

Chapter XXIII

IT was two o'clock when I returned to my lodgings; my dinner, just brought in from a neighbouring hotel, smoked on the table; I sat down thinking to eat - had the plate been heaped with potsherds and broken glass, instead of boiled beef and haricots, I could not have made a more signal failure: appetite had forsaken me. Impatient of seeing food which I could not taste, I put it all aside into a cupboard, and then demanded, 'What shall I do till evening?' for before six P.M. it would be vain to seek the Rue Notre Dame aux Neiges; its inhabitant (for me it had but one) was detained by her vocation elsewhere. I walked in the streets of Brussels, and I walked in my own room from two o'clock till six; never once in that space of time did I sit down. I was in my chamber when the last-named hour struck; I had just bathed my face and feverish hands, and was standing near the glass; my cheek was crimson, my eye was flame, still all my features looked quite settled and calm. Descending swiftly the stair and stepping out, I was glad to see Twilight drawing on in clouds; such shade was to me like a grateful screen, and the chill of latter Autumn, breathing in a fitful wind from the north-west, met me as a refreshing coolness. Still I saw it was cold to others, for the women I passed were wrapped in shawls, and the men had their coats buttoned close.

When are we quite happy? Was I so then? No; an urgent and growing dread worried my nerves, and had worried them since the first moment good tidings had reached me. How was Frances? It was ten weeks since I had seen her, six since I had heard from her, or of her. I had answered her letter by a brief note, friendly but calm, in which no mention of continued correspondence or further visits was made. At that hour my bark hung on the topmost curl of a wave of fate, and I knew not on what shoal the onward rush of the billow might hurl it; I would not then attach her destiny to mine by the slightest thread; if doomed to split on the rock, or run aground on the sand-bank, I was resolved no other vessel should share my disaster: but six weeks was a long time; and could it be that she was still well and doing well? Were not all sages agreed in declaring that happiness finds no climax on earth? Dared I think that but half a street now divided me from the full cup of contentment - the draught drawn from waters said to flow only in heaven?

I was at the door; I entered the quiet house; I mounted the stairs; the lobby was void and still, all the doors closed; I looked for the neat green mat; it lay duly in its place.

'Signal of hope!' I said, and advanced. 'But I will be a little calmer; I am not going to rush in, and get up a scene directly.' Forcibly staying my eager step, I paused on the mat.

'What an absolute hush! Is she in? Is anybody in?' I demanded to myself. A little tinkle, as of cinders falling from a grate, replied; a movement - a fire was gently stirred; and the slight rustle of life continuing, a step paced equably backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, in the apartment. Fascinated, I stood, more fixedly fascinated when a voice rewarded the attention of my strained ear - so low, so self-addressed, I never fancied the speaker otherwise than alone; solitude might speak thus in a desert, or in the hall of a forsaken house.

"And ne'er but once, my son," he said, "Was yon dark cavern trod; In persecution's iron days, When the land was left by God. From Bewley's bog, with slaughter red, A wanderer hither drew; And oft he stopp'd and turn'd his head, As by fits the night-winds blew. For trampling round by Cheviot-edge Were heard the troopers keen; And frequent from the Whitelaw ridge The death-shot flash'd between," &c. &c.

The old Scotch ballad was partly recited, then dropt; a pause ensued; then another strain followed, in French, of which the purport, translated, ran as follows: -

I gave, at first, attention close; Then interest warm ensued; From interest, as improvement rose, Succeeded gratitude.

Obedience was no effort soon, And labour was no pain; If tired, a word, a glance alone Would give me strength again.

From others of the studious band, Ere long he singled me; But only by more close demand, And sterner urgency.

The task he from another took, From me he did reject; He would no slight omission brook, And suffer no defect.

If my companions went astray, He scarce their wanderings blam'd; If I but falter'd in the way, His anger fiercely flam'd.

Something stirred in an adjoining chamber; it would not do to be surprised eaves-dropping; I tapped hastily, And as hastily entered. Frances was just before me; she had been walking slowly in her room, and her step was checked by my advent: Twilight only was with her, and tranquil, ruddy Firelight; to these sisters, the Bright and the Dark, she had been speaking, ere I entered, in poetry. Sir Walter Scott's voice, to her a foreign, far-off sound, a mountain echo, had uttered itself in the first stanzas; the second, I thought, from the style and the substance, was the language of her own heart. Her face was grave, its expression concentrated; she bent on me an unsmiling eye - an eye just returning from abstraction, just awaking from dreams:

well-arranged was her simple attire, smooth her dark hair, orderly her tranquil room; but what - with her thoughtful look, her serious self-reliance, her bent to meditation and haply inspiration - what had she to do with love? 'Nothing,' was the answer of her own sad, though gentle countenance; it seemed to say, 'I must cultivate fortitude and cling to poetry; one is to be my support and the other my solace through life. Human affections do not bloom, nor do human passions glow for me.' Other women have such thoughts. Frances, had she been as desolate as she deemed, would not have been worse off than thousands of her sex. Look at the rigid and formal race of old maids - the race whom all despise; they have fed themselves, from youth upwards, on maxims of resignation and endurance. Many of them get ossified with the dry diet; self-control is so continually their thought, so perpetually their object, that at last it absorbs the softer and more agreeable qualities of their nature; and they die mere models of austerity, fashioned out of a little parchment and much bone. Anatomists will tell you that there is a heart in the withered old maid's carcase - the same as in that of any cherished wife or proud mother in the land. Can this be so? I really don't know; but feel inclined to doubt it.

I came forward, bade Frances 'good evening,' and took my seat. The chair I had chosen was one she had probably just left; it stood by a little table where were her open desk and papers. I know not whether she had fully recognized me at first, but she did so now; and in a voice, soft but quiet, she returned my greeting. I had shown no eagerness; she took her cue from me, and evinced no surprise. We met as we had always met, as master and pupil - nothing more. I proceeded to handle the papers; Frances, observant and serviceable, stepped into an inner room, brought a candle, lit it, placed it by me; then drew the curtain over the lattice, and having added a little fresh fuel to the already bright fire, she drew a second chair to the table and sat down at my right hand, a little removed. The paper on the top was a translation of some grave French author into English, but underneath lay a sheet with stanzas; on this I laid hands. Frances half rose, made a movement to recover the captured spoil, saying, that was nothing - a mere copy of verses. I put by resistance with the decision I knew she never long opposed; but on this occasion her fingers had fastened on the paper. I had quietly to unloose them; their hold dissolved to my touch; her hand shrunk away; my own would fain have followed it, but for the present I forbade such impulse. The first page of the sheet was occupied with the lines I had overheard; the sequel was not exactly the writer's own experience, but a composition by portions of that experience suggested. Thus while egotism was avoided, the fancy was exercised, and the heart satisfied. I translate as before, and my translation is nearly literal; it continued thus: -

When sickness stay'd awhile my course, He seem'd impatient still,
Because his pupil's flagging force Could not obey his will.

One day when summoned to the bed Where pain and I did strive, I
heard him, as he bent his head, Say, 'God, she must revive!'

I felt his hand, with gentle stress, A moment laid on mine, And wished
to mark my consciousness By some responsive sign.

But pow'rless then to speak or move, I only felt, within, The sense of
Hope, the strength of Love, Their healing work begin.

And as he from the room withdrew, My heart his steps pursued; I
long'd to prove, by efforts new; My speechless gratitude.

When once again I took my place, Long vacant, in the class, Th'
unfrequent smile across his face Did for one moment pass.

The lessons done; the signal made Of glad release and play, He, as he
passed, an instant stay'd, One kindly word to say.

'Jane, till to-morrow you are free From tedious task and rule; This
afternoon I must not see That yet pale face in school.

'Seek in the garden-shades a seat, Far from the play-ground din; The
sun is warm, the air is sweet: Stay till I call you in.'

A long and pleasant afternoon I passed in those green bowers; All
silent, tranquil, and alone With birds, and bees, and flowers.

Yet, when my master's voice I heard Call, from the window, 'Jane!' I
entered, joyful, at the word, The busy house again.

He, in the hall, paced up and down; He paused as I passed by; His
forehead stern relaxed its frown: He raised his deep-set eye.

'Not quite so pale,' he murmured low. 'Now Jane, go rest awhile.' And
as I smiled, his smoothened brow Returned as glad a smile.

My perfect health restored, he took His mien austere again; And, as
before, he would not brook The slightest fault from Jane.

The longest task, the hardest theme Fell to my share as erst, And still
I toiled to place my name In every study first.

He yet begrudged and stinted praise, But I had learnt to read The
secret meaning of his face, And that was my best meed.

Even when his hasty temper spoke In tones that sorrow stirred, My
grief was lulled as soon as woke By some relenting word.

And when he lent some precious book, Or gave some fragrant flower, I
did not quail to Envy's look, Upheld by Pleasure's power.

At last our school ranks took their ground, The hard-fought field I
won; The prize, a laurel-wreath, was bound My throbbing forehead on.

Low at my master's knee I bent, The offered crown to meet; Its green
leaves through my temples sent A thrill as wild as sweet.

The strong pulse of Ambition struck In every vein I owned; At the
same instant, bleeding broke A secret, inward wound.

The hour of triumph was to me The hour of sorrow sore; A day hence I
must cross the sea, Ne'er to recross it more.

An hour hence, in my master's room I with him sat alone, And told
him what a dreary gloom O'er joy had parting thrown.

He little said; the time was brief, The ship was soon to sail, And while
I sobbed in bitter grief, My master but looked pale.

They called in haste; he bade me go, Then snatched me back again;
He held me fast and murmured low, 'Why will they part us, Jane?'

'Were you not happy in my care? Did I not faithful prove? Will others
to my darling bear As true, as deep a love?'

'O God, watch o'er my foster child! O guard her gentle head! When
minds are high and tempests wild Protection round her spread!

'They call again; leave then my breast; Quit thy true shelter, Jane; But
when deceived, repulsed, opprest, Come home to me again!'

I read - then dreamily made marks on the margin with my pencil;
thinking all the while of other things; thinking that 'Jane' was now at
my side; no child, but a girl of nineteen; and she might be mine, so my
heart affirmed; Poverty's curse was taken off me; Envy and Jealousy
were far away, and unapprized of this our quiet meeting; the frost of
the Master's manner might melt; I felt the thaw coming fast, whether I
would or not; no further need for the eye to practise a hard look, for
the brow to compress its expense into a stern fold: it was now
permitted to suffer the outward revelation of the inward glow - to seek,
demand, elicit an answering ardour. While musing thus, I thought
that the grass on Hermon never drank the fresh dews of sunset more
gratefully than my feelings drank the bliss of this hour.

Frances rose, as if restless; she passed before me to stir the fire, which did not want stirring; she lifted and put down the little ornaments on the mantelpiece; her dress waved within a yard of me; slight, straight, and elegant, she stood erect on the hearth.

There are impulses we can control; but there are others which control us, because they attain us with a tiger-leap, and are our masters ere we have seen them. Perhaps, though, such impulses are seldom altogether bad; perhaps Reason, by a process as brief as quiet, a process that is finished ere felt, has ascertained the sanity of the deed. Instinct meditates, and feels justified in remaining passive while it is performed. I know I did not reason, I did not plan or intend, yet, whereas one moment I was sitting solus on the chair near the table, the next, I held Frances on my knee, placed there with sharpness and decision, and retained with exceeding tenacity.

'Monsieur!' cried Frances, and was still: not another word escaped her lips; sorely confounded she seemed during the lapse of the first few moments; but the amazement soon subsided; terror did not succeed, nor fury: after all, she was only a little nearer than she had ever been before, to one she habitually respected and trusted; embarrassment might have impelled her to contend, but self-respect checked resistance where resistance was useless.

'Frances, how much regard have you for me?' was my demand. No answer; the situation was yet too new and surprising to permit speech. On this consideration, I compelled myself for some seconds to tolerate her silence, though impatient of it: presently, I repeated the same question - probably, not in the calmest of tones; she looked at me; my face, doubtless, was no model of composure, my eyes no still wells of tranquillity.

'Do speak,' I urged; and a very low, hurried, yet still arch voice said -

'Monsieur, vous me faites mal; de grace lachez un peu ma main droite.'

In truth I became aware that I was holding the said 'main droite' in a somewhat ruthless grasp: I did as desired; and, for the third time, asked more gently -

'Frances, how much regard have you for me?'

'Mon maitre, j'en ai beaucoup,' was the truthful rejoinder.

'Frances, have you enough to give yourself to me as my wife? - to accept me as your husband?'

I felt the agitation of the heart, I saw 'the purple light of love' cast its glowing reflection on cheeks, temples, neck; I desired to consult the eye, but sheltering lash and lid forbade.

'Monsieur,' said the soft voice at last, - 'Monsieur desire savoir si je consens - si - enfin, si je veux me marier avec lui?'

'Justement.'

'Monsieur sera-t-il aussi bon mari qu'il a ete bon maitre?'

'I will try, Frances.'

A pause; then with a new, yet still subdued inflexion of the voice - an inflexion which provoked while it pleased me - accompanied, too, by a 'sourire a la fois fin et timide' in perfect harmony with the tone: -

'C'est a dire, monsieur sera toujours un peu entete exigeant, volontaire - ?'

'Have I been so, Frances?'

'Mais oui; vous le savez bien.'

'Have I been nothing else?'

'Mais oui; vous avez ete mon meilleur ami.'

'And what, Frances, are you to me?'

'Votre devouee eleve, qui vous aime de tout son coeur.'

'Will my pupil consent to pass her life with me? Speak English now, Frances.'

Some moments were taken for reflection; the answer, pronounced slowly, ran thus: -

'You have always made me happy; I like to hear you speak; I like to see you; I like to be near you; I believe you are very good, and very superior; I know you are stern to those who are careless and idle, but you are kind, very kind to the attentive and industrious, even if they are not clever. Master, I should be GLAD to live with you always;' and she made a sort of movement, as if she would have clung to me, but restraining herself she only added with earnest emphasis - 'Master, I consent to pass my life with you.'

'Very well, Frances.'

I drew her a little nearer to my heart; I took a first kiss from her lips, thereby sealing the compact, now framed between us; afterwards she and I were silent, nor was our silence brief. Frances' thoughts, during this interval, I know not, nor did I attempt to guess them; I was not occupied in searching her countenance, nor in otherwise troubling her composure. The peace I felt, I wished her to feel; my arm, it is true, still detained her; but with a restraint that was gentle enough, so long as no opposition tightened it. My gaze was on the red fire; my heart was measuring its own content; it sounded and sounded, and found the depth fathomless.

'Monsieur,' at last said my quiet companion, as stirless in her happiness as a mouse in its terror. Even now in speaking she scarcely lifted her head.

'Well, Frances?' I like unexaggerated intercourse; it is not my way to overpower with amorous epithets, any more than to worry with selfishly importunate caresses.

'Monsieur est raisonnable, n'eut-ce pas?'

'Yes; especially when I am requested to be so in English: but why do you ask me? You see nothing vehement or obtrusive in my manner; am I not tranquil enough?'

'Ce n'est pas cela - ' began Frances.

'English!' I reminded her.

'Well, monsieur, I wished merely to say, that I should like, of course, to retain my employment of teaching. You will teach still, I suppose, monsieur?'

'Oh, yes! It is all I have to depend on.'

'Bon! - I mean good. Thus we shall have both the same profession. I like that; and my efforts to get on will be as unrestrained as yours - will they not, monsieur?'

'You are laying plans to be independent of me,' said I.

'Yes, monsieur; I must be no incumbrance to you - no burden in any way.'

'But, Frances, I have not yet told you what my prospects are. I have left M. Pelet's; and after nearly a month's seeking, I have got another place, with a salary of three thousand francs a year, which I can easily double by a little additional exertion. Thus you see it would be useless

for you to fag yourself by going out to give lessons; on six thousand francs you and I can live, and live well.'

Frances seemed to consider. There is something flattering to man's strength, something consonant to his honourable pride, in the idea of becoming the providence of what he loves - feeding and clothing it, as God does the lilies of the field. So, to decide her resolution, I went on:

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'Life has been painful and laborious enough to you so far, Frances; you require complete rest; your twelve hundred francs would not form a very important addition to our income, and what sacrifice of comfort to earn it! Relinquish your labours: you must be weary, and let me have the happiness of giving you rest.'

I am not sure whether Frances had accorded due attention to my harangue; instead of answering me with her usual respectful promptitude, she only sighed and said, -

'How rich you are, monsieur!' and then she stirred uneasy in my arms. 'Three thousand francs!' she murmured, 'While I get only twelve hundred!' She went on faster. 'However, it must be so for the present; and, monsieur, were you not saying something about my giving up my place? Oh no! I shall hold it fast;' and her little fingers emphatically tightened on mine.

'Think of my marrying you to be kept by you, monsieur! I could not do it; and how dull my days would be! You would be away teaching in close, noisy school-rooms, from morning till evening, and I should be lingering at home, unemployed and solitary; I should get depressed and sullen, and you would soon tire of me.'

'Frances, you could read and study - two things you like so well.'

'Monsieur, I could not; I like a contemplative life, but I like an active life better; I must act in some way, and act with you. I have taken notice, monsieur, that people who are only in each other's company for amusement, never really like each other so well, or esteem each other so highly, as those who work together, and perhaps suffer together.'

'You speak God's truth,' said I at last, 'and you shall have your own way, for it is the best way. Now, as a reward for such ready consent, give me a voluntary kiss.'

After some hesitation, natural to a novice in the art of kissing, she brought her lips into very shy and gentle contact with my forehead; I

took the small gift as a loan, and repaid it promptly, and with generous interest.

I know not whether Frances was really much altered since the time I first saw her; but, as I looked at her now, I felt that she was singularly changed for me; the sad eye, the pale cheek, the dejected and joyless countenance I remembered as her early attributes, were quite gone, and now I saw a face dressed in graces; smile, dimple, and rosy tint, rounded its contours and brightened its hues. I had been accustomed to nurse a flattering idea that my strong attachment to her proved some particular perspicacity in my nature; she was not handsome, she was not rich, she was not even accomplished, yet was she my life's treasure; I must then be a man of peculiar discernment. To-night my eyes opened on the mistake I had made; I began to suspect that it was only my tastes which were unique, not my power of discovering and appreciating the superiority of moral worth over physical charms. For me Frances had physical charms: in her there was no deformity to get over; none of those prominent defects of eyes, teeth, complexion, shape, which hold at bay the admiration of the boldest male champions of intellect (for women can love a downright ugly man if he be but talented); had she been either 'edentee, myope, rugueuse, ou bossue,' my feelings towards her might still have been kindly, but they could never have been impassioned; I had affection for the poor little misshapen Sylvie, but for her I could never have had love. It is true Frances' mental points had been the first to interest me, and they still retained the strongest hold on my preference; but I liked the graces of her person too. I derived a pleasure, purely material, from contemplating the clearness of her brown eyes, the fairness of her fine skin, the purity of her well-set teeth, the proportion of her delicate form; and that pleasure I could ill have dispensed with. It appeared, then, that I too was a sensualist, in my temperate and fastidious way.

Now, reader, during the last two pages I have been giving you honey fresh from flowers, but you must not live entirely on food so luscious; taste then a little gall - just a drop, by way of change.

At a somewhat late hour I returned to my lodgings: having temporarily forgotten that man had any such coarse cares as those of eating and drinking, I went to bed fasting. I had been excited and in action all day, and had tasted no food since eight that morning; besides, for a fortnight past, I had known no rest either of body or mind; the last few hours had been a sweet delirium, it would not subside now, and till long after midnight, broke with troubled ecstasy the rest I so much needed. At last I dozed, but not for long; it was yet quite dark when I awoke, and my waking was like that of Job when a spirit passed before his face, and like him, 'the hair of my flesh stood up.' I might continue the parallel, for in truth, though I saw nothing, yet 'a thing was secretly brought unto me, and mine ear received a little thereof;

there was silence, and I heard a voice,' saying - 'In the midst of life we are in death.'

That sound, and the sensation of chill anguish accompanying it, many would have regarded as supernatural; but I recognized it at once as the effect of reaction. Man is ever clogged with his mortality, and it was my mortal nature which now faltered and plained; my nerves, which jarred and gave a false sound, because the soul, of late rushing headlong to an aim, had overstrained the body's comparative weakness. A horror of great darkness fell upon me; I felt my chamber invaded by one I had known formerly, but had thought for ever departed. I was temporarily a prey to hypochondria.

She had been my acquaintance, nay, my guest, once before in boyhood; I had entertained her at bed and board for a year; for that space of time I had her to myself in secret; she lay with me, she ate with me, she walked out with me, showing me nooks in woods, hollows in hills, where we could sit together, and where she could drop her drear veil over me, and so hide sky and sun, grass and green tree; taking me entirely to her death-cold bosom, and holding me with arms of bone. What tales she would tell me at such hours! What songs she would recite in my ears! How she would discourse to me of her own country - the grave - and again and again promise to conduct me there ere long; and, drawing me to the very brink of a black, sullen river, show me, on the other side, shores unequal with mound, monument, and tablet, standing up in a glimmer more hoary than moonlight. 'Necropolis!' she would whisper, pointing to the pale piles, and add, 'It contains a mansion prepared for you.'

But my boyhood was lonely, parentless; uncheered by brother or sister; and there was no marvel that, just as I rose to youth, a sorceress, finding me lost in vague mental wanderings, with many affections and few objects, glowing aspirations and gloomy prospects, strong desires and slender hopes, should lift up her illusive lamp to me in the distance, and lure me to her vaulted home of horrors. No wonder her spells THEN had power; but NOW, when my course was widening, my prospect brightening; when my affections had found a rest; when my desires, folding wings, weary with long flight, had just alighted on the very lap of fruition, and nestled there warm, content, under the caress of a soft hand - why did hypochondria accost me now?

I repulsed her as one would a dreaded and ghastly concubine coming to embitter a husband's heart toward his young bride; in vain; she kept her sway over me for that night and the next day, and eight succeeding days. Afterwards, my spirits began slowly to recover their tone; my appetite returned, and in a fortnight I was well. I had gone about as usual all the time, and had said nothing to anybody of what I

felt; but I was glad when the evil spirit departed from me, and I could again seek Frances, and sit at her side, freed from the dreadful tyranny of my demon.