesitant and made his timidity visible, she burst out laughing and went away.

He often returned to the same place at the same time in the evening, and he perceived the pauper girl. She had made gestures of command and threat to him several times, but afterwards, on the contrary, she struck gracious poses, held out her clasped hands to him, and blew him a kiss.

Maurice dared not climb over the wall to go to meet her. The pauper girl's gaze troubled him. She inspired in him, at the same time, fear, attraction and repulsion. He did not mention her to Gothon, his mother or the bishop. He sometimes wondered whether she was a vision or a reality, whether she was sent by God or by the Devil.

In the afternoon, kneeling before his mother's ivory crucifix, he thought about her instead of praying; it was not the face of Christ but her image that he saw, and he associated it confusedly with forest trees, wild heather and paths descending beneath oaks. It was a similar fear and a similar hope that the pauper girl and nature engendered in his soul.

His first communion was celebrated with great pomp. Gothon put on a lacy bonnet and an embroidered shawl that day. It was the bishop who held out the host to Maurice. The child had his hands crossed over his breast and he tried to absorb himself entirely in the thought of God. The organ played, the white head-dresses of the women inclined like celestial birds; flowers, candles and incense filled the church with a divine atmosphere.

Maurice was astonished not to feel in his heart the promised joy. He watched out for the ecstasy on the faces of his little companions. He perceived Gothon and his mother on their knees, looking at him with admiration. He appealed to God with all his might, with the voices of his soul.

Suddenly, however, he ceased to hear the sound of bells and respire the perfume of garlands. It seemed to him that the candles were extinguished, that the stone walls of the church collapsed. Instead of the columns there were straight oaks whose branches split the stained glass windows and the vaults. The undulating and prostrate crowd of the witnesses was a field of large white flowers, which the wind caused

to quiver. The incense-burners were birds, and the bishop had taken on the form of a rock, at the summit of which his golden miter could still be distinguished. In the place of the altar, Maurice perceived a verdant clearing, in the middle of which the pauper girl was lying, her legs and neck bare. She stretched herself out lazily in the sunlit grass, and looked at him with an ironic and brazen gaze. A flood of light inundated her and she appeared to him to be admirably beautiful.

Then he uttered a cry and tried to launch himself forward. He took two steps and fell on the flagstones. An hour later, he came round, bathed by his mother's tears, in Gothon's arms.

II. The birth and first amorous adventures of Claire d'Amour

In the village near the château in which the hero of this true story resided, there lived a drunken and coarse tavern-keeper named Samson. That man had caused his wife to die of chagrin; he spent his time drinking and quarreling with the local mariners. People were afraid of him, but he was esteemed because of his strength and evil instincts.

At about the same time that Maurice was born, he was wandering in the countryside, having drunk more than usual. He thought he perceived a white form floating in a wood that he was passing alongside. Then he heard the moans of a child. He advanced and found a tiny baby girl abandoned in the midst of the heather.

Let's take that baby, he thought, and I'll sell her for three écus to some barren wife.

He took the little girl under his arm and went home.

The next day he went to offer her to several neighbors, but when he had told them how he had found her, and how he had seen a white form wandering around her, no one wanted to take her, judging that she was a daughter of fays.

He thought for a moment of throwing her to the bottom of his well, and even prepared a rope and a stone for that purpose, but he reflected that when she was older she could perform the function of waitress in his inn. He kept her with him.

The child's skin was admirably white; she seemed like a ray of sunlight. For that reason, she was named Claire.

She lived in Samson's inn; she spent her time outside the door, sitting in the gutter, jostled by some and caressed by others. She had bushy hair, wild eyes and a savage expression, and was an object of both derision and pity. Every evening, when Samson had been drinking, he beat her without any reason, whatever she had done, by virtue of evil inclination.

Claire received blows both when she had worked hard for her master, fetching water, sweeping and washing, and when she had stolen from him; because of that she could never understand the difference there was between good and evil. She esteemed that all human actions were of the same nature, since they all had the inevitable consequence of insults and blows of the rope.

Once, she escaped for an entire day to run through the fields and the nearby woods. She lived the most beautiful hours of her youth. The sun was streaming; she picked wild fruits from the hedges, cut flowers and understood their beauty for the first time. She lay down on the earth and the wild grass spoke to her. They told her vague and pleasant things, which thought could not translate, but which went to her heart.

When she went back in the evening, Samson put her on her knees and attached her by her shoulders to the old table on the inn; he left her there, in spite of her groans, until an advanced hour of the night.

Claire was hated by other children of her own age; they would not admit her to their games; they insulted her and threw stones at her. Their parents had told them that she was a daughter of fays, a pagan, and they showed an aversion for her that they translated into blows when they could.

Claire, who had never known amity, was not astonished by that. She was only afflicted by not having sufficient strength to make her enemies perish. She did not even have a sentiment of injustice, supposing that all children received, in the evening, blows of the rope, and were tied to an oak table when they spent a day running through the countryside.

It required a great deal of experience and reflection in order for her to conceive that things might be otherwise.

One day when a village child had been beaten and went home in tears, Claire slipped in behind him, penetrated into the courtyard of the house and went to stick her face to a widow in order to enjoy his torture. However, she saw his mother take him in her arms, not to choke him, but to embrace him tenderly and then prepare bread and milk for him.

That day, she learned the injustice of the world, and that was her first veritable chagrin.

She did not weep, however, because there were no tears in her.

Next door to the Samson house lived a lame old mariner named Guluche. He had been around the world several times, and now he smoked his pipe, dreaming, and waiting for death. His legs and arms were almost paralyzed; he liked solitude, and his heart was full of good will.

Once, when Claire was going past his house, he called to her. Frightened, she hesitated to approach him. He went back into his house, got an apple, and held it out to her. She took it fearfully, afraid of being hit. She bit into the fruit while Guluche smiled. The fruit was excellent; she had not received any blows. The man had just given her that gift in order that he might enjoy it. She had the revelation of something new and marvelous.

She became the friend of Guluche, the lame old mariner. He gave her fruits, told her stories and poured into her soul the inestimable sweetness of amity.

Meanwhile, she grew up; her eyes softened and filled with languor; her hair, in falling over her shoulders, created a mysterious harmony; she became slender and graceful.

And one day, on the point of striking her, Samson encountered her ardent gaze and stopped, suddenly having the sentiment of beauty. He remained thoughtful, and paced back and forth for a long time in front of the fireplace.

From that day on he beat her less frequently, he gave her a greater liberty, and even gave her a few sous so that she could buy dresses and ornaments.

Claire became beautiful, and rapidly discovered the charms and dangers that accompany the precious gift of beauty.

When it was very hot she had the custom of sitting down outside the door of Samson's inn. Her unfastened corsage allowed her bare breasts to be seen; her eyes were more beautiful than usual; she dreamed about the noises of forests, the song of crickets.

At the same time every day an old lord of the region passed along the road in front of her. He leaned on a cane in order to walk, he had pale, slack cheeks and his hands were agitated by a tremor. When he perceived Claire his face went pale, his lips quivered and he became horrible to behold. He tried to speak to her several times, but he could not articulate any intelligible sound. When he arrived at the street corner he stopped and made signs to her for a long time to come and join him in a nearby wood.

Claire was very intrigued by those things, but she did not go with the lord because his ugliness frightened her.

Meanwhile, all the mariners who came to drink in Samson's tavern desired her violently. She listened with an ingenuous gaze to their coarse words, and her apparent candor augmented the desire they had for her.

Among those men there was one mariner who affected in her regard the tender manners of a man in love. He gazed at her for a long time in silence; one day, he offered her a flower. He was mild and obedient with her. One evening, when she was alone in the inn, he came in and asked her, with timid words, to go with him. She accompanied him into the countryside, embarrassed to see him so tremulous beside her. But when they had arrived at a solitary place, the man threw himself upon her and knocked her to the ground brutally, with stifled and mysterious cries, followed by sighs and shivers.

Claire discovered amour for the first time. She experienced surprise but no joy in it. But she submitted to it in the same way that she had submitted to the blows of Samson's rope, and submitted to the rain and the wind when she was caught by a storm on a road.

Having given herself once, she gave herself to all the mariners at the inn and every man who asked her, unaware of the divine sensuality she was transmitting.

Her beauty increased, and she was nicknamed Claire d'Amour because of the facility with which she allowed herself to be loved.

Her life was not joyful, however; amour did not give her any pleasure; she hated all men. The time she spent with old Guluche was the sole charm of her life.

She often fled the village and wandered through the fields. It was in the course of one of those excursions that she perceived Maurice dreaming in his park one day, and she was touched by his youth and his grace. The neat and well-dressed little boy was different from all the men she had known thus far,

and she was glad to see him. She came back often at the same time, made signs to him, and a distant and pleasant friendship was established between them.

The image of Claire had taken complete possession of Maurice's heart, but he continued to be afraid of her.

One evening, as he approached the place where he was accustomed to seeing her, he found her sitting on the stones of the wall. She was staring at him with eyes full of timidity, languor and audacity.

Maurice's heart was beating very forcefully.

"Would you like to come with me?" she said.

"Where?"

"Out there." And her finger pointed at the horizon, where the sun was setting behind a wood of fir trees.

"I can't," Maurice replied. "What would my mother and Gothon say?"

Claire smiled. "Do you love them?" she said.

"Yes."

"More than me?"

"Yes, for the moment."

"Then I'm annoyed," said Claire, and, gripped by anger, she tried to go away; but Maurice retained her by the hand.

"What's your name?" he said.

"My name is Claire, but people call me Claire d'Amour."

"Why?"

Then Claire bowed her head, blushed and fell silent. They were beside one another, their cheeks were so close that Claire's hair brushed Maurice's. A cricket started singing the hymn of the evening and the earth, delightedly, and their lips came together.

After that kiss, they were ashamed, and ran away.

Having meditated, Maurice understood God's sixth commandment, the meaning of which had remained obscure to him previously. He went into the oratory where he was accustomed to pray, and fell to his knees; but he sensed that his prayer was not escaping from his heart and was not rising toward God. He had the warm taste of Claire d'Amour's kiss on his lips, and savored it in thought, deliciously.

He raised his head toward the ivory Christ and saw, distinctly, his godfather's face turn away from him.

He thought that he had sinned. He went down into the garden, went to find Gothon, who was peeling vegetables, sat down next to her, put his head on her knees and wept. And Gothon wept too, without knowing what his chagrin was, in sympathy, because he was weeping.