

Chapter XX

A COMPETENCY was what I wanted; a competency it was now my aim and resolve to secure; but never had I been farther from the mark. With August the school-year (*l'annee scolaire*) closed, the examinations concluded, the prizes were adjudged, the schools dispersed, the gates of all colleges, the doors of all pensionnats shut, not to be reopened till the beginning or middle of October. The last day of August was at hand, and what was my position? Had I advanced a step since the commencement of the past quarter? On the contrary, I had receded one. By renouncing my engagement as English master in *Mdlle. Reuter's* establishment, I had voluntarily cut off 20l. from my yearly income; I had diminished my 60l. per annum to 40l., and even that sum I now held by a very precarious tenure.

It is some time since I made any reference to M. Pelet. The moonlight walk is, I think, the last incident recorded in this narrative where that gentleman cuts any conspicuous figure: the fact is, since that event, a change had come over the spirit of our intercourse. He, indeed, ignorant that the still hour, a cloudless moon, and an open lattice, had revealed to me the secret of his selfish love and false friendship, would have continued smooth and complaisant as ever; but I grew spiny as a porcupine, and inflexible as a blackthorn cudgel; I never had a smile for his raillery, never a moment for his society; his invitations to take coffee with him in his parlour were invariably rejected, and very stiffly and sternly rejected too; his jesting allusions to the directress (which he still continued) were heard with a grim calm very different from the petulant pleasure they were formerly wont to excite. For a long time Pelet bore with my frigid demeanour very patiently; he even increased his attentions; but finding that even a cringing politeness failed to thaw or move me, he at last altered too; in his turn he cooled; his invitations ceased; his countenance became suspicious and overcast, and I read in the perplexed yet brooding aspect of his brow, a constant examination and comparison of premises, and an anxious endeavour to draw thence some explanatory inference. Ere long, I fancy, he succeeded, for he was not without penetration; perhaps, too, *Mdlle. Zoraide* might have aided him in the solution of the enigma; at any rate I soon found that the uncertainty of doubt had vanished from his manner; renouncing all pretence of friendship and cordiality, he adopted a reserved, formal, but still scrupulously polite deportment. This was the point to which I had wished to bring him, and I was now again comparatively at my ease. I did not, it is true, like my position in his house; but being freed from the annoyance of false professions and double-dealing I could endure it, especially as no heroic sentiment of hatred or jealousy of the director distracted my philosophical soul; he had not, I found, wounded me in a very tender point, the wound was so soon and so radically healed, leaving only a sense of contempt for the treacherous

fashion in which it had been inflicted, and a lasting mistrust of the hand which I had detected attempting to stab in the dark.

This state of things continued till about the middle of July, and then there was a little change; Pelet came home one night, an hour after his usual time, in a state of unequivocal intoxication, a thing anomalous with him; for if he had some of the worst faults of his countrymen, he had also one at least of their virtues, i.e. sobriety. So drunk, however, was he upon this occasion, that after having roused the whole establishment (except the pupils, whose dormitory being over the classes in a building apart from the dwelling-house, was consequently out of the reach of disturbance) by violently ringing the hall-bell and ordering lunch to be brought in immediately, for he imagined it was noon, whereas the city bells had just tolled midnight; after having furiously rated the servants for their want of punctuality, and gone near to chastise his poor old mother, who advised him to go to bed, he began raving dreadfully about 'le maudit Anglais, Creemsvort.' I had not yet retired; some German books I had got hold of had kept me up late; I heard the uproar below, and could distinguish the director's voice exalted in a manner as appalling as it was unusual. Opening my door a little, I became aware of a demand on his part for 'Creemsvort' to be brought down to him that he might cut his throat on the hall-table and wash his honour, which he affirmed to be in a dirty condition, in infernal British blood. 'He is either mad or drunk,' thought I, 'and in either case the old woman and the servants will be the better of a man's assistance,' so I descended straight to the hall. I found him staggering about, his eyes in a fine frenzy rolling - a pretty sight he was, a just medium between the fool and the lunatic.

'Come, M. Pelet,' said I, 'you had better go to bed,' and I took hold of his arm. His excitement, of course, increased greatly at sight and touch of the individual for whose blood he had been making application: he struggled and struck with fury - but a drunken man is no match for a sober one; and, even in his normal state, Pelet's worn out frame could not have stood against my sound one. I got him upstairs, and, in process of time, to bed. During the operation he did not fail to utter comminations which, though broken, had a sense in them; while stigmatizing me as the treacherous spawn of a perfidious country, he, in the same breath, anathematized Zoraide Reuter; he termed her 'femme sottte et vicieuse,' who, in a fit of lewd caprice, had thrown herself away on an unprincipled adventurer; directing the point of the last appellation by a furious blow, obliquely aimed at me. I left him in the act of bounding elastically out of the bed into which I had tucked him; but, as I took the precaution of turning the key in the door behind me, I retired to my own room, assured of his safe custody till the morning, and free to draw undisturbed conclusions from the scene I had just witnessed.

Now, it was precisely about this time that the directress, stung by my coldness, bewitched by my scorn, and excited by the preference she suspected me of cherishing for another, had fallen into a snare of her own laying - was herself caught in the meshes of the very passion with which she wished to entangle me. Conscious of the state of things in that quarter, I gathered, from the condition in which I saw my employer, that his lady-love had betrayed the alienation of her affections - inclinations, rather, I would say; affection is a word at once too warm and too pure for the subject - had let him see that the cavity of her hollow heart, emptied of his image, was now occupied by that of his usher. It was not without some surprise that I found myself obliged to entertain this view of the case; Pelet, with his old - established school, was so convenient, so profitable a match - Zoraide was so calculating, so interested a woman - I wondered mere personal preference could, in her mind, have prevailed for a moment over worldly advantage: yet, it was evident, from what Pelet said, that, not only had she repulsed him, but had even let slip expressions of partiality for me. One of his drunken exclamations was, 'And the jade doats on your youth, you raw blockhead! and talks of your noble deportment, as she calls your accursed English formality - and your pure morals, forsooth! des mœurs de Caton a-t-elle dit - sottel!' Hers, I thought, must be a curious soul, where in spite of a strong, natural tendency to estimate unduly advantages of wealth and station, the sardonic disdain of a fortuneless subordinate had wrought a deeper impression than could be imprinted by the most flattering assiduities of a prosperous CHEF D'INSTITUTION. I smiled inwardly; and strange to say, though my AMOUR PROPRE was excited not disagreeably by the conquest, my better feelings remained untouched. Next day, when I saw the directress, and when she made an excuse to meet me in the corridor, and besought my notice by a demeanour and look subdued to Helot humility, I could not love, I could scarcely pity her. To answer briefly and dryly some interesting inquiry about my health - to pass her by with a stern bow - was all I could; her presence and manner had then, and for some time previously and consequently, a singular effect upon me: they sealed up all that was good elicited all that was noxious in my nature; sometimes they enervated my senses, but they always hardened my heart. I was aware of the detriment done, and quarrelled with myself for the change. I had ever hated a tyrant; and, behold, the possession of a slave, self-given, went near to transform me into what I abhorred! There was at once a sort of low gratification in receiving this luscious incense from an attractive and still young worshipper; and an irritating sense of degradation in the very experience of the pleasure. When she stole about me with the soft step of a slave, I felt at once barbarous and sensual as a pasha. I endured her homage sometimes; sometimes I rebuked it. My indifference or harshness served equally to increase the evil I desired to check.

'Que le dedain lui sied bien!' I once overheard her say to her mother: 'il est beau comme Apollon quand il sourit de son air hautain.'

And the jolly old dame laughed, and said she thought her daughter was bewitched, for I had no point of a handsome man about me, except being straight and without deformity. 'Pour moi,' she continued, 'il me fait tout l'effet d'un chat-huant, avec ses besicles.'

Worthy old girl! I could have gone and kissed her had she not been a little too old, too fat, and too red-faced; her sensible, truthful words seemed so wholesome, contrasted with the morbid illusions of her daughter.

When Pelet awoke on the morning after his frenzy fit, he retained no recollection of what had happened the previous night, and his mother fortunately had the discretion to refrain from informing him that I had been a witness of his degradation. He did not again have recourse to wine for curing his griefs, but even in his sober mood he soon showed that the iron of jealousy had entered into his soul. A thorough Frenchman, the national characteristic of ferocity had not been omitted by nature in compounding the ingredients of his character; it had appeared first in his access of drunken wrath, when some of his demonstrations of hatred to my person were of a truly fiendish character, and now it was more covertly betrayed by momentary contractions of the features, and flashes of fierceness in his light blue eyes, when their glance chanced to encounter mine. He absolutely avoided speaking to me; I was now spared even the falsehood of his politeness. In this state of our mutual relations, my soul rebelled sometimes almost ungovernably, against living in the house and discharging the service of such a man; but who is free from the constraint of circumstances? At that time, I was not: I used to rise each morning eager to shake off his yoke, and go out with my portmanteau under my arm, if a beggar, at least a freeman; and in the evening, when I came back from the pensionnat de demoiselles, a certain pleasant voice in my ear; a certain face, so intelligent, yet so docile, so reflective, yet so soft, in my eyes; a certain cast of character, at once proud and pliant, sensitive and sagacious, serious and ardent, in my head; a certain tone of feeling, fervid and modest, refined and practical, pure and powerful, delighting and troubling my memory - visions of new ties I longed to contract, of new duties I longed to undertake, had taken the rover and the rebel out of me, and had shown endurance of my hated lot in the light of a Spartan virtue.

But Pelet's fury subsided; a fortnight sufficed for its rise, progress, and extinction: in that space of time the dismissal of the obnoxious teacher had been effected in the neighbouring house, and in the same interval I had declared my resolution to follow and find out my pupil, and upon my application for her address being refused, I had

summarily resigned my own post. This last act seemed at once to restore Mdlle. Reuter to her senses; her sagacity, her judgment, so long misled by a fascinating delusion, struck again into the right track the moment that delusion vanished. By the right track, I do not mean the steep and difficult path of principle - in that path she never trod; but the plain highway of common sense, from which she had of late widely diverged. When there she carefully sought, and having found, industriously pursued the trail of her old suitor, M. Pelet. She soon overtook him. What arts she employed to soothe and blind him I know not, but she succeeded both in allaying his wrath, and hoodwinking his discernment, as was soon proved by the alteration in his mien and manner; she must have managed to convince him that I neither was, nor ever had been, a rival of his, for the fortnight of fury against me terminated in a fit of exceeding graciousness and amenity, not unmixed with a dash of exulting self-complacency, more ludicrous than irritating. Pelet's bachelor's life had been passed in proper French style with due disregard to moral restraint, and I thought his married life promised to be very French also. He often boasted to me what a terror he had been to certain husbands of his acquaintance; I perceived it would not now be difficult to pay him back in his own coin.

The crisis drew on. No sooner had the holidays commenced than note of preparation for some momentous event sounded all through the premises of Pelet: painters, polishers, and upholsterers were immediately set to work, and there was talk of 'la chambre de Madame,' 'le salon de Madame.' Not deeming it probable that the old duenna at present graced with that title in our house, had inspired her son with such enthusiasm of filial piety, as to induce him to fit up apartments expressly for her use, I concluded, in common with the cook, the two housemaids, and the kitchen-scullion, that a new and more juvenile Madame was destined to be the tenant of these gay chambers.

Presently official announcement of the coming event was put forth. In another week's time M. Francois Pelet, directeur, and Mdlle. Zoraide Reuter, directrice, were to be joined together in the bands of matrimony. Monsieur, in person, heralded the fact to me; terminating his communication by an obliging expression of his desire that I should continue, as heretofore, his ablest assistant and most trusted friend; and a proposition to raise my salary by an additional two hundred francs per annum. I thanked him, gave no conclusive answer at the time, and, when he had left me, threw off my blouse, put on my coat, and set out on a long walk outside the Porte de Flandre, in order, as I thought, to cool my blood, calm my nerves, and shake my disarranged ideas into some order. In fact, I had just received what was virtually my dismissal. I could not conceal, I did not desire to conceal from myself the conviction that, being now certain that Mdlle.

Reuter was destined to become Madame Pelet it would not do for me to remain a dependent dweller in the house which was soon to be hers. Her present demeanour towards me was deficient neither in dignity nor propriety; but I knew her former feeling was unchanged. Decorum now repressed, and Policy masked it, but Opportunity would be too strong for either of these - Temptation would shiver their restraints.

I was no pope - I could not boast infallibility: in short, if I stayed, the probability was that, in three months' time, a practical modern French novel would be in full process of concoction under the roof of the unsuspecting Pelet. Now, modern French novels are not to my taste, either practically or theoretically. Limited as had yet been my experience of life, I had once had the opportunity of contemplating, near at hand, an example of the results produced by a course of interesting and romantic domestic treachery. No golden halo of fiction was about this example, I saw it bare and real, and it was very loathsome. I saw a mind degraded by the practice of mean subterfuge, by the habit of perfidious deception, and a body depraved by the infectious influence of the vice-polluted soul. I had suffered much from the forced and prolonged view of this spectacle; those sufferings I did not now regret, for their simple recollection acted as a most wholesome antidote to temptation. They had inscribed on my reason the conviction that unlawful pleasure, trenching on another's rights, is delusive and envenomed pleasure - its hollowness disappoints at the time, its poison cruelly tortures afterwards, its effects deprave for ever.

From all this resulted the conclusion that I must leave Pelet's, and that instantly; 'but,' said Prudence, 'you know not where to go, nor how to live;' and then the dream of true love came over me: Frances Henri seemed to stand at my side; her slender waist to invite my arm; her hand to court my hand; I felt it was made to nestle in mine; I could not relinquish my right to it, nor could I withdraw my eyes for ever from hers, where I saw so much happiness, such a correspondence of heart with heart; over whose expression I had such influence; where I could kindle bliss, infuse awe, stir deep delight, rouse sparkling spirit, and sometimes waken pleasurable dread. My hopes to will and possess, my resolutions to merit and rise, rose in array against me; and here I was about to plunge into the gulf of absolute destitution; 'and all this,' suggested an inward voice, 'because you fear an evil which may never happen!' 'It will happen; you KNOW it will,' answered that stubborn monitor, Conscience. 'Do what you feel is right; obey me, and even in the sloughs of want I will plant for you firm footing.' And then, as I walked fast along the road, there rose upon me a strange, inly-felt idea of some Great Being, unseen, but all present, who in His beneficence desired only my welfare, and now watched the struggle of good and evil in my heart,

and waited to see whether I should obey His voice, heard in the whispers of my conscience, or lend an ear to the sophisms by which His enemy and mine - the Spirit of Evil - sought to lead me astray. Rough and steep was the path indicated by divine suggestion; mossy and declining the green way along which Temptation strewed flowers; but whereas, methought, the Deity of Love, the Friend of all that exists, would smile well-pleased were I to gird up my loins and address myself to the rude ascent; so, on the other hand, each inclination to the velvet declivity seemed to kindle a gleam of triumph on the brow of the man-hating, God-defying demon. Sharp and short I turned round; fast I retraced my steps; in half an hour I was again at M. Pelet's: I sought him in his study; brief parley, concise explanation sufficed; my manner proved that I was resolved; he, perhaps, at heart approved my decision. After twenty minutes' conversation, I re-entered my own room, self-deprived of the means of living, self-sentenced to leave my present home, with the short notice of a week in which to provide another.