

Memnon The Philosopher, or Human Wisdom

(François-Marie Arouet)

Memnon one day decided to become a great philosopher. There are few men who have not, at some time or other, conceived the same wild project. Says Memnon to himself, "To be a perfect philosopher, and of course to be perfectly happy, I have nothing to do but to divest myself entirely of passions; and nothing is more easy, as everybody knows. In the first place, I will never be in love; for, when I see a beautiful woman, I will say to myself, These cheeks will one day grow wrinkled, these eyes be encircled with vermilion, that bosom become flabby and pendant, that head bald and palsied. Now I have only to consider her at present in imagination, as she will afterwards appear; and certainly a fair face will never turn my head.

In the second place, I will be always temperate. It will be in vain to tempt me with good cheer, with delicious wines, or the charms of society. I will have only to figure to myself the consequences of excess, an aching head, a loathing stomach, the loss of reason, of health, and of time. I will then only eat to supply the waste of nature; my health will be always equal, my ideas pure and luminous. All this is so easy that there is no merit in accomplishing it.

But, says Memnon, I must think a little of how I am to regulate my fortune; why, my desires are moderate, my wealth is securely placed with the Receiver General of the finances of Nineveh: I have where-withal to live independent; and that is the greatest of blessings. I shall never be under the cruel necessity of dancing attendance at court: I will never envy anyone, and nobody will envy me; still, all this is easy. I have friends, continued he, and I will preserve them, for we shall never have any difference; I will never take amiss anything they may say or do; and they will behave in the same way to me. There is no difficulty in all this.

Having thus laid his little plan of philosophy in his closet, Memnon put his head out of the window. He saw two women walking under the plane trees near his house. The one was old, and appeared quite at her ease. The other was young, handsome, and seemingly much agitated: she sighed, she wept, and seemed on that account still more beautiful. Our philosopher was touched, not, to be sure, with the beauty of the lady (he was too much determined not to feel any uneasiness of that kind) but with the distress which he saw her in. He came downstairs and accosted the young Ninevite in the design of consoling her with philosophy. That lovely person related to him, with an air of great simplicity, and in the most affecting manner, the injuries she sustained from an imaginary uncle; with what art he had deprived her of some imaginary property, and of the violence which she pretended to dread from him. "You appear to me," said she, "a man of such wisdom that if you will condescend to come to my house and examine into my affairs, I am persuaded you will be able to draw me from the cruel embarrassment I am at present involved in." Memnon did not hesitate to follow her, to examine her affairs philosophically and to give her sound counsel.

The afflicted lady led him into a perfumed chamber, and politely made him sit down with her on a large sofa, where they both placed themselves opposite to each other in the attitude of conversation, their legs crossed; the one eager in telling her story, the other listening with devout attention. The lady spoke with downcast eyes, whence there sometimes fell a tear, and which, as she now and then ventured to raise them, always met those of the sage Memnon. Their discourse was full of tenderness, which redoubled as often as their eyes met. Memnon took her affairs exceedingly to heart, and felt himself every instant more and more inclined to oblige a person so virtuous and so unhappy. By degrees, in the warmth of conversation, they ceased to sit opposite; they drew nearer; their legs were no longer crossed. Memnon counseled her so closely and gave her such tender advices that neither of them could talk any longer of business nor well knew what they were about.

At this interesting moment, as may easily be imagined, who should come in but the uncle; he was armed from head to foot, and the first thing he said was, that he would immediately sacrifice, as was just, the sage Memnon and his niece; the latter, who made her escape, knew that he was well enough disposed to pardon, provided a good round sum were offered to him. Memnon was obliged to purchase his safety with all he had about him. In those days people were happy in getting so easily quit. America was not then discovered, and distressed ladies were not nearly as dangerous as they are now.

Memnon, covered with shame and confusion, got home to his own house; there he found a card inviting him to dinner with some of his intimate friends. If I remain at home alone, said he, I shall have my mind so

occupied with this vexatious adventure that I shall not be able to eat a bit, and I shall bring upon myself some disease. It will therefore be prudent in me to go to my intimate friends, and partake with them of a frugal repast. I shall forget in the sweets of their society that folly I have this morning been guilty of. Accordingly, he attends the meeting; he is discovered to be uneasy at something, and he is urged to drink and banish care. A little wine, drunk in moderation, comforts the heart of god and man: so reasons Memnon the philosopher, and he becomes intoxicated. After the repast, play is proposed. A little play with one's intimate friends is a harmless pastime. He plays and loses all that is in his purse, and four times as much on his word. A dispute arises on some circumstances in the game, and the disputants grow warm: one of his intimate friends throws a dice box at his head, and strikes out one of his eyes. The philosopher Memnon is carried home to his house, drunk and penniless, with the loss of an eye.

He sleeps out his debauch, and when his head has got a little clearer, he sends his servant to the Receiver General of the finances of Nineveh to draw a little money to pay his debts of honor to his intimate friends. The servant returns and informs him that the Receiver General had that morning been declared a fraudulent bankrupt and that by this means an hundred families are reduced to poverty and despair. Memnon, almost beside himself, puts a plaster on his eye and a petition in his pocket, and goes to court to solicit justice from the king against the bankrupt. In the saloon he meets a number of ladies all in the highest spirits, and sailing along with hoops four-and-twenty feet in circumference. One of them, who knew him a little, eyed him askance, and cried aloud, "Ah! What a horrid monster!" Another, who was better acquainted with him, thus accosts him, "Good-morrow, Mr. Memnon. I hope you are very well, Mr. Memnon. La, Mr. Memnon, how did you lose your eye?" And, turning upon her heel, she tripped away without waiting an answer. Memnon hid himself in a corner and waited for the moment when he could throw himself at the feet of the monarch. That moment at last arrived. Three times he kissed the earth, and presented his petition. His gracious majesty received him very favorably, and referred the paper to one of his satraps, that he might give him an account of it. The satrap takes Memnon aside and says to him with a haughty air and satirical grin, "Hark ye, you fellow with the one eye, you must be a comical dog indeed, to address yourself to the king rather than to me; and still more so, to dare to demand justice against an honest bankrupt, whom I honor with my protection, and who is nephew to the waiting-maid of my mistress. Proceed no further in this business, my good friend, if you wish to preserve the eye you have left."

Memnon, having thus resolved to renounce women, the excesses of food and drink, play and quarreling, but especially having determined never to go to court, had been in the short space of four- and-twenty hours, duped and robbed by a gentle dame, had got drunk, had played, had been engaged in a quarrel, had got his eye knocked out, and had been at court where he was sneered at and insulted.

Paalysed with astonishment, and his heart broken with grief, Memnon returns homeward in despair. As he is about to enter his house, he is repulsed by a number of officers who are carrying off his furniture for the benefit of his creditors: he falls down almost lifeless under a plane tree. There he finds the fair dame, of the morning, who was walking with her dear uncle; and both set up a loud laugh on seeing Memnon with his plaster. The night approached, and Memnon made his bed on some straw near the walls of his house. Here the ague seized him, and he fell asleep in one of the fits, when a celestial spirit appeared to him in a dream.

It was all resplendent with light: it had six beautiful wings, but neither feet nor head nor tail, and could be likened to nothing. "What art thou?" said Memnon. "Thy good genius," replied the spirit. "Restore to me then my eye, my health, my fortune, my reason," said Memnon; and he related how he had lost them all in one day. "These are adventures which never happen to us in the world we inhabit," said the spirit. "And what world do you inhabit?" said the man of affliction. "My native country," replied the other, "Is five hundred millions of leagues distant from the sun, in a little star near Sirius, which you see from hence."

"Charming country!" said Memnon. "And are there indeed no jades to dupe a poor devil, no intimate friends that win his money, and knock out an eye for him, no fraudulent bankrupts, no satraps that make a jest of you while they refuse you justice?" "No," said the inhabitant of the star, "We have nothing of what you talk of; we are never duped by women, because we have none among us; we never indulge in food and drink to excess, because we neither eat nor drink; we have no bankrupts, because with us there is neither silver nor gold; our eyes cannot be knocked out because we have not bodies in the form of yours; and satraps never do us injustice because in our world we are all equal."

"Pray, my lord," then said Memnon, "Without women and without eating how do you spend your time?" "In watching," said the genius, "Over the other worlds that are entrusted to us; and I am now come to give you

consolation." "Alas!" replied Memnon, "Why did you not come yesterday to hinder me from committing so many indiscretions?" "I was with your elder brother Hassan," said the celestial being. "He is still more to be pitied than you are. His Most Gracious Majesty the Sultan of the Indies, in whose court he has the honor to serve, has caused both his eyes to be put out for some small indiscretion; and he is now in a dungeon, his hands and feet loaded with chains."

"Tis a happy thing truly," said Memnon, "To have a good genius in one's family, when out of two brothers one is blind of an eye, the other blind of both: one stretched upon straw, the other in a dungeon." "Your fate will soon change," said the animal of the star. "It is true, you will never recover your eye, but, except that, you may be sufficiently happy if you never again take it into your head to be a perfect philosopher." "It is then impossible?" said Memnon. "As impossible as to be perfectly wise, perfectly strong, perfectly powerful, perfectly happy. We ourselves are very far from it. There is a world indeed where all this is possible; but, in the hundred thousand millions of worlds dispersed over the regions of space, everything goes on by degrees. There is less philosophy, and less enjoyment on the second than in the first, less in the third than in the second, and so forth till the last in the scale, where all are completely fools." "I am afraid," said Memnon, "that our little terraqueous globe here is the madhouse of those hundred thousand millions of worlds of which Your Lordship does me the honor to speak." "Not quite," said the spirit, "But very nearly; everything must be in its proper place." "But are those poets and philosophers wrong, then, who tell us that everything is for the best?" "No, they are right, when we consider things in relation to the gradation to the whole universe." "Oh! I shall never believe it till I recover my eye again," said poor Memnon.