

Chapter XI

I HAD indeed had a very long talk with the crafty little politician, and on regaining my quarters, I found that dinner was half over. To be late at meals was against a standing rule of the establishment, and had it been one of the Flemish ushers who thus entered after the removal of the soup and the commencement of the first course, M. Pelet would probably have greeted him with a public rebuke, and would certainly have mulcted him both of soup and fish; as it was, that polite though partial gentleman only shook his head, and as I took my place, unrolled my napkin, and said my heretical grace to myself, he civilly despatched a servant to the kitchen, to bring me a plate of 'puree aux carottes' (for this was a maigre-day), and before sending away the first course, reserved for me a portion of the stock-fish of which it consisted. Dinner being over, the boys rushed out for their evening play; Kint and Vandam (the two ushers) of course followed them. Poor fellows! if they had not looked so very heavy, so very soulless, so very indifferent to all things in heaven above or in the earth beneath, I could have pitied them greatly for the obligation they were under to trail after those rough lads everywhere and at all times; even as it was, I felt disposed to scout myself as a privileged prig when I turned to ascend to my chamber, sure to find there, if not enjoyment, at least liberty; but this evening (as had often happened before) I was to be still farther distinguished.

'Eh bien, mauvais sujet!' said the voice of M. Pelet behind me, as I set my foot on the first step of the stair, 'ou allez-vous? Venez a la salle-a-manger, que je vous gronde un peu.'

'I beg pardon, monsieur,' said I, as I followed him to his private sitting-room, 'for having returned so late - it was not my fault.'

'That is just what I want to know,' rejoined M. Pelet, as he ushered me into the comfortable parlour with a good wood-fire - for the stove had now been removed for the season. Having rung the bell he ordered 'Coffee for two,' and presently he and I were seated, almost in English comfort, one on each side of the hearth, a little round table between us, with a coffee-pot, a sugar-basin, and two large white china cups. While M. Pelet employed himself in choosing a cigar from a box, my thoughts reverted to the two outcast ushers, whose voices I could hear even now crying hoarsely for order in the playground.

'C'est une grande responsabilite, que la surveillance,' observed I.

'Plait-il?' dit M. Pelet.

I remarked that I thought Messieurs Vandam and Kint must sometimes be a little fatigued with their labours.

'Des betes de somme, - des betes de somme,' murmured scornfully the director. Meantime I offered him his cup of coffee.

'Servez-vous mon garçon,' said he blandly, when I had put a couple of huge lumps of continental sugar into his cup. 'And now tell me why you stayed so long at Mdlle. Reuter's. I know that lessons conclude, in her establishment as in mine, at four o'clock, and when you returned it was past five.'

'Mdlle. wished to speak with me, monsieur.'

'Indeed! on what subject? if one may ask.'

'Mademoiselle talked about nothing, monsieur.'

'A fertile topic! and did she discourse thereon in the schoolroom, before the pupils?'

'No; like you, monsieur, she asked me to walk into her parlour.'

'And Madame Reuter - the old duenna - my mother's gossip, was there, of course?'

'No, monsieur; I had the honour of being quite alone with mademoiselle.'

'C'est joli - cela,' observed M. Pelet, and he smiled and looked into the fire.

'Honi soit qui mal y pense,' murmured I, significantly.

'Je connais un peu ma petite voisine - voyez-vous.'

'In that case, monsieur will be able to aid me in finding out what was mademoiselle's reason for making me sit before her sofa one mortal hour, listening to the most copious and fluent dissertation on the merest frivolities.'

'She was sounding your character.'

'I thought so, monsieur.'

'Did she find out your weak point?'

'What is my weak point?'

'Why, the sentimental. Any woman sinking her shaft deep enough, will at last reach a fathomless spring of sensibility in thy breast, Crimsworth.'

I felt the blood stir about my heart and rise warm to my cheek.

'Some women might, monsieur.'

'Is Mdlle. Reuter of the number? Come, speak frankly, mon fils; elle est encore jeune, plus agee que toi peut-etre, mais juste asset pour unir la tendresse d'une petite maman a l'amour d'une epouse devouee; n'est-ce pas que cela t'irait superieurement?'

'No, monsieur; I should like my wife to be my wife, and not half my mother.'

'She is then a little too old for you?'

'No, monsieur, not a day too old if she suited me in other things.'

'In what does she not suit you, William? She is personally agreeable, is she not?'

'Very; her hair and complexion are just what I admire; and her turn of form, though quite Belgian, is full of grace.'

'Bravo! and her face? her features? How do you like them?'

'A little harsh, especially her mouth.'

'Ah, yes! her mouth,' said M. Pelet, and he chuckled inwardly. 'There is character about her mouth - firmness - but she has a very pleasant smile; don't you think so?'

'Rather crafty.'

'True, but that expression of craft is owing to her eyebrows; have you remarked her eyebrows?'

I answered that I had not.

'You have not seen her looking down then?' said he.

'No.'

It is a treat, notwithstanding. Observe her when she has some knitting, or some other woman's work in hand, and sits the image of peace, calmly intent on her needles and her silk, some discussion

meantime going on around her, in the course of which peculiarities of character are being developed, or important interests canvassed; she takes no part in it; her humble, feminine mind is wholly with her knitting; none of her features move; she neither presumes to smile approval, nor frown disapprobation; her little hands assiduously ply their unpretending task; if she can only get this purse finished, or this bonnet-grec completed, it is enough for her. If gentlemen approach her chair, a deeper quiescence, a meeker modesty settles on her features, and clothes her general mien; observe then her eyebrows, et dites-moi s'il n'y a pas du chat dans l'un et du renard dans l'autre.'

'I will take careful notice the first opportunity,' said I.

'And then,' continued M. Pelet, 'the eyelid will flicker, the light-coloured lashes be lifted a second, and a blue eye, glancing out from under the screen, will take its brief, sly, searching survey, and retreat again.'

I smiled, and so did Pelet, and after a few minutes' silence, I asked:

'Will she ever marry, do you think?'

'Marry! Will birds pair? Of course it is both her intention and resolution to marry when she finds a suitable match, and no one is better aware than herself of the sort of impression she is capable of producing; no one likes better to captivate in a quiet way. I am mistaken if she will not yet leave the print of her stealing steps on thy heart, Crimsworth.'

'Of her steps? Confound it, no! My heart is not a plank to be walked on.'

'But the soft touch of a patte de velours will do it no harm.'

'She offers me no patte de velours; she is all form and reserve with me.'

'That to begin with; let respect be the foundation, affection the first floor, love the superstructure; Mdlle. Reuter is a skilful architect.'

'And interest, M. Pelet - interest. Will not mademoiselle consider that point?'

'Yes, yes, no doubt; it will be the cement between every stone. And now we have discussed the directress, what of the pupils? N'y-a-t-il pas de belles etudes parmi ces jeunes tetes?'

‘Studies of character? Yes; curious ones, at least, I imagine; but one cannot divine much from a first interview.’

‘Ah, you affect discretion; but tell me now, were you not a little abashed before these blooming young creatures?’

‘At first, yes; but I rallied and got through with all due sang-froid.’

‘I don't believe you.’

‘It is true, notwithstanding. At first I thought them angels, but they did not leave me long under that delusion; three of the eldest and handsomest undertook the task of setting me right, and they managed so cleverly that in five minutes I knew them, at least, for what they were - three arrant coquettes.’

‘Je les connais!’ exclaimed M. Pelet. ‘Elles sont toujours au premier rang a l'eglise et a la promenade; une blonde superbe, une jolie espiègle, une belle brune.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Lovely creatures all of them - heads for artists; what a group they would make, taken together! Eulalie (I know their names), with her smooth braided hair and calm ivory brow. Hortense, with her rich chesnut locks so luxuriantly knotted, plaited, twisted, as if she did not know how to dispose of all their abundance, with her vermilion lips, damask cheek, and roguish laughing eye. And Caroline de Blemont! Ah, there is beauty! beauty in perfection. What a cloud of sable curls about the face of a houri! What fascinating lips! What glorious black eyes! Your Byron would have worshipped her, and you - you cold, frigid islander! - you played the austere, the insensible in the presence of an Aphrodite so exquisite?’

I might have laughed at the director's enthusiasm had I believed it real, but there was something in his tone which indicated got-up raptures. I felt he was only affecting fervour in order to put me off my guard, to induce me to come out in return, so I scarcely even smiled. He went on:

‘Confess, William, do not the mere good looks of Zoraide Reuter appear dowdyish and commonplace compared with the splendid charms of some of her pupils?’

The question discomposed me, but I now felt plainly that my principal was endeavouring (for reasons best known to himself - at that time I could not fathom them) to excite ideas and wishes in my mind alien to

what was right and honourable. The iniquity of the instigation proved its antidote, and when he further added: -

‘Each of those three beautiful girls will have a handsome fortune; and with a little address, a gentlemanlike, intelligent young fellow like you might make himself master of the hand, heart, and purse of any one of the trio.’

I replied by a look and an interrogative ‘Monsieur?’ which startled him.

He laughed a forced laugh, affirmed that he had only been joking, and demanded whether I could possibly have thought him in earnest. Just then the bell rang; the play-hour was over; it was an evening on which M. Pelet was accustomed to read passages from the drama and the belles lettres to his pupils. He did not wait for my answer, but rising, left the room, humming as he went some gay strain of Beranger's.