

Chapter XXII

A WEEK is gone; LE JOUR DES NOCES arrived; the marriage was solemnized at St. Jacques; Mdlle. Zoraide became Madame Pelet, NEE Reuter; and, in about an hour after this transformation, 'the happy pair,' as newspapers phrase it, were on their way to Paris; where, according to previous arrangement, the honeymoon was to be spent. The next day I quitted the pensionnat. Myself and my chattels (some books and clothes) were soon transferred to a modest lodging I had hired in a street not far off. In half an hour my clothes were arranged in a commode, my books on a shelf, and the 'fitting' was effected. I should not have been unhappy that day had not one pang tortured me - a longing to go to the Rue Notre Dame aux Neiges, resisted, yet irritated by an inward resolve to avoid that street till such time as the mist of doubt should clear from my prospects.

It was a sweet September evening - very mild, very still; I had nothing to do; at that hour I knew Frances would be equally released from occupation; I thought she might possibly be wishing for her master, I knew I wished for my pupil. Imagination began with her low whispers, infusing into my soul the soft tale of pleasures that might be.

'You will find her reading or writing,' said she; 'you can take your seat at her side; you need not startle her peace by undue excitement; you need not embarrass her manner by unusual action or language. Be as you always are; look over what she has written; listen while she reads; chide her, or quietly approve; you know the effect of either system; you know her smile when pleased, you know the play of her looks when roused; you have the secret of awakening that expression you will, and you can choose amongst that pleasant variety. With you she will sit silent as long as it suits you to talk alone; you can hold her under a potent spell: intelligent as she is, eloquent as she can be, you can seal her lips, and veil her bright countenance with diffidence; yet, you know, she is not all monotonous mildness; you have seen, with a sort of strange pleasure, revolt, scorn, austerity, bitterness, lay energetic claim to a place in her feelings and physiognomy; you know that few could rule her as you do; you know she might break, but never bend under the hand of Tyranny and Injustice, but Reason and Affection can guide her by a sign. Try their influence now. Go - they are not passions; you may handle them safely.'

'I will NOT go was my answer to the sweet temptress. A man is master of himself to a certain point, but not beyond it. Could I seek Frances to-night, could I sit with her alone in a quiet room, and address her only in the language of Reason and Affection?'

'No,' was the brief, fervent reply of that Love which had conquered and now controlled me.

Time seemed to stagnate; the sun would not go down; my watch ticked, but I thought the hands were paralyzed.

'What a hot evening!' I cried, throwing open the lattice; for, indeed, I had seldom felt so feverish. Hearing a step ascending the common stair, I wondered whether the 'locataire,' now mounting to his apartments, were as unsettled in mind and condition as I was, or whether he lived in the calm of certain resources, and in the freedom of unfettered feelings. What! was he coming in person to solve the problem hardly proposed in inaudible thought? He had actually knocked at the door - at MY door; a smart, prompt rap; and, almost before I could invite him in, he was over the threshold, and had closed the door behind him.

'And how are you?' asked an indifferent, quiet voice, in the English language; while my visitor, without any sort of bustle or introduction, put his hat on the table, and his gloves into his hat, and drawing the only armchair the room afforded a little forward, seated himself tranquilly therein.

'Can't you speak?' he inquired in a few moments, in a tone whose nonchalance seemed to intimate that it was much the same thing whether I answered or not. The fact is, I found it desirable to have recourse to my good friends 'les besicles;' not exactly to ascertain the identity of my visitor - for I already knew him, confound his impudence! but to see how he looked - to get a clear notion of his mien and countenance. I wiped the glasses very deliberately, and put them on quite as deliberately; adjusting them so as not to hurt the bridge of my nose or get entangled in my short tufts of dun hair. I was sitting in the window-seat, with my back to the light, and I had him VIS-A-VIS; a position he would much rather have had reversed; for, at any time, he preferred scrutinizing to being scrutinized. Yes, it was HE, and no mistake, with his six feet of length arranged in a sitting attitude; with his dark travelling surtout with its velvet collar, his gray pantaloons, his black stock, and his face, the most original one Nature ever modelled, yet the least obtrusively so; not one feature that could be termed marked or odd, yet the effect of the whole unique. There is no use in attempting to describe what is indescribable. Being in no hurry to address him, I sat and stared at my ease.

'Oh, that's your game - is it?' said he at last. 'Well, we'll see which is soonest tired.' And he slowly drew out a fine cigar-case, picked one to his taste, lit it, took a book from the shelf convenient to his hand, then leaning back, proceeded to smoke and read as tranquilly as if he had been in his own room, in Grove-street, X - -shire, England. I knew he was capable of continuing in that attitude till midnight, if he conceived the whim, so I rose, and taking the book from his hand, I said, -

'You did not ask for it, and you shall not have it.'

'It is silly and dull,' he observed, 'so I have not lost much;' then the spell being broken, he went on. 'I thought you lived at Pelet's; I went there this afternoon expecting to be starved to death by sitting in a boarding-school drawing-room, and they told me you were gone, had departed this morning; you had left your address behind you though, which I wondered at; it was a more practical and sensible precaution than I should have imagined you capable of. Why did you leave?'

'Because M. Pelet has just married the lady whom you and Mr Brown assigned to me as my wife.'

'Oh, indeed!' replied Hunsden with a short laugh; 'so you've lost both your wife and your place?'

'Precisely so.'

I saw him give a quick, covert glance all round my room; he marked its narrow limits, its scanty furniture: in an instant he had comprehended the state of matters - had absolved me from the crime of prosperity. A curious effect this discovery wrought in his strange mind; I am morally certain that if he had found me installed in a handsome parlour, lounging on a soft couch, with a pretty, wealthy wife at my side, he would have hated me; a brief, cold, haughty visit, would in such a case have been the extreme limit of his civilities, and never would he have come near me more, so long as the tide of fortune bore me smoothly on its surface; but the painted furniture, the bare walls, the cheerless solitude of my room relaxed his rigid pride, and I know not what softening change had taken place both in his voice and look ere he spoke again.

'You have got another place?'

'No.'

'You are in the way of getting one?'

'No.'

'That is bad; have you applied to Brown?'

'No, indeed.'

'You had better; he often has it in his power to give useful information in such matters.'

'He served me once very well; I have no claim on him, and am not in the humour to bother him again.'

'Oh, if you're bashful, and dread being intrusive, you need only commission me. I shall see him to-night; I can put in a word.'

'I beg you will not, Mr Hunsden; I am in your debt already; you did me an important service when I was at X - - ; got me out of a den where I was dying: that service I have never repaid, and at present I decline positively adding another item to the account.'

'If the wind sits that way, I'm satisfied. I thought my unexampled generosity in turning you out of that accursed counting-house would be duly appreciated some day: 'Cast your bread on the waters, and it shall be found after many days,' say the Scriptures. Yes, that's right, lad - make much of me - I'm a nonpareil: there's nothing like me in the common herd. In the meantime, to put all humbug aside and talk sense for a few moments, you would be greatly the better of a situation, and what is more, you are a fool if you refuse to take one from any hand that offers it.'

'Very well, Mr Hunsden; now you have settled that point, talk of something else. What news from X - - ?'

'I have not settled that point, or at least there is another to settle before we get to X - - . Is this Miss Zenobie' (Zoraide, interposed I) - 'well, Zoraide - is she really married to Pelet?'

'I tell you yes - and if you don't believe me, go and ask the cure of St. Jacques.'

'And your heart is broken?'

'I am not aware that it is; it feels all right - beats as usual.'

'Then your feelings are less superfine than I took them to be; you must be a coarse, callous character, to bear such a thwack without staggering under it.'

'Staggering under it? What the deuce is there to stagger under in the circumstance of a Belgian schoolmistress marrying a French schoolmaster? The progeny will doubtless be a strange hybrid race; but that's their Look out - not mine.'

'He indulges in scurrilous jests, and the bride was his affianced one!'

'Who said so?'

'Brown.'

'I'll tell you what, Hunsden - Brown is an old gossip.'

'He is; but in the meantime, if his gossip be founded on less than fact - if you took no particular interest in Miss Zoraide - why, O youthful pedagogue! did you leave your place in consequence of her becoming Madame Pelet?'

'Because - ' I felt my face grow a little hot; 'because - in short, Mr Hunsden, I decline answering any more questions,' and I plunged my hands deep in my breeches pocket.

Hunsden triumphed: his eyes - his laugh announced victory.

'What the deuce are you laughing at, Mr Hunsden?'

'At your exemplary composure. Well, lad, I'll not bore you; I see how it is: Zoraide has jilted you - married some one richer, as any sensible woman would have done if she had had the chance.'

I made no reply - I let him think so, not feeling inclined to enter into an explanation of the real state of things, and as little to forge a false account; but it was not easy to blind Hunsden; my very silence, instead of convincing him that he had hit the truth, seemed to render him doubtful about it; he went on: -

'I suppose the affair has been conducted as such affairs always are amongst rational people: you offered her your youth and your talents - such as they are - in exchange for her position and money: I don't suppose you took appearance, or what is called LOVE, into the account - for I understand she is older than you, and Brown says, rather sensible-looking than beautiful. She, having then no chance of making a better bargain, was at first inclined to come to terms with you, but Pelet - the head of a flourishing school - stepped in with a higher bid; she accepted, and he has got her: a correct transaction - perfectly so - business-like and legitimate. And now we'll talk of something else.'

'Do,' said I, very glad to dismiss the topic, and especially glad to have baffled the sagacity of my cross-questioner - if, indeed, I had baffled it; for though his words now led away from the dangerous point, his eyes, keen and watchful, seemed still preoccupied with the former idea.

'You want to hear news from X - - ? And what interest can you have in X - - ? You left no friends there, for you made none. Nobody ever asks after you - neither man nor woman; and if I mention your name

in company, the men look as if I had spoken of Prester John; and the women sneer covertly. Our X - - belles must have disliked you. How did you excite their displeasure?’

‘I don't know. I seldom spoke to them - they were nothing to me. I considered them only as something to be glanced at from a distance; their dresses and faces were often pleasing enough to the eye: but I could not understand their conversation, nor even read their countenances. When I caught snatches of what they said, I could never make much of it; and the play of their lips and eyes did not help me at all.’

‘That was your fault, not theirs. There are sensible, as well as handsome women in X - - ; women it is worth any man's while to talk to, and with whom I can talk with pleasure: but you had and have no pleasant address; there is nothing in you to induce a woman to be affable. I have remarked you sitting near the door in a room full of company, bent on hearing, not on speaking; on observing, not on entertaining; looking frigidly shy at the commencement of a party, confusingly vigilant about the middle, and insultingly weary towards the end. Is that the way, do you think, ever to communicate pleasure or excite interest? No; and if you are generally unpopular, it is because you deserve to be so.’

‘Content!’ I ejaculated.

‘No, you are not content; you see beauty always turning its back on you; you are mortified and then you sneer. I verily believe all that is desirable on earth - wealth, reputation, love - will for ever to you be the ripe grapes on the high trellis: you'll look up at them; they will tantalize in you the lust of the eye; but they are out of reach: you have not the address to fetch a ladder, and you'll go away calling them sour.’

Cutting as these words might have been under some circumstances, they drew no blood now. My life was changed; my experience had been varied since I left X - - , but Hunsden could not know this; he had seen me only in the character of Mr Crimsworth's clerk - a dependant amongst wealthy strangers, meeting disdain with a hard front, conscious of an unsocial and unattractive exterior, refusing to sue for notice which I was sure would be withheld, declining to evince an admiration which I knew would be scorned as worthless. He could not be aware that since then youth and loveliness had been to me everyday objects; that I had studied them at leisure and closely, and had seen the plain texture of truth under the embroidery of appearance; nor could he, keen-sighted as he was, penetrate into my heart, search my brain, and read my peculiar sympathies and antipathies; he had not known me long enough, or well enough, to

perceive how low my feelings would ebb under some influences, powerful over most minds; how high, how fast they would flow under other influences, that perhaps acted with the more intense force on me, because they acted on me alone. Neither could he suspect for an instant the history of my communications with Mdlle. Reuter; secret to him and to all others was the tale of her strange infatuation; her blandishments, her wiles had been seen but by me, and to me only were they known; but they had changed me, for they had proved that I COULD impress. A sweeter secret nestled deeper in my heart; one full of tenderness and as full of strength: it took the sting out of Hunsden's sarcasm; it kept me unbent by shame, and unstirred by wrath. But of all this I could say nothing - nothing decisive at least; uncertainty sealed my lips, and during the interval of silence by which alone I replied to Mr Hunsden, I made up my mind to be for the present wholly misjudged by him, and misjudged I was; he thought he had been rather too hard upon me, and that I was crushed by the weight of his upbraidings; so to re-assure me he said, doubtless I should mend some day; I was only at the beginning of life yet; and since happily I was not quite without sense, every false step I made would be a good lesson.

Just then I turned my face a little to the light; the approach of twilight, and my position in the window-seat, had, for the last ten minutes, prevented him from studying my countenance; as I moved, however, he caught an expression which he thus interpreted: -

‘Confound it! How doggedly self-approving the lad looks! I thought he was fit to die with shame, and there he sits grinning smiles, as good as to say, 'Let the world wag as it will, I've the philosopher's stone in my waist-coat pocket, and the elixir of life in my cupboard; I'm independent of both Fate and Fortune.’

‘Hunsden - you spoke of grapes; I was thinking of a fruit I like better than your X - - hot-house grapes - an unique fruit, growing wild, which I have marked as my own, and hope one day to gather and taste. It is of no use your offering me the draught of bitterness, or threatening me with death by thirst: I have the anticipation of sweetness on my palate; the hope of freshness on my lips; I can reject the unsavoury, and endure the exhausting.’

‘For how long?’

‘Till the next opportunity for effort; and as the prize of success will be a treasure after my own heart, I'll bring a bull's strength to the struggle.’

'Bad luck crushes bulls as easily as bullaces; and, I believe, the fury dogs you: you were born with a wooden spoon in your mouth, depend on it.'

'I believe you; sad I mean to make my wooden spoon do the work of some people's silver ladles: grasped firmly, and handled nimbly, even a wooden spoon will shovel up broth.'

Hunsden rose: 'I see,' said he; 'I suppose you're one of those who develop best unwatched, and act best unaided-work your own way. Now, I'll go.' And, without another word, he was going; at the door he turned: -

'Crimsworth Hall is sold,' said he.

'Sold!' was my echo.

'Yes; you know, of course, that your brother failed three months ago?'

'What! Edward Crimsworth?'

'Precisely; and his wife went home to her fathers; when affairs went awry, his temper sympathized with them; he used her ill; I told you he would be a tyrant to her some day; as to him - '

'Ay, as to him - what is become of him?'

'Nothing extraordinary - don't be alarmed; he put himself under the protection of the court, compounded with his creditors - tenpence in the pound; in six weeks set up again, coaxed back his wife, and is flourishing like a green bay-tree.'

'And Crimsworth Hall - was the furniture sold too?'

'Everything - from the grand piano down to the rolling-pin.'

'And the contents of the oak dining-room - were they sold?'

'Of course; why should the sofas and chairs of that room be held more sacred than those of any other?'

'And the pictures?'

'What pictures? Crimsworth had no special collection that I know of - he did not profess to be an amateur.'

‘There were two portraits, one on each side the mantelpiece; you cannot have forgotten them, Mr Hunsden; you once noticed that of the lady - ’

‘Oh, I know! the thin-faced gentlewoman with a shawl put on like drapery. - Why, as a matter of course, it would be sold among the other things. If you had been rich, you might have bought it, for I remember you said it represented your mother: you see what it is to be without a sou.’

I did. ‘But surely,’ I thought to myself, ‘I shall not always be so poverty-stricken; I may one day buy it back yet. - Who purchased it? do you know?’ I asked.

‘How is it likely? I never inquired who purchased anything; there spoke the unpractical man - to imagine all the world is interested in what interests himself! Now, good night - I’m off for Germany tomorrow morning; I shall be back here in six weeks, and possibly I may call and see you again; I wonder whether you’ll be still out of place!’ he laughed, as mockingly, as heartlessly as Mephistopheles, and so laughing, vanished.

Some people, however indifferent they may become after a considerable space of absence, always contrive to leave a pleasant impression just at parting; not so Hunsden, a conference with him affected one like a draught of Peruvian bark; it seemed a concentration of the specially harsh, stringent, bitter; whether, like bark, it invigorated, I scarcely knew.

A ruffled mind makes a restless pillow; I slept little on the night after this interview; towards morning I began to doze, but hardly had my slumber become sleep, when I was roused from it by hearing a noise in my sitting room, to which my bed-room adjoined - a step, and a shoving of furniture; the movement lasted barely two minutes; with the closing of the door it ceased. I listened; not a mouse stirred; perhaps I had dreamt it; perhaps a locataire had made a mistake, and entered my apartment instead of his own. It was yet but five o’clock; neither I nor the day were wide awake; I turned, and was soon unconscious. When I did rise, about two hours later, I had forgotten the circumstance; the first thing I saw, however, on quitting my chamber, recalled it; just pushed in at the door of my sitting-room, and still standing on end, was a wooden packing-case - a rough deal affair, wide but shallow; a porter had doubtless shoved it forward, but seeing no occupant of the room, had left it at the entrance.

‘That is none of mine,’ thought I, approaching; ‘it must be meant for somebody else.’ I stooped to examine the address: -

‘Wm. Crimsworth, Esq., No - , - St., Brussels.’

I was puzzled, but concluding that the best way to obtain information was to ask within, I cut the cords and opened the case. Green baize enveloped its contents, sewn carefully at the sides; I ripped the pack-thread with my pen-knife, and still, as the seam gave way, glimpses of gilding appeared through the widening interstices. Boards and baize being at length removed, I lifted from the case a large picture, in a magnificent frame; leaning it against a chair, in a position where the light from the window fell favourably upon it, I stepped back - already I had mounted my spectacles. A portrait-painter's sky (the most sombre and threatening of welkins), and distant trees of a conventional depth of hue, raised in full relief a pale, pensive-looking female face, shadowed with soft dark hair, almost blending with the equally dark clouds; large, solemn eyes looked reflectively into mine; a thin cheek rested on a delicate little hand; a shawl, artistically draped, half hid, half showed a slight figure. A listener (had there been one) might have heard me, after ten minutes' silent gazing, utter the word ‘Mother!’ I might have said more - but with me, the first word uttered aloud in soliloquy rouses consciousness; it reminds me that only crazy people talk to themselves, and then I think out my monologue, instead of speaking it. I had thought a long while, and a long while had contemplated the intelligence, the sweetness, and - alas! the sadness also of those fine, grey eyes, the mental power of that forehead, and the rare sensibility of that serious mouth, when my glance, travelling downwards, fell on a narrow billet, stuck in the corner of the picture, between the frame and the canvas. Then I first asked, ‘Who sent this picture? Who thought of me, saved it out of the wreck of Crimsworth Hall, and now commits it to the care of its natural keeper?’ I took the note from its niche; thus it spoke: -

‘There is a sort of stupid pleasure in giving a child sweets, a fool his bells, a dog a bone. You are repaid by seeing the child besmear his face with sugar; by witnessing how the fool's ecstasy makes a greater fool of him than ever; by watching the dog's nature come out over his bone. In giving William Crimsworth his mother's picture, I give him sweets, bells, and bone all in one; what grieves me is, that I cannot behold the result; I would have added five shillings more to my bid if the auctioneer could only have promised me that pleasure.

‘H. Y. H.

‘P.S. - You said last night you positively declined adding another item to your account with me; don't you think I've saved you that trouble?’

I muffled the picture in its green baize covering, restored it to the case, and having transported the whole concern to my bed-room, put it out of sight under my bed. My pleasure was now poisoned by pungent

pain; I determined to look no more till I could look at my ease. If Hunsden had come in at that moment, I should have said to him, 'I owe you nothing, Hunsden - not a fraction of a farthing; you have paid yourself in taunts!'

Too anxious to remain any longer quiescent, I had no sooner breakfasted, than I repaired once more to M. Vandenhuten's, scarcely hoping to find him at home; for a week had barely elapsed since my first call: but fancying I might be able to glean information as to the time when his return was expected. A better result awaited me than I had anticipated, for though the family were yet at Ostend, M. Vandenhuten had come over to Brussels on business for the day. He received me with the quiet kindness of a sincere though not excitable man. I had not sat five minutes alone with him in his bureau, before I became aware of a sense of ease in his presence, such as I rarely experienced with strangers. I was surprised at my own composure, for, after all, I had come on business to me exceedingly painful - that of soliciting a favour. I asked on what basis the calm rested - I feared it might be deceptive. Ere long I caught a glimpse of the ground, and at once I felt assured of its solidity; I knew where it was.

M. Vandenhuten was rich, respected, and influential; I, poor, despised and powerless; so we stood to the world at large as members of the world's society; but to each other, as a pair of human beings, our positions were reversed. The Dutchman (he was not Flamand, but pure Hollandais) was slow, cool, of rather dense intelligence, though sound and accurate judgment; the Englishman far more nervous, active, quicker both to plan and to practise, to conceive and to realize. The Dutchman was benevolent, the Englishman susceptible; in short our characters dovetailed, but my mind having more fire and action than his, instinctively assumed and kept the predominance.

This point settled, and my position well ascertained, I addressed him on the subject of my affairs with that genuine frankness which full confidence can alone inspire. It was a pleasure to him to be so appealed to; he thanked me for giving him this opportunity of using a little exertion in my behalf. I went on to explain to him that my wish was not so much to be helped, as to be put into the way of helping myself; of him I did not want exertion - that was to be my part - but only information and recommendation. Soon after I rose to go. He held out his hand at parting - an action of greater significance with foreigners than with Englishmen. As I exchanged a smile with him, I thought the benevolence of his truthful face was better than the intelligence of my own. Characters of my order experience a balm-like solace in the contact of such souls as animated the honest breast of Victor Vandenhuten.

The next fortnight was a period of many alternations; my existence during its lapse resembled a sky of one of those autumnal nights which are specially haunted by meteors and falling stars. Hopes and fears, expectations and disappointments, descended in glancing showers from zenith to horizon; but all were transient, and darkness followed swift each vanishing apparition. M. Vandenhuten aided me faithfully; he set me on the track of several places, and himself made efforts to secure them for me; but for a long time solicitation and recommendation were vain - the door either shut in my face when I was about to walk in, or another candidate, entering before me, rendered my further advance useless. Feverish and roused, no disappointment arrested me; defeat following fast on defeat served as stimulants to will. I forgot fastidiousness, conquered reserve, thrust pride from me: I asked, I persevered, I remonstrated, I dunned. It is so that openings are forced into the guarded circle where Fortune sits dealing favours round. My perseverance made me known; my importunity made me remarked. I was inquired about; my former pupils' parents, gathering the reports of their children, heard me spoken of as talented, and they echoed the word: the sound, bandied about at random, came at last to ears which, but for its universality, it might never have reached; and at the very crisis when I had tried my last effort and knew not what to do, Fortune looked in at me one morning, as I sat in drear and almost desperate deliberation on my bedstead, nodded with the familiarity of an old acquaintance - though God knows I had never met her before - and threw a prize into my lap.

In the second week of October, 18 - , I got the appointment of English professor to all the classes of - - College, Brussels, with a salary of three thousand francs per annum; and the certainty of being able, by dint of the reputation and publicity accompanying the position, to make as much more by private means. The official notice, which communicated this information, mentioned also that it was the strong recommendation of M. Vandenhuten, negociant, which had turned the scale of choice in my favour.

No sooner had I read the announcement than I hurried to M. Vandenhuten's bureau, pushed the document under his nose, and when he had perused it, took both his hands, and thanked him with unrestrained vivacity. My vivid words and emphatic gesture moved his Dutch calm to unwonted sensation. He said he was happy - glad to have served me; but he had done nothing meriting such thanks. He had not laid out a centime - only scratched a few words on a sheet of paper.

Again I repeated to him -

'You have made me quite happy, and in a way that suits me; I do not feel an obligation irksome, conferred by your kind hand; I do not feel

disposed to shun you because you have done me a favour; from this day you must consent to admit me to your intimate acquaintance, for I shall hereafter recur again and again to the pleasure of your society.'

'Ainsi soit-il,' was the reply, accompanied by a smile of benignant content. I went away with its sunshine in my heart.