

I. Carthage. The Pavilion. The Dream

Multa renascentur, etc.

*Many things that have fallen into decadence
will be reborn, and others that are standing today will fall in their turn.*
Ovid.

*Dreams contain infinitely less mystery
than ordinary people believe, and a little more
than powerful minds think.*
Bayle.¹

Of all the new cities built upon ancient and glorious ruins in order to revive the immense shore of the Mediterranean, Carthage is, in everyone's opinion, the most exciting and the most picturesque. If you are familiar with the delightful pleasure-houses with which its environs are ornamented, mainly in the direction of Utica, you have doubtless noticed the one that dominates all the others by its elevation, surpassing them with a magnificence at least equal to the finest palaces in Constantinople. I shall offer no description of it, because it is necessary, in general, to avoid describing ordinary things, especially at the beginning of a book. There would be no end to it: colonnades of marble, breccia and roseate granite, vast alabaster bowls, gushing springs and fountains in the African style; arbors of laurels and myrtles, porticos of vegetation such as one sees in all cities, but with a character of their own.

Everyone knows that this sumptuous habitation is the favorite residence of the beautiful Politée, the founder of re-established Carthage. Politée is sitting in a porcelain pavilion with her pretty sister Mirzala, breathing in the evening breeze.²

To the right the sea is visible, like a horizon in flames, and a less distant plain with a few rounded hills, uncultivated as yet, covered with fig trees and aloes in flower, scattered with pleasant plantations of palms, lemon-trees, orange-trees, arbutuses, terebinths and other decorative or productive trees of two hemispheres. In a distant blue haze, a gap allows a glimpse of the Moorish city of Tunis, and, on another plain, a part of the vast aqueduct of the ancient city of Hannibal.

To the left, as if at the edge of a precipice, the eye looks down upon the new city, its terraces, its domes, its minarets and its vast and monumental buildings, some completed, others bristling with scaffolding, cranes and machines operated by thousands of men. Further away, there is the port, so ingeniously excavated with the aid of a new machine, and already covered with buildings of every size and shape.

Those who have enjoyed the spectacle of a city seen thus, from a bird's eye view, will also remember the confused noise that rises up from these human formicaries, which reaches the ears as the vain and vague summation of so much movement. That movement is in large part work: industry, the material aspect of civilization. There are other noises too, including those of

¹ Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), a Protestant moral philosopher who frequently attacked the follies of superstition.

² Politée, like many of the names in the novel, is symbolic. The Old French *politie* is equivalent to the Latin *politia* and the English "polity," but the modern *politesse* signifies politeness and good breeding. Mirzala—which Bodin defines later on—might have been borrowed from Alaric Alexander Watts' prose-poem "Mirzala" in *Poems and Sketches* (1823).

suffering and joy, but the great voice of labor drowns them out, and that is undoubtedly a good thing.

This is what offers itself to the senses and thoughts of the two friends as they take tea in the beautiful pavilion decorated with the most delicate paintings of the new Greek school.

This tall woman with the majestic bearing and noble visage, whose features are so handsome that she seems scarcely 30 years old, is—as has already been established—the famous woman popularly known as the Modern Dido, the grand-daughter of the skillful engineer who made six millions³ from his machine for excavating ports and river-beds, which opened up the most direct route from Europe to India via Antioch and the Euphrates, and reunited the two oceans formerly separated by the isthmus of Panama, and, finally, the daughter of the richest shareholder in the European Africa Company.

I have already said that the charming maiden with the slightly Asiatic appearance, large black almond-shaped eyes, gracefully-arched eyebrows, and long silken hair that falls in thick tresses over her pale broad shoulders, is called Mirzala, but what is she? At first glance one can see that she is probably not Politée's natural sister, so different are they in their manner and complexion. For the moment, the secret of her birth is only imperfectly revealed in her.

About 15 years before the era in which this narrative begins, at the end of the last war against slavery and polygamy, all the newspapers in the world, in reporting the capture of Babylon, mentioned a pretty little girl, still at the breast, found in the harem of the last of that empire's sultans. Politée's father, the rich Pontarque—one of three powerful associates who had contributed their talents and financial resources to the completion of that long and terrible war—took her, it is said, under his protection and soon adopted her. The greatest mystery surrounded the orphan's cradle, and if Pontarque knew better than anyone else what was contained therein, unknown motives led him to exercise the utmost discretion, to the extent that the charming infant was quite uncertain as to whether or not nature had give her the same father as Politée.

A woman who lived perpetually behind the veil, according to ancient Oriental custom, devoted herself with an entirely maternal tenderness to the education of little Mirzala, whose charming face would never again be exposed to the eyes of a man, save only for the one she was on the point of marrying. This woman, whose influence on Pontarque's mind was remarkable and to whom he even showed respect, finding herself on the point of death, made him promise that her pupil, his adopted daughter, would continue being raised according to Asiatic mores and ideas and in the reformed Islamic faith—which, as everyone knows, is very similar to Christianity.

When Mirzala lost this devoted instructress, who was thought by many people to be her real mother, Pontarque entrusted her to his daughter Politée, who, being much older and endowed with a precocious intelligence, was fully capable of serving instead of a mother for the little sister she cherished so tenderly. Pontarque's death left the two sisters completely orphaned a short time afterwards, when Mirzala was still a child and Politée only 15—but virtually free despite her youth—under the relatively unburdensome surveillance of an aged aunt. It was not until five or six years after that, however, that Politée had her adventure with the famous warrior Philomaque.

The marriage created quite a stir at the time, and the striking abandonment that followed a few months later furnished all the newspapers in the world with material for rather long commentaries, in order that the facts could be placed among the facts of history. Everyone remembers the parallels which gave birth to that sad similarity between the destiny of the new Dido and that of her poetic predecessor. The fine minds of two hemispheres—white, black, light and dark brown—struggled with the subject in prose and verse and in all languages, but the reputation for virtue that the founder of modern Carthage enjoyed was so solidly established that it did not receive the slightest injury in that *mêlée* of poems, dramas and novels.

³ Bodin inserts a footnote: "Given the progressive depreciation of money by the increase in its circulation, these six millions only represent three and a half in the French valuation of the beginning of the 19th century."

Politée's situation being familiar, therefore, it is not difficult to explain the melancholy expression spread upon her handsome features, the poignant pallor of her complexion, pure and diaphanous nevertheless, and the slight bluish tint in the corners of her eyes, which add to their beautiful expression as turquoises serve to heighten the brightness of diamonds. Her carriage is still majestic, her stance still noble, because that is the way she is made: because her frame is both tall and elegant; because her mind is elevated and her heart proud; and because she is playing the role of an ancient queen, and is also a queen of sorts in reality. From time to time, though, when memories or reflections assail her, and her gestures seem nonchalant and casual, she seems to have fallen from her throne and to have become a mere woman again.

It is in this exact disposition that she finds herself now, leaning negligently on Mirzala's shoulder, with a tear ready to escape her eye, gazing at the shining mosaic floor with that fixed stare which sees nothing.

Mirzala, who is seated on the same divan, with her legs crossed in the Turkish fashion, lifts up one of her long jade tresses to wipe her friend's eyes. Putting her arms gracefully around Politée's neck, she lavishes a young girl's chaste kisses upon her: caresses so naïve that no chagrin can resist them; the sweet perfume of hope and happiness, with no admixture of regret and anxiety.

"Dear sister," murmurs Mirzala, "I have not dared to tell you about the dream I had last night, because I feared that it might be indiscreet to raise the subject, and that it might not give you pleasure."

"Oh! Why is that?" says Politée, excitedly. "On the contrary, you know how your dreams interest and amuse me. Tell me about this one, my dear Mirzala."

"Well, lovely sister, I saw *him*. He was in the sky, and I have a feeling that he is coming here."

"Oh, no, no!" Politée replies, blushing slightly. "I can't believe that for a moment, dear Mirzala, although I know from experience how lucid your dreams are—often as certain as the best magnetic visions. This time, I strongly doubt..."

"I swear to you, Politée, that I saw him quite distinctly, as I see you, with that clarity and force of vision that immediately distinguishes from my ordinary dreams those which apprise me of distant and present facts."

"It's rather a long time since you've seen him, though, Mirzala. Are you perfectly sure of being able to recognize him?"

"Oh, my dear! How could anyone forget that masculine bearing, so proud—especially someone who has only seen a dozen men's faces, at the most, having spent her life, as I have, hidden behind a veil?"

Politée assumes an expression of indifference. "Yes," she says, "I admit that his physiognomy was rather remarkable, although too warlike for our peaceful century. He would have made a fine model for the battle scenes of the old painters of the French Empire. But what a sad advantage! You, Mirzala, who knows my heart, know that his image was erased therefrom a long time ago; it is the pride of outraged womanhood that suffers in me, and would almost make me desire vengeance if I were not a Christian. In eight years I have not been able to accustom myself to so public a humiliation of my self-respect."

Mirzala, who is as delicate as she was good, does not insist; fully of the same opinion as her sister, she approves wholeheartedly of the complete obliteration of the infidel's memory, and undertakes to show how few qualities he has that might render him worthy of a profound attachment. Then she passes on, a trifle maliciously, to another subject of conversation.

"Are you saying, then," Politée says, harking back, "that you have really seen him? How was he?"

"Oh, but he was always handsome," Mirzala replies, smiling. "His features delicately outlined, albeit with grandiosity, his fiery gaze, his elevated stature..."

“I know all that,” says Politée, a slight impatience hidden within her exceedingly soft tone. “What I’m asking you, dear Mirzala, is...is...”

“How can I tell you that?”

“Oh, you irritate me with your mysteries!” Immediately giving the charming Babylonian girl a little kiss, as if to beg pardon for that outburst, she adds: “Tell me if he appeared at all changed to you.”

“Not much...no, a little...I think.”

“Ah!” says Politée, with a slight muted sigh. Then she falls silent. After a brief pause, she goes on: “You aren’t saying anything more. I’ll have to get the rest one question at a time. What was he wearing?”

“Oh, that’s what struck me: he was wearing a turban, a large and handsome white turban, truly, with an expensive diamond spray that sparkled in the sunlight like a group of stars. He also had a very long black moustache, which gave his mouth an even greater severity. Finally, I saw an Arab yataghan in his belt, the hilt of which was similarly covered with those enormous diamonds that chemists cannot make as yet.”

“There!” Politée says to herself, letting her head fall upon her breast. “A vision of him, clearer and more detailed than I have been able to obtain for a long time from any magnetically-entranced Pythoness.⁴ There’s something strange about that.” Turning to Mirzala, she says: “This dream, dear child, must relate directly to you.”

“I’m tempted to believe so, because...”

“Ah! You haven’t told me everything, then?”

“You didn’t give me time, dear sister. Well, it seemed to me that Philomaque looked at me very hard—with a step-brother’s tenderness, as before, but nevertheless with an air of authority that intimidated me. I still shiver even in recalling it.”

“Did you think that he was talking to you?”

“His lips quivered, and I thought that he was going to open his mouth, but his aerostat—doubtless a war-bird of the first rank, manned by a powerful crew—cleaved the air in swift flight and, assisted by the wind, passed in a flash. It was as if my breathing were suppressed by the rapidity of his progress and the atmospheric disturbance; that woke me up with a start. Since that moment I’ve had a sad presentiment that something is going to happen to me, but I said nothing to you, dear sister, for that very reason. I am seriously anxious about not having seen *him* arrive during the three days that we have been waiting for him—you know full well who I mean!”

“Ah! Yes, you too, dear child, already have your own anxieties and dreads; you will no longer belong to yourself, and you imagine that another will belong to you. You’re going to be married...are you afraid that he might kidnap your fiancé?”

“I don’t know, but I have everything to fear; there is such antipathy between them—or, to put it more accurately, Philomaque has such a strong detestation for my poor Philirène,⁵ who, I believe, is incapable of hating anyone himself.”

“That’s why you love him so much, sweet dove.”

“Truly, I can’t say that. I don’t know if I love as you say that you yourself have loved, as people love in the poems and plays I’ve read. I love calmly and safely, with a delicate happiness, like this light breeze that brings us the perfumes of the countryside. I love with the certainty of being loved uniquely, because it seems impossible to me that he loves anyone else, inasmuch as he has told me so. He told me that in front of you, dear sister, and you seemed to believe him. Is it true, though, that he once loved you? I’ve heard vague mention of that—you’ve become pensive; is that because it’s true? Tell me, tell me quickly.”

“You’ll know all that when you’re married.”

⁴ Bodin inserts a footnote: “The somnambulists, or rather the magnetic somniloquists [*somniloques*] of the 18th century were sometimes called by the name by which they were known in antiquity.”

⁵ Philirène translates as “peace-lover.”

“No, I want to know now.”

“Come on, Mirzala, are you getting jealous? May God preserve you from that. Continue to love Philirène tranquilly, and beware of loving him too much. I promise to tell you some day what there was between us. Oh, it’s already very old, and you, with your 15 years and your charming face, have nothing to fear from memories.”

Mirzala darts a rapid glance at a mirror, as women never fail to do in any circumstances where their beauty is involved in an issue. Then, sufficiently reassured by that furtive inspection, she says: “Why not, dear Politée? But you love me too much to be capable of trying to please him—and then again, it seems to me that a man like him would never be able to satisfy you.”

“Who knows? Poor child, you’ve scarcely clapped eyes on anyone else but him.”

It is in our nature not always to accept the disadvantages of our situation. A recluse, who has only seen the world through the barred window of her visiting-room, can at least claim to know exactly what she has seen, and even to have seen that which is to be seen more clearly. The naïve Mirzala, therefore, her self-respect somewhat wounded by the reminder that she had only ever seen one man, finds herself drawn to forge common cause between the merit of that man and her own self-respect, rendering them interdependent. She wants him to be the first among men, in order that she should not be the most inexperienced of women.

“Oh, yes, I’m well aware of that; he’s the only one to whom I’ve appeared unveiled; he’s the only one that I’ve been able to observe since I ceased to be a child. How well I’ve studied him, my Philirène, how I know him by heart! How good he is, how amiable he is, how witty he is! How great and generous his ideas are, always directed towards the happiness and moral dignity of the human species! How much religious elevation he has, what tender sentiments beneath his skepticism—which I do not share, but which seems to me, personally, to be pious and almost devout. Then again, if anyone says that he is not handsome in Philomaque’s fashion, like the fine warriors of your art gallery, I shall say that he is handsome as the busts of savants, thinkers, poets and artists that I often admire in our collections are handsome. I love him in that way, my Philirène...but I’m annoyed with you, because he’s beginning to pay too much attention to you.”

“Bravo, bravo!” cries Politée, planting a kiss on her sister’s round and shapely neck. “What fire! What richness of words! I’m delighted that you love him thus, for he certainly deserves it; I’m glad that you’re both happy!”

“Oh, if I could give you a part of that happiness, in exchange for your sorrow, I would do it with the greatest pleasure!”

“I believe you would, but I would not dream of consenting to it.”

“And yet, beautiful sister, how many advantages you have over me, how many elements of happiness that I have not! You do great things; you have fame; you, who, being your own mistress and mistress of an immense fortune at the age of 15, had the idea—so novel for a young woman—of founding an empire, almost a civilization. You’re a superior woman; you’re more than a woman, for you’ve gone as far as men in their sciences, their useful arts, and their philosophical speculations; you’re what they call a *thinking woman*—while I will never be more than a mere woman of sentiment.”

“All these distinctions, my dear, that you wish to apply to me in flattering terms, are never very real. Personally, I don’t think of myself exclusively as what they call a thinking woman, entirely exempt from the passions of our sex. I am not so lucky, or unlucky—you know that very well, you naughty girl. And you, who are so profoundly poetic, so gracefully artistic, are you pretending that you do not think a little?”

As the two young women continue this conversation, sometimes sad and sometimes cheerful, often mingled with soft smiles and interrupted by tender caresses, a drawing-room door begins to open.