

Chapter XVII

AFTER all I had profited but imperfectly by the opportunity I had so boldly achieved of speaking to Mdlle. Henri; it was my intention to ask her how she came to be possessed of two English baptismal names, Frances and Evans, in addition to her French surname, also whence she derived her good accent. I had forgotten both points, or, rather, our colloquy had been so brief that I had not had time to bring them forward; moreover, I had not half tested her powers of speaking English; all I had drawn from her in that language were the words 'Yes,' and 'Thank you, sir.' 'No matter,' I reflected. 'What has been left incomplete now, shall be finished another day.' Nor did I fail to keep the promise thus made to myself. It was difficult to get even a few words of particular conversation with one pupil among so many; but, according to the old proverb, 'Where there is a will, there is a way;' and again and again I managed to find an opportunity for exchanging a few words with Mdlle. Henri, regardless that envy stared and detraction whispered whenever I approached her.

'Your book an instant.' Such was the mode in which I often began these brief dialogues; the time was always just at the conclusion of the lesson; and motioning to her to rise, I installed myself in her place, allowing her to stand deferentially at my side; for I esteemed it wise and right in her case to enforce strictly all forms ordinarily in use between master and pupil; the rather because I perceived that in proportion as my manner grew austere and magisterial, hers became easy and self-possessed - an odd contradiction, doubtless, to the ordinary effect in such cases; but so it was.

'A pencil,' said I, holding out my hand without looking at her. (I am now about to sketch a brief report of the first of these conferences.) She gave me one, and while I underlined some errors in a grammatical exercise she had written, I observed -

'You are not a native of Belgium?'

'No.'

'Nor of France?'

'No.'

'Where, then, is your birthplace?'

'I was born at Geneva.'

'You don't call Frances and Evans Swiss names, I presume?'

'No, sir; they are English names.'

'Just so; and is it the custom of the Genevese to give their children English appellatives?'

'Non, Monsieur; mais - '

'Speak English, if you please.'

'Mais - '

'English - '

'But' (slowly and with embarrassment) 'my parents were not all the two Genevese.'

'Say BOTH, instead of 'all the two,' mademoiselle.'

'Not BOTH Swiss: my mother was English.'

'Ah! and of English extraction?'

'Yes - her ancestors were all English.'

'And your father?'

'He was Swiss.'

'What besides? What was his profession?'

'Ecclesiastic - pastor - he had a church.'

'Since your mother is an Englishwoman, why do you not speak English with more facility?'

'Maman est morte, il y a dix ans.'

'And you do homage to her memory by forgetting her language. Have the goodness to put French out of your mind so long as I converse with you - keep to English.'

'C'est si difficile, monsieur, quand on n'en a plus l'habitude.'

'You had the habitude formerly, I suppose? Now answer me in your mother tongue.'

'Yes, sir, I spoke the English more than the French when I was a child.'

'Why do you not speak it now?'

'Because I have no English friends.'

'You live with your father, I suppose?'

'My father is dead.'

'You have brothers and sisters?'

'Not one.'

'Do you live alone?'

'No - I have an aunt - ma tante Julienne.'

'Your father's sister?'

'Justement, monsieur.'

'Is that English?'

'No - but I forget - '

'For which, mademoiselle, if you were a child I should certainly devise some slight punishment; at your age - you must be two or three and twenty, I should think?'

'Pas encore, monsieur - en un mois j'aurai dix-neuf ans.'

'Well, nineteen is a mature age, and, having attained it, you ought to be so solicitous for your own improvement, that it should not be needful for a master to remind you twice of the expediency of your speaking English whenever practicable.'

To this wise speech I received no answer; and, when I looked up, my pupil was smiling to herself a much-meaning, though not very gay smile; it seemed to say, 'He talks of he knows not what:' it said this so plainly, that I determined to request information on the point concerning which my ignorance seemed to be thus tacitly affirmed.

'Are you solicitous for your own improvement?'

'Rather.'

'How do you prove it, mademoiselle?'

An odd question, and bluntly put; it excited a second smile.

'Why, monsieur, I am not inattentive - am I? I learn my lessons well - '

'Oh, a child can do that! and what more do you do?'

'What more can I do?'

'Oh, certainly, not much; but you are a teacher, are you not, as well as a pupil?'

'Yes.'

'You teach lace-mending?'

'Yes.'

'A dull, stupid occupation; do you like it?'

'No - it is tedious.'

'Why do you pursue it? Why do you not rather teach history, geography, grammar, even arithmetic?'

'Is monsieur certain that I am myself thoroughly acquainted with these studies?'

'I don't know; you ought to be at your age.'

'But I never was at school, monsieur - '

'Indeed! What then were your friends - what was your aunt about? She is very much to blame.'

'No monsieur, no - my aunt is good - she is not to blame - she does what she can; she lodges and nourishes me' (I report Mdlle. Henri's phrases literally, and it was thus she translated from the French). 'She is not rich; she has only an annuity of twelve hundred francs, and it would be impossible for her to send me to school.'

'Rather,' thought I to myself on hearing this, but I continued, in the dogmatical tone I had adopted: -

'It is sad, however, that you should be brought up in ignorance of the most ordinary branches of education; had you known something of history and grammar you might, by degrees, have relinquished your lace-mending drudgery, and risen in the world.'

'It is what I mean to do.'

'How? By a knowledge of English alone? That will not suffice; no respectable family will receive a governess whose whole stock of knowledge consists in a familiarity with one foreign language.'

'Monsieur, I know other things.'

'Yes, yes, you can work with Berlin wools, and embroider handkerchiefs and collars - that will do little for you.'

Mdlle. Henri's lips were unclosed to answer, but she checked herself, as thinking the discussion had been sufficiently pursued, and remained silent.

'Speak,' I continued, impatiently; 'I never like the appearance of acquiescence when the reality is not there; and you had a contradiction at your tongue's end.'

'Monsieur, I have had many lessons both in grammar, history, geography, and arithmetic. I have gone through a course of each study.'

'Bravo! but how did you manage it, since your aunt could not afford to send you to school?'

'By lace-mending; by the thing monsieur despises so much.'

'Truly! And now, mademoiselle, it will be a good exercise for you to explain to me in English how such a result was produced by such means.'

'Monsieur, I begged my aunt to have me taught lace-mending soon after we came to Brussels, because I knew it was a METIER, a trade which was easily learnt, and by which I could earn some money very soon. I learnt it in a few days, and I quickly got work, for all the Brussels ladies have old lace - very precious - which must be mended all the times it is washed. I earned money a little, and this money I gave for lessons in the studies I have mentioned; some of it I spent in buying books, English books especially; soon I shall try to find a place of governess, or school-teacher, when I can write and speak English well; but it will be difficult, because those who know I have been a lace-mender will despise me, as the pupils here despise me. Pourtant j'ai mon projet,' she added in a lower tone.

'What is it?'

'I will go and live in England; I will teach French there.'

The words were pronounced emphatically. She said 'England' as you might suppose an Israelite of Moses' days would have said Canaan.

'Have you a wish to see England?'

'Yes, and an intention.'

And here a voice, the voice of the directress, interposed:

'Mademoiselle Henri, je crois qu'il va pleuvoir; vous feriez bien, ma bonne amie, de retourner chez vous tout de suite.'

In silence, without a word of thanks for this officious warning, Mdlle. Henri collected her books; she moved to me respectfully, endeavoured to move to her superior, though the endeavour was almost a failure, for her head seemed as if it would not bend, and thus departed.

Where there is one grain of perseverance or wilfulness in the composition, trifling obstacles are ever known rather to stimulate than discourage. Mdlle. Reuter might as well have spared herself the trouble of giving that intimation about the weather (by-the-by her prediction was falsified by the event - it did not rain that evening). At the close of the next lesson I was again at Mdlle. Henri's desk. Thus did I accost her: -

'What is your idea of England, mademoiselle? Why do you wish to go there?'

Accustomed by this time to the calculated abruptness of my manner, it no longer discomposed or surprised her, and she answered with only so much of hesitation as was rendered inevitable by the difficulty she experienced in improvising the translation of her thoughts from French to English.

'England is something unique, as I have heard and read; my idea of it is vague, and I want to go there to render my idea clear, definite.'

'Hum! How much of England do you suppose you could see if you went there in the capacity of a teacher? A strange notion you must have of getting a clear and definite idea of a country! All you could see of Great Britain would be the interior of a school, or at most of one or two private dwellings.'

'It would be an English school; they would be English dwellings.'

'Indisputably; but what then? What would be the value of observations made on a scale so narrow?'

'Monsieur, might not one learn something by analogy? An-echantillon - a - a sample often serves to give an idea of the whole; besides, narrow and wide are words comparative, are they not? All my life would perhaps seem narrow in your eyes - all the life of a - that little animal subterranean - une taupe - comment dit-on?'

'Mole.'

'Yes - a mole, which lives underground would seem narrow even to me.'

'Well, mademoiselle - what then? Proceed.'

'Mais, monsieur, vous me comprenez.'

'Not in the least; have the goodness to explain.'

'Why, monsieur, it is just so. In Switzerland I have done but little, learnt but little, and seen but little; my life there was in a circle; I walked the same round every day; I could not get out of it; had I rested - remained there even till my death, I should never have enlarged it, because I am poor and not skilful, I have not great acquirements; when I was quite tired of this round, I begged my aunt to go to Brussels; my existence is no larger here, because I am no richer or higher; I walk in as narrow a limit, but the scene is changed; it would change again if I went to England. I knew something of the bourgeois of Geneva, now I know something of the bourgeois of Brussels; if I went to London, I would know something of the bourgeois of London. Can you make any sense out of what I say, monsieur, or is it all obscure?'

'I see, I see - now let us advert to another subject; you propose to devote your life to teaching, and you are a most unsuccessful teacher; you cannot keep your pupils in order.'

A flush of painful confusion was the result of this harsh remark; she bent her head to the desk, but soon raising it replied -

'Monsieur, I am not a skilful teacher, it is true, but practice improves; besides, I work under difficulties; here I only teach sewing, I can show no power in sewing, no superiority - it is a subordinate art; then I have no associates in this house, I am isolated; I am too a heretic, which deprives me of influence.'

'And in England you would be a foreigner; that too would deprive you of influence, and would effectually separate you from all round you; in England you would have as few connections, as little importance as you have here.'

'But I should be learning something; for the rest, there are probably difficulties for such as I everywhere, and if I must contend, and perhaps: be conquered, I would rather submit to English pride than to Flemish coarseness; besides, monsieur - '

She stopped - not evidently from any difficulty in finding words to express herself, but because discretion seemed to say, 'You have said enough.'

'Finish your phrase,' I urged.

'Besides, monsieur, I long to live once more among Protestants; they are more honest than Catholics; a Romish school is a building with porous walls, a hollow floor, a false ceiling; every room in this house, monsieur, has eyeholes and ear-holes, and what the house is, the inhabitants are, very treacherous; they all think it lawful to tell lies; they all call it politeness to profess friendship where they feel hatred.'

'All?' said I; 'you mean the pupils - the mere children - inexperienced, giddy things, who have not learnt to distinguish the difference between right and wrong?'

'On the contrary, monsieur - the children are the most sincere; they have not yet had time to become accomplished in duplicity; they will tell lies, but they do it inartificially, and you know they are lying; but the grown-up people are very false; they deceive strangers, they deceive each other - '

A servant here entered: -

'Mdlle. Henri - Mdlle. Reuter vous prie de vouloir bien conduire la petite de Dorlodot chez elle, elle vous attend dans le cabinet de Rosalie la portiere - c'est que sa bonne n'est pas venue la chercher - voyez-vous.'

'Eh bien! est-ce que je suis sa bonne - moi?' demanded Mdlle. Henri; then smiling, with that same bitter, derisive smile I had seen on her lips once before, she hastily rose and made her exit.