

Chapter VIII

AND Pelet himself? How did I continue to like him? Oh, extremely well! Nothing could be more smooth, gentlemanlike, and even friendly, than his demeanour to me. I had to endure from him neither cold neglect, irritating interference, nor pretentious assumption of superiority. I fear, however, two poor, hard-worked Belgian ushers in the establishment could not have said as much; to them the director's manner was invariably dry, stern, and cool. I believe he perceived once or twice that I was a little shocked at the difference he made between them and me, and accounted for it by saying, with a quiet sarcastic smile -

'Ce ne sont que des Flamands - allez!'

And then he took his cigar gently from his lips and spat on the painted floor of the room in which we were sitting. Flamands certainly they were, and both had the true Flamand physiognomy, where intellectual inferiority is marked in lines none can mistake; still they were men, and, in the main, honest men; and I could not see why their being aboriginals of the flat, dull soil should serve as a pretext for treating them with perpetual severity and contempt. This idea, of injustice somewhat poisoned the pleasure I might otherwise have derived from Pelet's soft affable manner to myself. Certainly it was agreeable, when the day's work was over, to find one's employer an intelligent and cheerful companion; and if he was sometimes a little sarcastic and sometimes a little too insinuating, and if I did discover that his mildness was more a matter of appearance than of reality - if I did occasionally suspect the existence of flint or steel under an external covering of velvet - still we are none of us perfect; and weary as I was of the atmosphere of brutality and insolence in which I had constantly lived at X - - , I had no inclination now, on casting anchor in calmer regions, to institute at once a prying search after defects that were scrupulously withdrawn and carefully veiled from my view. I was willing to take Pelet for what he seemed - to believe him benevolent and friendly until some untoward event should prove him otherwise. He was not married, and I soon perceived he had all a Frenchman's, all a Parisian's notions about matrimony and women. I suspected a degree of laxity in his code of morals, there was something so cold and BLASE in his tone whenever he alluded to what he called 'le beau sexe;' but he was too gentlemanlike to intrude topics I did not invite, and as he was really intelligent and really fond of intellectual subjects of discourse, he and I always found enough to talk about, without seeking themes in the mire. I hated his fashion of mentioning love; I abhorred, from my soul, mere licentiousness. He felt the difference of our notions, and, by mutual consent, we kept off ground debateable.

Pelet's house was kept and his kitchen managed by his mother, a real old Frenchwoman; she had been handsome - at least she told me so, and I strove to believe her; she was now ugly, as only continental old women can be; perhaps, though, her style of dress made her look uglier than she really was. Indoors she would go about without cap, her grey hair strangely dishevelled; then, when at home, she seldom wore a gown - only a shabby cotton camisole; shoes, too, were strangers to her feet, and in lieu of them she sported roomy slippers, trodden down at the heels. On the other hand, whenever it was her pleasure to appear abroad, as on Sundays and fete-days, she would put on some very brilliant-coloured dress, usually of thin texture, a silk bonnet with a wreath of flowers, and a very fine shawl. She was not, in the main, an ill-natured old woman, but an incessant and most indiscreet talker; she kept chiefly in and about the kitchen, and seemed rather to avoid her son's august presence; of him, indeed, she evidently stood in awe. When he reproved her, his reproofs were bitter and unsparing; but he seldom gave himself that trouble.

Madame Pelet had her own society, her own circle of chosen visitors, whom, however, I seldom saw, as she generally entertained them in what she called her 'cabinet,' a small den of a place adjoining the kitchen, and descending into it by one or two steps. On these steps, by-the-by, I have not unfrequently seen Madame Pelet seated with a trencher on her knee, engaged in the threefold employment of eating her dinner, gossiping with her favourite servant, the housemaid, and scolding her antagonist, the cook; she never dined, and seldom indeed took any meal with her son; and as to showing her face at the boys' table, that was quite out of the question. These details will sound very odd in English ears, but Belgium is not England, and its ways are not our ways.

Madame Pelet's habits of life, then, being taken into consideration, I was a good deal surprised when, one Thursday evening (Thursday was always a half-holiday), as I was sitting all alone in my apartment, correcting a huge pile of English and Latin exercises, a servant tapped at the door, and, on its being opened, presented Madame Pelet's compliments, and she would be happy to see me to take my 'gouter' (a meal which answers to our English 'tea') with her in the dining-room.

'Plait-il?' said I, for I thought I must have misunderstood, the message and invitation were so unusual; the same words were repeated. I accepted, of course, and as I descended the stairs, I wondered what whim had entered the old lady's brain; her son was out - gone to pass the evening at the Salle of the Grande Harmonie or some other club of which he was a member. Just as I laid my hand on the handle of the dining-room door, a queer idea glanced across my mind.

'Surely she's not going to make love to me,' said I. 'I've heard of old Frenchwomen doing odd things in that line; and the gouter? They generally begin such affairs with eating and drinking, I believe.'

There was a fearful dismay in this suggestion of my excited imagination, and if I had allowed myself time to dwell upon it, I should no doubt have cut there and then, rushed back to my chamber, and bolted myself in; but whenever a danger or a horror is veiled with uncertainty, the primary wish of the mind is to ascertain first the naked truth, reserving the expedient of flight for the moment when its dread anticipation shall be realized. I turned the door-handle, and in an instant had crossed the fatal threshold, closed the door behind me, and stood in the presence of Madame Pelet.

Gracious heavens! The first view of her seemed to confirm my worst apprehensions. There she sat, dressed out in a light green muslin gown, on her head a lace cap with flourishing red roses in the frill; her table was carefully spread; there were fruit, cakes, and coffee, with a bottle of something - I did not know what. Already the cold sweat started on my brow, already I glanced back over my shoulder at the closed door, when, to my unspeakable relief, my eye, wandering mildly in the direction of the stove, rested upon a second figure, seated in a large fauteuil beside it. This was a woman, too, and, moreover, an old woman, and as fat and as rubicund as Madame Pelet was meagre and yellow; her attire was likewise very fine, and spring flowers of different hues circled in a bright wreath the crown of her violet-coloured velvet bonnet.

I had only time to make these general observations when Madame Pelet, coming forward with what she intended should be a graceful and elastic step, thus accosted me:

'Monsieur is indeed most obliging to quit his books, his studies, at the request of an insignificant person like me - will Monsieur complete his kindness by allowing me to present him to my dear friend Madame Reuter, who resides in the neighbouring house - the young ladies' school.'

'Ah!' thought I, 'I knew she was old,' and I bowed and took my seat. Madame Reuter placed herself at the table opposite to me.

'How do you like Belgium, Monsieur?' asked she, in an accent of the broadest Bruxellois. I could now well distinguish the difference between the fine and pure Parisian utterance of M. Pelet, for instance, and the guttural enunciation of the Flamands. I answered politely, and then wondered how so coarse and clumsy an old woman as the one before me should be at the head of a ladies' seminary, which I had always heard spoken of in terms of high commendation. In truth there

was something to wonder at. Madame Reuter looked more like a joyous, free-living old Flemish fermiere, or even a maitresse d'auberge, than a staid, grave, rigid directrice de pensionnat. In general the continental, or at least the Belgian old women permit themselves a licence of manners, speech, and aspect, such as our venerable granddames would recoil from as absolutely disreputable, and Madame Reuter's jolly face bore evidence that she was no exception to the rule of her country; there was a twinkle and leer in her left eye; her right she kept habitually half shut, which I thought very odd indeed. After several vain attempts to comprehend the motives of these two droll old creatures for inviting me to join them at their gouter, I at last fairly gave it up, and resigning myself to inevitable mystification, I sat and looked first at one, then at the other, taking care meantime to do justice to the confitures, cakes, and coffee, with which they amply supplied me. They, too, ate, and that with no delicate appetite, and having demolished a large portion of the solids, they proposed a 'petit verre.' I declined. Not so Mesdames Pelet and Reuter; each mixed herself what I thought rather a stiff tumbler of punch, and placing it on a stand near the stove, they drew up their chairs to that convenience, and invited me to do the same. I obeyed; and being seated fairly between them, I was thus addressed first by Madame Pelet, then by Madame Reuter.

'We will now speak of business,' said Madame Pelet, and she went on to make an elaborate speech, which, being interpreted, was to the effect that she had asked for the pleasure of my company that evening in order to give her friend Madame Reuter an opportunity of broaching an important proposal, which might turn out greatly to my advantage.

'Pourvu que vous soyez sage,' said Madame Reuter, 'et a vrai dire, vous en avez bien l'air. Take one drop of the punch' (or ponche, as she pronounced it); 'it is an agreeable and wholesome beverage after a full meal.'

I bowed, but again declined it. She went on:

'I feel,' said she, after a solemn sip - 'I feel profoundly the importance of the commission with which my dear daughter has entrusted me, for you are aware, Monsieur, that it is my daughter who directs the establishment in the next house?'

'Ah! I thought it was yourself, madame.' Though, indeed, at that moment I recollected that it was called Mademoiselle, not Madame Reuter's pensionnat.

'! Oh, no! I manage the house and look after the servants, as my friend Madame Pelet does for Monsieur her son - nothing more. Ah! you thought I gave lessons in class - did you?'

And she laughed loud and long, as though the idea tickled her fancy amazingly.

'Madame is in the wrong to laugh,' I observed; 'if she does not give lessons, I am sure it is not because she cannot;' and I whipped out a white pocket-handkerchief and wafted it, with a French grace, past my nose, bowing at the name time.

'*Quel charmant jeune homme!*' murmured Madame Pelet in a low voice. Madame Reuter, being less sentimental, as she was Flamand and not French, only laughed again.

'You are a dangerous person, I fear,' said she; 'if you can forge compliments at that rate, Zoraide will positively be afraid of you; but if you are good, I will keep your secret, and not tell her how well you can flatter. Now, listen what sort of a proposal she makes to you. She has heard that you are an excellent professor, and as she wishes to get the very best masters for her school (*car Zoraide fait tout comme une reine, c'est une veritable maitresse-femme*), she has commissioned me to step over this afternoon, and sound Madame Pelet as to the possibility of engaging you. Zoraide is a wary general; she never advances without first examining well her ground I don't think she would be pleased if she knew I had already disclosed her intentions to you; she did not order me to go so far, but I thought there would be no harm in letting you into the secret, and Madame Pelet was of the same opinion. Take care, however, you don't betray either of us to Zoraide - to my daughter, I mean; she is so discreet and circumspect herself, she cannot understand that one should find a pleasure in gossiping a little - '

'*C'est absolument comme mon fils!*' cried Madame Pelet.

'All the world is so changed since our girlhood!' rejoined the other: 'young people have such old heads now. But to return, Monsieur. Madame Pelet will mention the subject of your giving lessons in my daughter's establishment to her son, and he will speak to you; and then to-morrow, you will step over to our house, and ask to see my daughter, and you will introduce the subject as if the first intimation of it had reached you from M. Pelet himself, and be sure you never mention my name, for I would not displease Zoraide on any account.

'*Bien! bien!*' interrupted I - for all this chatter and circumlocution began to bore me very much; 'I will consult M. Pelet, and the thing shall be settled as you desire. Good evening, mesdames - I am infinitely obliged to you.'

'*Comment! vous vous en allez deja?*' exclaimed Madame Pelet.

'Prenez encore quelquechose, monsieur; une pomme cuite, des biscuits, encore une tasse de cafe?'

'Merci, merci, madame - au revoir.' And I backed at last out of the apartment.

Having regained my own room, I set myself to turn over in my mind the incident of the evening. It seemed a queer affair altogether, and queerly managed; the two old women had made quite a little intricate mess of it; still I found that the uppermost feeling in my mind on the subject was one of satisfaction. In the first place it would be a change to give lessons in another seminary, and then to teach young ladies would be an occupation so interesting - to be admitted at all into a ladies' boarding-school would be an incident so new in my life. Besides, thought I, as I glanced at the boarded window, 'I shall now at last see the mysterious garden: I shall gaze both on the angels and their Eden.'