

THE ROBE OF SINCERITY

A philosopher of the isle of Crete named Misandre, a naturally good man but eccentric in his manners and extraordinary in his sentiments, was nevertheless married to a wife who had beauty and virtue; but that wife had a character so savage and melancholy that, the foundation of ill humor combining with the misfortune she had in being united with a husband who had very little fortune and a great many caprices, she had become so exceedingly bitter and sad, and so bad-tempered that she had been nicknamed Chasseris,¹ and the name stuck.

Of the marriage of those two quarrelsome spouses nothing resulted but a unique daughter, and that was a great good fortune for them, for Misandre's indigence had increased incessantly with his years. He belonged to a noble family, but his father had scarcely left him enough to sustain him in his estate with same tranquility, and he had not wanted to take up a profession; he was scornful of almost everything that people in general esteemed the most.

The profession of arms seemed to him to be odious for a thousand churlish reasons that he alleged; the magistracy and the bar did not please him anymore, the one because it was not exercised in society in a manner in conformity with his ideas, and the other because eloquence appeared to him to be a despicable art. He treated as bagatelles, vain amusements and futilities what people called business, commerce and the fine arts, and he said that he only wanted to apply himself to seeking the truth; and what was strange about that was that he made the search for the pretended truth consist of a few wretched metaphysical arguments that nobody understood and which he did not understand himself.

However, believing that he possessed the most sublime enlightenment from the heights of his luminous mind, he gazed pityingly at the thick darkness of the rest of humankind. He deplored blindly those he saw applying themselves to becoming skillful in politics and history. He had no greater esteem for poetry than he had for eloquence, but, although he was very scornful of fine writing, he disparaged the other fine arts even more. He talked incessantly, in the most insulting fashion in the world, about painting and music, and, as if he wanted to avenge himself for the disorder that a spoiled imagination had created in his mind, he decried the imagination relentlessly.

Utterly bizarre as the visions of the philosopher were, however, he nevertheless did not fail to dazzle for some time a small number of individuals, who applauded as they listened to him pronounce grandiose words that they did not understand, wanting to receive lessons from him in order to try to comprehend them.

Misandre was, therefore, reputed to be a master of philosophy, and he obtained a utility from that which his family sensed. His pupils, however, who never understood anything of his fantastic reasoning, from which reason was always banished, soon lost their appetite for his tenebrous knowledge and did not take long to take their leave of such a master. Thus, Misandre fell more than ever into indigence, for his patrimony as diminishing every day. As he was far from having enough income to support his family, he often drew on his capital, and made so much use of that recourse that in the end, he found that he no longer had anything at all.

Meanwhile, his daughter entered into her nineteenth year. Herminie—that was her name—was beautiful, shapely, and had all the qualities that can render a young woman amiable. Nevertheless, no suitor had yet asked for her hand; the meager fortune and the bizarre humor of the philosopher had frightened away all those in whom the beautiful young woman's charms had given birth to an inclination to espouse her.

In spite of the poor state of her fate, Herminie did not feel any chagrin in finding herself without a lover; she had no ambition of coquetry and had been born with a certain firmness of soul that caused her

¹ The implication of his name is not immediately obvious, but might derive from one of the meanings of the verb *chasser*, which implies driving someone away.

to receive tranquilly all the disgraces that it pleased destiny to send her. She had not inherited anything of her father's mentality, nor did she have anything of her mother's bitter and surly humor; she only resembled her mother in virtue and beauty. She had large dark eyes so full of fire, tenderness and vivacity that by means of her brilliant and affectionate gaze it was easy to detect the intelligence and benevolence of the person that animated it. She had a perfectly formed nose, an admirable mouth, a complexion of dazzling whiteness and beautiful shiny and lustrous black hair. It was the agreeable mixture of black and white made by the extreme whiteness of her skin and the beautiful blackness of her hair that had caused her to be given the name Herminie.²

Although she had been raised in the bosom of a grim family, whose members very rarely went into society, the charms of which she partook had always caused her to be noticed advantageously, and by her beauty, her mildness and her engaging manners she had attracted universal benevolence since her childhood. She could not prevent herself from having an inclination for the majority of the things that her father hated the most; she cherished fine writing and music ardently, and had such a powerful passion for painting that from the age of seven she drew with pure genius—which had attracted terrible scolding from Misandre, who called the liking she had for the fine art a “pernicious penchant.”

Chasseris, who was an exceedingly active mother, led a harsh and laborious life, opposed to all pleasure, never taking any rest, and never let others take any; she intended that Herminie should be regulated by her model in all things, and wanted the beautiful girl only to learn to sew, to spin and to keep a household in good order. On the other hand, Misandre wanted to fill her head with his hollow metaphysical reveries and the chimeras of his new system of the world; but the amiable Herminie did not feel any inclination to become the victim of philosophical visions, and was no more disposed to limit herself uniquely to the mind than to vulgar occupations.

She learned admirably well all the petty labors that were appropriate to her sex, and she worked therein with as much pleasure as skill, and was no less able in regulating the economy of a household, but she believed that after having fulfilled with exactitude the duties of her estate, it was then permissible for her to satisfy the innocent inclination that she had to equip her mind with knowledge as noble as it was diverting. She therefore read avidly in history, fables, poetry, orators and their writings, where she learned the morality that one ought to practice in order to live honorably and pleasantly in civil society.

Herminie obtained a marvelous fruit from all her reading, but it was necessary to hide it from Misandre and Chasseris with an extreme care. As she was as laborious as her mother and naturally very lively, she worked by day at a young woman's tasks, and read for a part of the night.

She had a neighbor named Philantrope, who had taken her in amity since childhood. That neighbor, who had a great deal of virtue and a very cultivated mind, had lent books secretly to Herminie as soon as she was able to read, and had always sought to give her pleasure in all sorts of occasions. Her obliging benevolence had given rise to the greatest happiness that Herminie had ever had, for not only did Philantrope have a knowledge of literature unusual in persons of her sex, but she also knew music perfectly and had very distinguished talents in painting. She knew how to paint in oils with a great deal of nobility, but above all, she painted miniatures in a manner so accurate and gracious that her paintings had the reputation among connoisseurs of being consummate works. She usually worked on portraits; she took much more pleasure in exercising her brush in that than on historical subjects, although she was also very skillful in painting history.

As obliging as she was enlightened, Philantrope had seconded as best she could the precocious penchant that Herminie had for painting, and had communicated to her with a great deal of care the knowledge and talent that she had in that charming art. In order to teach Herminie to draw well and paint graciously, however, it was necessary to take a great deal of trouble, for it was necessary to hide it completely from Misandre. As for Chasseris, she was not completely unaware that Philantrope was showing her daughter how to paint, but because the young woman and she had received a thousand favors from that obliging friend and she knew that she was a widow without children, rich and always disposed

² By analogy with “ermine.”

to give them new pleasures, she had not dared resist the pleas that Philantrope had always made to send Herminie to spend the day with her frequently.

The amiable pupil profited perfectly from the lessons of her mistress, but nevertheless, unlike that savant woman, she felt a particular penchant for treating historical subjects, so it charmed her more to represent Daphne changed into a laurel or Diana hunting in the forest with her nymphs than making a simple portrait, although she made elegance and nobility shine in all the genres in which she worked. Having already acquired great skill, therefore, at the tender age she had reached, and seeing the sorry state of her father's finances, she resolved to make use of her talents in painting to render a little aid against misfortune.

She made Philantrope party to her project, but that generous friend did not want her to carry it out. "I am very sorry," she said to her, while embracing her, "only to have such mediocre wealth, having the sentiments that I have for you, but such as that wealth is, I flatter myself that you would like to share it with me, and I hope that it will be sufficient for us to lead a comfortable life, with those who gave you birth. All three of you, then, come to my house, which I beg you to regard as yours."

Herminie testified to Philantrope the keen gratitude that such a generosity proposal merited, but, in spite of the situation in which she found herself, she could not bring herself to accept the kind offer, because of the capricious humors of Misandre and Chasseris, from which she feared that Philantrope might suffer too much, and would be discouraged by it after a few months of patience. However, she had wanted throughout her life to give the most ardent cares to her father and mother, who, in spite of their eccentricities, were very dear to her.

Philantrope begged her so tenderly and with such good grace to accept her offer that in the end she consented, but only after Philantrope had returned from a journey that her affairs rendered absolutely obligatory to a port distant from the capital of the island, and on the condition that she and her family would not be lodged in the house of her generous friend. Matters being settled thus, Philantrope left Herminie a sum of money that was more than sufficient to sustain the family in comfortable abundance until her return.

The two friends separated with the most ardent marks of tenderness, but as destiny seemed to be conspiring to persecute Herminie, scarcely had Philantrope arrived in the maritime town where her journey ended than, while walking along the sea shore, she was abducted by pirates.

Herminie, more out of amity for Philantrope than her own interests, thought that she would die of dolor when she heard that news. As for Philantrope's heirs, however, they were in haste to take possession of all her property as soon as possible, without giving any thought at all to making attempts to discover where the pirates had taken her. On the contrary, it seemed that they were apprehensive of being informed of it, for fear of being obliged to end her captivity by paying a ransom. Herminie, who had entirely opposite sentiments, had all the searches made that were in her power; in spite of all the actions and trouble she took, however, she was unable to learn anything about the fate of such a dear friend, and, in losing any hope of ever seeing her again, she was overwhelmed by the weight of her chagrins.

Meanwhile, she sensed that she was about to fall back into the domestic anxieties from which Philantrope's generous cares had saved her for a time. Misandre had sold all of his remaining property and he had nothing left but a few items of furniture that were almost worthless.

While he took advantage of those woeful scraps for the subsistence of his family, with which he had retreated to the country, Herminie worked for several months on paintings, in which she treated gracious historical subjects, but although she succeeded with a great deal of taste and elegance, as she did not have a cabal to praise her, little account was made of the paintings, for which she was only given a price far below mediocre; for that century was already at the level that it followed for a long time thereafter, in which the rarest talents in the fine arts fell sadly into oblivion if they were not shored up by protections; already, false merit supported by a cabal oppressed true merit destitute of support.

Let us return to Herminie, however; her father, who had once revolted against her talents in painting, was offended to the utmost in seeing them so badly received, and, finally irritated to excess against his century, he resolved to avenge himself in the manner that we shall describe in due course, after we have talked at some length about the King of Crete, of whom our philosopher was a subject.

That King was a young prince named Clearque, born with some fine personal qualities. He had a pleasant face, valor and liberality, but, in addition, he was suspicious, mistrustful, stubborn in his prejudices and superstitious to such a degree that he gave himself blindly to all popular errors.

The prince had a sister named Elismene, who seemed to have received from Heaven all the gifts appropriate to charm. She had an admirable figure and a face in which all the features were symmetrical and agreeable. She had chestnut-brown hair, a complexion as pale as it was uniform, heightened by a hint of vermilion that rendered it dazzling, and one saw in her large blue eyes, softened by brown eyelids, as much fire as softness. The qualities of her soul were no less admirable than those of her person. She had a grandeur of courage above her sex, a heroic rectitude and generosity, and a gracious goodness that attracted all hearts to her.

That beautiful princess had often suffered from the caprices of her brother, the King, even though she was the gentlest and most complaisant person in the world. The prince changed his sentiments so often that it was not a mediocre affair to study them, but Clearque never abandoned his love of pleasures, particularly those of hunting and warrior games.

At the time when Misandre and his family were languishing in the country, one day when the King of Crete was giving his court a fête in which there were chariot races, combats with javelins, wrestling and other spectacles, a young stranger was seen to appear in all those various games, who distinguished himself as much by his skill as his good looks and his magnificence. He had all the honors of the day. He carried off the prizes with the applause of the court and the acclamations of the people, and manifested an unparalleled grace and generosity in all his actions and procedures.

In the evening there was a ball in the residence of the princess, and the young stranger shone no less there than he had in the other diversions. As it was from Elismene's hand that he had received the prizes, he had already had opportunities to talk to her, and he found another at the ball, and made as much intelligence and politeness visible in his speech as there was charm in his manners.

The King heaped him with honors and caresses, and expressed a strong desire to know who he was. He begged the prince for permission to remain in his court incognito for a few more days, and assured him that he would gladly satisfy his curiosity thereafter. Meanwhile, Clearque gave him an apartment in his palace and had him served there with great magnificence. The stranger's retinue was not numerous, but all those composing it appeared, by their manners, to be people of great distinction.

The amiable unknown soon found an opportunity to tell the princess that he adored her, and that he had only come to the island of Crete to offer her a heart over which the charms of her portrait had already triumphed in Thessaly. She could not be offended by that declaration, for he told her at the same time that he was Prince Telephonte, the son of the King of Cyprus. He indicated to Elismene that he was sure of having, for the knots that he desired, the agreement of the King to whom he owed the light of day, who would not fail to send ambassadors to ask for her. He added that he flattered himself that King Clearque would not refuse his support in her regard, but he protested that he did not want to owe the precious gift of her hand either to the endeavors of the King of Cyprus or the orders of the King of Crete.

"I only want, Madame," he said, "to obtain it from yourself; it is only by virtue of the respectful passion that I have for you, and my tender services, that I dare to hope to acquire a place in your heart. It is the dread that I have that an overly scrupulous obedience might bear you to hinder your wishes that made me hide my name and my birth from your brother the King until I was instructed of your sentiments. If my glorious pretensions have the misfortune of displeasing you, that prince will never know who I am; but if you deign not to disapprove of my designs I will make them known to the King of Crete, and I hope that he will be favorable to them."

Elismene had listened with so much surprise and trouble to the Prince of Cyprus' speech that it was some time before she found the strength to respond. Finally, with a blush on her face and confusion in her eyes, she told him in an embarrassed fashion that she was absolutely submissive to the will of her brother, the King, and that she would always glory in obeying him.

Telephonte pressed her to declare naturally whether she did not feel any aversion in his regard, swearing to her again that if he were unfortunate enough to displease her, he would refrain from asking

her brother for her, not wishing to expose her to suffering that any violence should be done to her inclinations.

She assured Telephonte that she knew neither love nor hate, but only how to obey. Then, after reddening further, she added that in his regard, he was wrong to fear her aversion, since a prince such as him was more apt to give birth to esteem than hatred. After saying that, nonplussed, and trembling that she might have said too much, the Princess of Crete summoned her ladies-in-waiting—who, out of respect, had moved away—and for the rest of the day the conversation was general.

Meanwhile, the Prince of Cyprus, transported with amour for Elismene and delighted that the charming princess had not received the offering of his prayers in a disobliging fashion, told the King of Crete who he was. The King gave a thousand marks of joy at the news, and rendered with splendor to Telephonte's rank all the honors due to it.

Clearque was burning with desire to know the reason for which the Prince of Cyprus had come to his estates, but he dared not ask the Prince overtly. He contented himself with asking questions on that subject of a young knight in Telephonte's retinue who appeared to be one of this master's foremost favorites. That knight, whose name was Leandrin, did indeed have a large part in the confidence of Telephonte, but he did not think it appropriate to inform the King of Crete of the Prince's secrets.

It was Telephonte himself who informed him. After a thousand petty things, which he remarked every day with an infinite joy, had persuaded him that the offer of his hand would not displease Elismene, he declared to the King of Crete the amour that he had for her, asked him for his protection with regard to the Princess, and added that if he deigned to approve of the designs he had for that charming sister, the King of Cyprus would send a solemn embassy to request her as soon as possible.

Clearque assured Telephonte, while embracing him, that nothing could be dearer to him than an alliance with a Prince as accomplished as him. He then took him to Elismene's apartment, and asked her to regard Telephonte as a Prince that he destined for her spouse, and who merited all her attachment by virtue of his fine qualities.

The Princess replied to the King, her brother, with a great deal of deference and modesty, but through her modesty and submissive manners it was evident that she had no distaste in obeying the order that had been given to her to have consideration for Telephonte.

The Prince said a thousand things to her that were as witty as they were gallant. Then he added: "In spite of the strength of the knots that attach me to you, Madame, I shall soon be obliged to quit you in order to obey the orders of the King, my father, who is recalling me urgently to Cyprus in order to witness the marriage ceremony of Princess Celenie, my sister, whom an ambassador for Lemnos is to marry in a short while, in the name of the King his master.

"But Madame," Telephonte continued, "rigorous as the difficulties that your absence will cost me are, I shall feel the rigor diminished by the glorious permission that your brother the King has given me. That great prince wishes that as soon as I arrive in Cyprus, my father will send an envoy to announce solemnly the honor and felicity to which I aspire."

After a few similar speeches, Clearque, who could not remain in the same place for long, went out and took Telephonte with him. As he went, the Prince made a sign to Leandrin to stay with Elismene, and the favorite, who was very intelligent, easily understood that his master wanted him to talk to the Princess about his love. He acquitted that task like the clever man he was, but, while depicting Telephonte's passionate sentiments with great skill, he did not forget to give a fine idea of the Prince's character. By recounting certain of his actions, he was able to insinuate subtly the rectitude and grandeur of his soul, the generosity and delicacy of his heart, the intrepidity of his courage and the valor of his arm.

It is true, however, that in spite of the extreme zeal that Leandrin had for Telephonte, the portrait that he made of him did not flatter him. The young prince had all the qualities of a hero, so he was tenderly cherished by his father the King, and adored by that monarch's subjects.