

Chapter X

NEXT day the morning hours seemed to pass very slowly at M. Pelet's; I wanted the afternoon to come that I might go again to the neighbouring pensionnat and give my first lesson within its pleasant precincts; for pleasant they appeared to me. At noon the hour of recreation arrived; at one o'clock we had lunch; this got on the time, and at last St. Gudule's deep bell, tolling slowly two, marked the moment for which I had been waiting.

At the foot of the narrow back-stairs that descended from my room, I met M. Pelet.

'Comme vous avez l'air rayonnant!' said he. 'Je ne vous ai jamais vu aussi gai. Que s'est-il donc passe?'

'Apparemment que j'aime les changements,' replied I.

'Ah! je comprends - c'est cela-soyez sage seulement. Vous etes bien jeune - trop jeune pour le role que vous allez jouer; il faut prendre garde - savez-vous?'

'Mais quel danger y a-t-il?'

'Je n'en sais rien - ne vous laissez pas aller a de vives impressions - voila tout.'

I laughed: a sentiment of exquisite pleasure played over my nerves at the thought that 'vives impressions' were likely to be created; it was the deadness, the sameness of life's daily ongoings that had hitherto been my bane; my blouse-clad 'eleves' in the boys' seminary never stirred in me any 'vives impressions' except it might be occasionally some of anger. I broke from M. Pelet, and as I strode down the passage he followed me with one of his laughs - a very French, rakish, mocking sound.

Again I stood at the neighbouring door, and soon was re-admitted into the cheerful passage with its clear dove-colour imitation marble walls. I followed the portress, and descending a step, and making a turn, I found myself in a sort of corridor; a side-door opened, Mdlle. Reuter's little figure, as graceful as it was plump, appeared. I could now see her dress in full daylight; a neat, simple mousseline-laine gown fitted her compact round shape to perfection - delicate little collar and manchettes of lace, trim Parisian brodequins showed her neck, wrists, and feet, to complete advantage; but how grave was her face as she came suddenly upon me! Solicitude and business were in her eye - on her forehead; she looked almost stern. Her 'Bon jour, monsieur,' was quite polite, but so orderly, so commonplace, it spread directly a cool,

damp towel over my 'vives impressions.' The servant turned back when her mistress appeared, and I walked slowly along the corridor, side by side with Mdlle. Reuter.

'Monsieur will give a lesson in the first class to-day,' said she; 'dictation or reading will perhaps be the best thing to begin with, for those are the easiest forms of communicating instruction in a foreign language; and, at the first, a master naturally feels a little unsettled.'

She was quite right, as I had found from experience; it only remained for me to acquiesce. We proceeded now in silence. The corridor terminated in a hall, large, lofty, and square; a glass door on one side showed within a long narrow refectory, with tables, an armoire, and two lamps; it was empty; large glass doors, in front, opened on the playground and garden; a broad staircase ascended spirally on the opposite side; the remaining wall showed a pair of great folding-doors, now closed, and admitting: doubtless, to the classes.

Mdlle. Reuter turned her eye laterally on me, to ascertain, probably, whether I was collected enough to be ushered into her sanctum sanctorum. I suppose she judged me to be in a tolerable state of self-government, for she opened the door, and I followed her through. A rustling sound of uprising greeted our entrance; without looking to the right or left, I walked straight up the lane between two sets of benches and desks, and took possession of the empty chair and isolated desk raised on an estrade, of one step high, so as to command one division; the other division being under the surveillance of a maitresse similarly elevated. At the back of the estrade, and attached to a moveable partition dividing this schoolroom from another beyond, was a large tableau of wood painted black and varnished; a thick crayon of white chalk lay on my desk for the convenience of elucidating any grammatical or verbal obscurity which might occur in my lessons by writing it upon the tableau; a wet sponge appeared beside the chalk, to enable me to efface the marks when they had served the purpose intended.

I carefully and deliberately made these observations before allowing myself to take one glance at the benches before me; having handled the crayon, looked back at the tableau, fingered the sponge in order to ascertain that it was in a right state of moisture, I found myself cool enough to admit of looking calmly up and gazing deliberately round me.

And first I observed that Mdlle. Reuter had already glided away, she was nowhere visible; a maitresse or teacher, the one who occupied the corresponding estrade to my own, alone remained to keep guard over me; she was a little in the shade, and, with my short sight, I could only see that she was of a thin bony figure and rather tallowy

complexion, and that her attitude, as she sat, partook equally of listlessness and affectation. More obvious, more prominent, shone on by the full light of the large window, were the occupants of the benches just before me, of whom some were girls of fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, some young women from eighteen (as it appeared to me) up to twenty; the most modest attire, the simplest fashion of wearing the hair, were apparent in all; and good features, ruddy, blooming complexions, large and brilliant eyes, forms full, even to solidity, seemed to abound. I did not bear the first view like a stoic; I was dazzled, my eyes fell, and in a voice somewhat too low I murmured -

‘Prenez vos cahiers de dictee, mesdemoiselles.’

Not so had I bid the boys at Pelet's take their reading-books. A rustle followed, and an opening of desks; behind the lifted lids which momentarily screened the heads bent down to search for exercise-books, I heard tittering and whispers.

‘Eulalie, je suis prete a pamer de rire,’ observed one.

‘Comme il a rougi en parlant!’

‘Oui, c'est un veritable blanc-bec.’

‘Tais-toi, Hortense - il nous ecoute.’

And now the lids sank and the heads reappeared; I had marked three, the whisperers, and I did not scruple to take a very steady look at them as they emerged from their temporary eclipse. It is astonishing what ease and courage their little phrases of flippancy had given me; the idea by which I had been awed was that the youthful beings before me, with their dark nun-like robes and softly braided hair, were a kind of half-angels. The light titter, the giddy whisper, had already in some measure relieved my mind of that fond and oppressive fancy.

The three I allude to were just in front, within half a yard of my estrade, and were among the most womanly-looking present. Their names I knew afterwards, and may as well mention now; they were Eulalie, Hortense, Caroline. Eulalie was tall, and very finely shaped: she was fair, and her features were those of a Low Country Madonna; many a ‘figure de Vierge’ have I seen in Dutch pictures exactly resembling hers; there were no angles in her shape or in her face, all was curve and roundness - neither thought, sentiment, nor passion disturbed by line or flush the equality of her pale, clear skin; her noble bust heaved with her regular breathing, her eyes moved a little - by these evidences of life alone could I have distinguished her from some large handsome figure moulded in wax. Hortense was of middle size and stout, her form was ungraceful, her face striking, more alive

and brilliant than Eulalie's, her hair was dark brown, her complexion richly coloured; there were frolic and mischief in her eye: consistency and good sense she might possess, but none of her features betokened those qualities.

Caroline was little, though evidently full grown; raven-black hair, very dark eyes, absolutely regular features, with a colourless olive complexion, clear as to the face and sallow about the neck, formed in her that assemblage of points whose union many persons regard as the perfection of beauty. How, with the tintless pallor of her skin and the classic straightness of her lineaments, she managed to look sensual, I don't know. I think her lips and eyes contrived the affair between them, and the result left no uncertainty on the beholder's mind. She was sensual now, and in ten years' time she would be coarse - promise plain was written in her face of much future folly.

If I looked at these girls with little scruple, they looked at me with still less. Eulalie raised her unmoved eye to mine, and seemed to expect, passively but securely, an impromptu tribute to her majestic charms. Hortense regarded me boldly, and giggled at the same time, while she said, with an air of impudent freedom -

'Ditez-nous quelque chose de facile pour commencer, monsieur.'

Caroline shook her loose ringlets of abundant but somewhat coarse hair over her rolling black eyes; parting her lips, as full as those of a hot-blooded Maroon, she showed her well-set teeth sparkling between them, and treated me at the same time to a smile 'de sa facon.' Beautiful as Pauline Borghese, she looked at the moment scarcely purer than Lucrece de Borgia. Caroline was of noble family. I heard her lady-mother's character afterwards, and then I ceased to wonder at the precocious accomplishments of the daughter. These three, I at once saw, deemed themselves the queens of the school, and conceived that by their splendour they threw all the rest into the shade. In less than five minutes they had thus revealed to me their characters, and in less than five minutes I had buckled on a breast-plate of steely indifference, and let down a visor of impassible austerity.

'Take your pens and commence writing,' said I, in as dry and trite a voice as if I had been addressing only Jules Vanderkelkov and Co.

The dictee now commenced. My three belles interrupted me perpetually with little silly questions and uncalled-for remarks, to some of which I made no answer, and to others replied very quietly and briefly. 'Comment dit-on point et virgule en Anglais, monsieur?'

'Semi-colon, mademoiselle.'

‘Semi-collong? Ah, comme c'est drole!’ (giggle.)

‘J'ai une si mauvaise plume - impossible d'ecrire!’

‘Mais, monsieur - je ne sais pas suivre - vous allez si vite.’

‘Je n'ai rien compris, moi!’

Here a general murmur arose, and the teacher, opening her lips for the first time, ejaculated -

‘Silence, mesdemoiselles!’

No silence followed - on the contrary, the three ladies in front began to talk more loudly.

‘C'est si difficile, l'Anglais!’

‘Je deteste la dictee.’

‘Quel ennui d'ecrire quelquechose que l'on ne comprend pas!’

Some of those behind laughed: a degree of confusion began to pervade the class; it was necessary to take prompt measures.

‘Donnez-moi votre cahier,’ said I to Eulalie in an abrupt tone; and bending over, I took it before she had time to give it.

‘Et vous, mademoiselle-donnez-moi le votre,’ continued I, more mildly, addressing a little pale, plain looking girl who sat in the first row of the other division, and whom I had remarked as being at once the ugliest and the most attentive in the room; she rose up, walked over to me, and delivered her book with a grave, modest curtsy. I glanced over the two dictations; Eulalie's was slurred, blotted, and full of silly mistakes - Sylvie's (such was the name of the ugly little girl) was clearly written, it contained no error against sense, and but few faults of orthography. I coolly read aloud both exercises, marking the faults - then I looked at Eulalie:

‘C'est honteux!’ said I, and I deliberately tore her dictation in four parts, and presented her with the fragments. I returned Sylvie her book with a smile, saying -

‘C'est bien - je suis content de vous.’

Sylvie looked calmly pleased, Eulalie swelled like an incensed turkey, but the mutiny was quelled: the conceited coquetry and futile flirtation of the first bench were exchanged for a taciturn sullenness,

much more convenient to me, and the rest of my lesson passed without interruption.

A bell clanging out in the yard announced the moment for the cessation of school labours. I heard our own bell at the same time, and that of a certain public college immediately after. Order dissolved instantly; up started every pupil, I hastened to seize my hat, bow to the maitresse, and quit the room before the tide of externats should pour from the inner class, where I knew near a hundred were prisoned, and whose rising tumult I already heard.

I had scarcely crossed the hall and gained the corridor, when Mdlle. Reuter came again upon me.

‘Step in here a moment,’ said she, and she held open the door of the side room from whence she had issued on my arrival; it was a SALLE-A-MANGER, as appeared from the beaufet and the armoire vitree, filled with glass and china, which formed part of its furniture. Ere she had closed the door on me and herself, the corridor was already filled with day-pupils, tearing down their cloaks, bonnets, and cabas from the wooden pegs on which they were suspended; the shrill voice of a maitresse was heard at intervals vainly endeavouring to enforce some sort of order; vainly, I say: discipline there was none in these rough ranks, and yet this was considered one of the best-conducted schools in Brussels.

‘Well, you have given your first lesson,’ began Mdlle. Reuter in the most calm, equable voice, as though quite unconscious of the chaos from which we were separated only by a single wall.

‘Were you satisfied with your pupils, or did any circumstance in their conduct give you cause for complaint? Conceal nothing from me, repose in me entire confidence.’

Happily, I felt in myself complete power to manage my pupils without aid; the enchantment, the golden haze which had dazzled my perspicuity at first, had been a good deal dissipated. I cannot say I was chagrined or downcast by the contrast which the reality of a pensionnat de demoiselles presented to my vague ideal of the same community; I was only enlightened and amused; consequently, I felt in no disposition to complain to Mdlle. Reuter, and I received her considerate invitation to confidence with a smile.

‘A thousand thanks, mademoiselle, all has gone very smoothly.’

She looked more than doubtful.

‘Et les trois demoiselles du premier banc?’ said she.

'Ah! tout va au mieux!' was my answer, and Mdlle. Reuter ceased to question me; but her eye - not large, not brilliant, not melting, or kindling, but astute, penetrating, practical, showed she was even with me; it let out a momentary gleam, which said plainly, 'Be as close as you like, I am not dependent on your candour; what you would conceal I already know.'

By a transition so quiet as to be scarcely perceptible, the directress's manner changed; the anxious business-air passed from her face, and she began chatting about the weather and the town, and asking in neighbourly wise after M. and Madame Pelet. I answered all her little questions; she prolonged her talk, I went on following its many little windings; she sat so long, said so much, varied so often the topics of discourse, that it was not difficult to perceive she had a particular aim in thus detaining me. Her mere words could have afforded no clue to this aim, but her countenance aided; while her lips uttered only affable commonplaces, her eyes reverted continually to my face. Her glances were not given in full, but out of the corners, so quietly, so stealthily, yet I think I lost not one. I watched her as keenly as she watched me; I perceived soon that she was feeling after my real character; she was searching for salient points, and weak; points, and eccentric points; she was applying now this test, now that, hoping in the end to find some chink, some niche, where she could put in her little firm foot and stand upon my neck - mistress of my nature, Do not mistake me, reader, it was no amorous influence she wished to gain - at that time it was only the power of the politician to which she aspired; I was now installed as a professor in her establishment, and she wanted to know where her mind was superior to mine - by what feeling or opinion she could lead me.

I enjoyed the game much, and did not hasten its conclusion; sometimes I gave her hopes, beginning a sentence rather weakly, when her shrewd eye would light up - she thought she had me; having led her a little way, I delighted to turn round and finish with sound, hard sense, whereat her countenance would fall. At last a servant entered to announce dinner; the conflict being thus necessarily terminated, we parted without having gained any advantage on either side: Mdlle. Reuter had not even given me an opportunity of attacking her with feeling, and I had managed to baffle her little schemes of craft. It was a regular drawn battle. I again held out my hand when I left the room, she gave me hers; it was a small and white hand, but how cool! I met her eye too in full - obliging her to give me a straightforward look; this last test went against me: it left her as it found her - moderate, temperate, tranquil; me it disappointed.

'I am growing wiser,' thought I, as I walked back to M. Pelet's. 'Look at this little woman; is she like the women of novelists and romancers? To read of female character as depicted in Poetry and Fiction, one

would think it was made up of sentiment, either for good or bad - here is a specimen, and a most sensible and respectable specimen, too, whose staple ingredient is abstract reason. No Talleyrand was ever more passionless than Zoraide Reuter!' So I thought then; I found afterwards that blunt susceptibilities are very consistent with strong propensities.