

## *PART ONE*

The enchanter Mirzaf spent his life sadly in an old castle constructed on a rocky escarpment on the edge of the sea. He only employed the secrets of his art in setting the surest traps for the birds and wild animals that he hunted in the forests near his retreat. He had never loved anyone, when he saw Princess Narbe, who was walking on the shore.

Narbe was the daughter of the King of Persia, and carried in her face the air of grandeur and majesty that announces and betrays sovereigns, even in slavery. She had come to offer her prayers in a temple of Neptune constructed of shingle at the entrance to a little wood beside the sea. Her heart was stirred by the emotion she had just experienced while imploring that terrible god; her eyes were still moist with tears that had just flowed for a cherished lover: for young Coroes, who was on the point of marrying her.

That prince was at sea; the most violent storm had separated one of the ships accompanying him, which had been wrecked two days ago on the coast of Gaza, without having been able to give news of the prince.

Narbe was walking alone, her women following her at a distance; her eyes were fixed on the sea, so calm at that moment, which was the end of a beautiful day, but she remembered fearfully the furies of that perfidious element; she was interrogating it tremulously regarding the fate of such a dear absentee.

Those dispositions gave the princess an air of distress and tender languor that rendered her extremely touching. Mirzaf was struck by that, as by the apparition of a divinity. He fell to his knees, addressed prayers to her as if to a goddess, and offered her his heart, his treasures, his secrets, his hand, and immortality if she were a mere mortal.

Mirzaf had a face that was scarcely agreeable; he caught her, in any case, at a bad moment. Coroes was a charming prince, he was beloved, absent and in danger; a woman in love is neither coquettish nor flirtatious in such circumstances; the heart is too occupied for anything to divide it. The enchanter was poorly received, repaid for his offerings with marks of the most offensive scorn. The princess continued walking without looking at him or responding. Motionless with anger and chagrin, he did not have the strength to follow her, and soon lost sight of her.

Coroes arrived the next day; the preparation for his marriage with the princess had been made a long time ago; the lovers were united. Narbe, all her prayers answered, remembered then those that had been offered to her on the sea shore; it was without anger and with a sort of pleasure. It is thus with almost all our ideas; those that have wounded us in a time of distress amuse us in a moment of satisfaction.

Mirzaf was only instructed of that news by the mockery of which he learned that he was the subject at the court of the newlyweds; although he was not wicked, he nevertheless resolved to avenge himself in a manner appropriate to poison all the pleasures that Narbe seemed to be able to promise herself.

Beautiful, young, in the highest rank, united by choice and by taste with the most amiable prince, and loved recklessly, such a happiness seemed to be above the reach of envy, but it foundered before a fatal mirror that the enchanter placed adroitly on Narbe's dressing-table. It was not that the mirror made her appear ugly in her own eyes; on the contrary, the glass was very accurate, and as the princess was very beautiful, she had never seen herself so advantageously, and with more pleasure, in any other; she would have been very happy if that had been all that she was able to see; but she also read the hearts and penetrated the most hidden sentiments of those she perceived there.

That redoubtable mirror only had the virtue of revealing the interior of anyone who was represented to it for the eyes of the princess; it was to pass from age to age, and from the dressing-table to dressing-table of all of Narbe's female posterity, destined to trouble the repose of the unfortunate princesses who possessed it successively. It could only break in the hands of a woman who saw in it, during the course of

a year, her lover equally constant or her husband equally faithful. It is understandable that such a condition did not render the mirror fragile.

Along with all her court, Narbe was unaware of the effect of that dangerous present; however, it operated marvels. Every time the princess had occasion to perceive someone in the glass, whether they were present facing it or sideways, the person was revealed; the past, the present and a little of their future was shown to the princess; all his thoughts and the recesses of their heart were developed for her: a strange situation that leads to being content with almost no one, and discontented with everyone!

More perfect and a thousand times more lovable than anyone at her court, she was the least loved; one fears so naturally eyes that divine, but those that do more than divine, however beautiful they are, are found to be unsustainable.

Narbe attributed to notions and certain prejudices the knowledge and impressions that she obtained from her mirror, but people did not fail to complain of her penetration as an injustice and an excess of malignity.

Those of her women who were obliged by their estate to witness her at her dressing-table every day, and to appear assiduously before the mirror that denounced their most secret thoughts, experienced a continual torture; no matter how they composed their behavior, their faces and their expressions in one fashion, if their heart was otherwise inclined, Narbe unmasked them, and knew their secret thoughts better than they did. She enabled them to see that they had not deceived her, often by whispering to them what they wanted to say to her; she always said it generously, but that did not matter; it was saying it, developing what the most adroit dissimulation had hidden profoundly.

One expressed her attachment and respect in the most seductive terms, accompanied by the best calculated actions; it was so much wasted effort and preparation; her heart hid discontentment, impatience, annoyance and chagrin. Narbe saw all that, and broke down the dissimulation in all its retrenchments. Another had had a lover only the night before; another was only beginning to conceive the design of an infidelity; another, by means of sighs and glances, had permitted some hope: the princess was alerted to it by her mirror; she could have made a journal of it, and knew its slightest circumstances.

Meanwhile, hatred was redoubled in that excessively enlightened court; people regarded one another reciprocally as so many spies and Arguses who informed the princess. The lover most capable of keeping quiet passed for indiscreet and perfidious.

It was not in the most beautiful women in the court that Narbe perceived the most jealousy and enmity; it was in those who believed themselves wrongly to be beautiful, or who were chagrined by not being; it was from those that she received the most excessive and the most dishonest eulogies. One, with eyes apparently dazzled by the extreme beauty of the incomparable princess, with exaggerated compliments on all her charms, diminished them and criticized them in the depths of her heart, finding her forehead too smooth, her eyebrows too dark. Another praised her present complexion, while rejoicing secretly that it appeared less vivid and bright than it had the day before. Another advised placing a beauty spot beside some charm, or putting a flower or a diamond in some curl of the hair, because she thought to would have a bad effect.

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Narbe sustained these vexations patiently for as long as Coroes was faithful to her; the term of a year marked by the enchanter had almost elapsed; a few more days of constancy and the mirror would have broken in the hands of that fickle husband; but Zama appeared in the court and the mirror was no longer in danger; Coroes became infidel; and what a rival Zama was! She had barely reached that dangerous age, the first flower of youth in which even ugliness is not without a few charms, and Zama possessed all charms in combination.

The varnish of freshness, innocence and gaiety that renders beauty so piquant embellished Zama's slightest features and actions. Such is a beautiful flower ready to bloom; one judges the beauties still hidden in its bosom by those that have hatched, and every instant adds to those that appear by uncovering new ones.

Zama was related to Narbe; blood sufficed to unite them, but something stronger can unite two perfectly beautiful women, which is beauty itself, when it is at the point of equality and perfection, which

does not permit base envy or jealousies. Narbe was therefore the first, and perhaps the only, woman in her court capable of loving Zama. Soon she felt that she was sincerely loved by her. The mirror, which told her everything without her knowing that it was speaking to her, enabled her to see her relative as tender and as true as she was beautiful.

Narbe was not jealous of any of the tender and passionate homages that her dear Zama revealed; only the heart of Coroes interested her, and she believed that there was only admiration there. That prince hid carefully a more vivid sentiment of which he was still the master, and although he was unaware of the property of the mirror, he did not approach it; no hazard had yet exposed him to being seen therein; he avoided occasions to encounter Zama in Narbe's presence, and often even avoided the princess's gaze at the moments when he might have been able to yield to the charm of seeing her.

Narbe took for withdrawal and indifference what was actually the commencement of an extreme passion; she made the mistake that one makes voluntarily when one has a good heart devoid of experience; one praises too much the object of one's amity or amour; one enables all its charms and merits to be known only too well.

Soon, Coroes' passion no longer had any limits; he sought out the princess everywhere and followed her everywhere, but she was too assiduous at Narbe's dressing-table for him not to end up dooming himself there. For a few days he was placed in such a fashion that, unable to be seen in the mirror, he was not accused by her; but the moment finally came.

The queen often took refuge in the cabinet where the mirror was placed; she spent entire hours there alone with Zama in order to avoid the crowd; she made the same mistake with her friend as she did with Coroes; she talked continually to the young princess about the intelligence, the grace and the charming face of a husband she loved too much, and by whom she believed herself to be loved as much. She compared him to the most brilliant and most lovable people in the court, and it was always to give him the advantage of the comparisons; she recalled all the pettiness and ridiculousness of the courtiers, in order to prove that Coroes was exempt from them.

Oh, let us refrain from praising to our friends the merit and charms of our lovers; let them refrain themselves from remarking too much to their friends on the beauty and grace of their mistresses. In the heart of a man there is an extreme tendency to love the friend of his lover; the same disposition is in the heart of the friend for her friend's lover; amity is always the dupe of amour, in the same way that intelligence always is of the heart.

One evening, when the two young princesses had forgotten themselves in that occupation for longer than usual, the impatient Coroes came to surprise them; they were in front of the mirror, where, without either one appearing distracted from what they were taking an extreme pleasure in saying to one another, both were enjoying separately the pleasure of seeing themselves. There is no pretty woman who does not know the natural and mechanical division that one makes of one's attention between the mirror that reflects her and the circle that amuses her; that is executed without appearing to be, without anything being lost thereby. She attends to everything, she responds to everything, but does not lose a word of what the mirror says to her.

That position prevented Coroes from being able to avoid their gaze; they both saw him in the mirror at the same time, but what a difference the sight of him produced in them!

Zama, already too prejudiced by what she had just heard to the advantage of the prince, was in one of those dangerous moments when a single glance bears disturbance into a sensitive soul that had just been stirred; as she raised her eyes to look at the prince, she perceived in his for the first time the respectful and tender something that penetrates us at a stroke and is embedded in the depths of our soul; Zama felt the subtle poison gliding through her veins; she lowered her eyes and blushed.

But what a frightful spectacle for Narbe suddenly to see the entire soul of the adored object, and to see it so different from what she had previously believed it to be: to see not only a passion in her husband's heart of which she had been unaware until that moment, but also, at that same moment, to see its excess and magnification; to see born in the heart of her best friend the fire that she seemed to have prepared there herself by means of her confidence and her eulogies—all woes at once!

Her eyes fixed on the mirror, her body motionless and her mind bewildered, that violent state was interrupted by the dolorous cries she uttered in looking at her friend. Then, no longer having the strength to sustain her dolor, she fainted.

That event extracted Zama from the disturbance into which the tender and passionate gaze of the prince had thrown her. She was no longer occupied by anything but the aid of which the queen was in need. Her faint lasted a long time, and when she was finally brought to her senses by means of cares and remedies, she seemed only to recover the light painfully. Her sadness, her obstinate silence, her frequent and dolorous sighs, alarmed Zama and Coroes sincerely; they both still loved Narbe. It is not at the moment when another passion is born in the heart, or an infidelity commences there, that the object that it is ready to forget and betray ceases to appear dear; one is only fully away of one's change long after one has changed.

As Narbe had been pregnant for a few months, the long faint was attributed to that, and the sort of languor and continual sadness by which it was followed to the situation she was on. The physicians employed their art in vain to render her a health that is not in the juice of herbs when the principle of our malady is in the secret bitterness of our heart. She languished, and hardly ever quit her bed throughout the time of her pregnancy.