Chapter VII - Villette

I awoke next morning with courage revived and spirits refreshed: physical debility no longer enervated my judgment; my mind felt prompt and clear.

Just as I finished dressing, a tap came to the door: I said, 'Come in,' expecting the chambermaid, whereas a rough man walked in and said, -

'Gif me your keys, Meess.'

'Why?' I asked.

'Gif!' said he impatiently; and as he half-snatched them from my hand, he added, 'All right! haf your tronc soon.'

Fortunately it did turn out all right: he was from the custom-house. Where to go to get some breakfast I could not tell; but I proceeded, not without hesitation, to descend.

I now observed, what I had not noticed in my extreme weariness last night, viz. that this inn was, in fact, a large hotel; and as I slowly descended the broad staircase, halting on each step (for I was in wonderfully little haste to get down), I gazed at the high ceiling above me, at the painted walls around, at the wide windows which filled the house with light, at the veined marble I trod (for the steps were all of marble, though uncarpeted and not very clean), and contrasting all this with the dimensions of the closet assigned to me as a chamber, with the extreme modesty of its appointments, I fell into a philosophizing mood.

Much I marvelled at the sagacity evinced by waiters and chamber-maids in proportioning the accommodation to the guest. How could inn- servants and ship-stewardesses everywhere tell at a glance that I, for instance, was an individual of no social significance, and little burdened by cash? They *did* know it evidently: I saw quite well that they all, in a moment's calculation, estimated me at about the same fractional value. The fact seemed to me curious and pregnant: I would not disguise from myself what it indicated, yet managed to keep up my spirits pretty well under its pressure.

Having at last landed in a great hall, full of skylight glare, I made my way somehow to what proved to be the coffee-room. It cannot be denied that on entering this room I trembled somewhat; felt uncertain, solitary, wretched; wished to Heaven I knew whether I was doing right or wrong; felt convinced that it was the last, but could not help myself. Acting in the spirit and with the calm of a fatalist, I sat down at a

small table, to which a waiter presently brought me some breakfast; and I partook of that meal in a frame of mind not greatly calculated to favour digestion. There were many other people breakfasting at other tables in the room; I should have felt rather more happy if amongst them all I could have seen any women; however, there was not one - all present were men. But nobody seemed to think I was doing anything strange; one or two gentlemen glanced at me occasionally, but none stared obtrusively: I suppose if there was anything eccentric in the business, they accounted for it by this word 'Anglaise!'

Breakfast over, I must again move - in what direction? 'Go to Villette,' said an inward voice; prompted doubtless by the recollection of this slight sentence uttered carelessly and at random by Miss Fanshawe, as she bid me good-by: 'I wish you would come to Madame Beck's; she has some marmots whom you might look after; she wants an English gouvernante, or was wanting one two months ago.'

Who Madame Beck was, where she lived, I knew not; I had asked, but the question passed unheard: Miss Fanshawe, hurried away by her friends, left it unanswered. I presumed Villette to be her residence - to Villette I would go. The distance was forty miles. I knew I was catching at straws; but in the wide and weltering deep where I found myself, I would have caught at cobwebs. Having inquired about the means of travelling to Villette, and secured a seat in the diligence, I departed on the strength of this outline - this shadow of a project. Before you pronounce on the rashness of the proceeding, reader, look back to the point whence I started; consider the desert I had left, note how little I perilled: mine was the game where the player cannot lose and may win.

Of an artistic temperament, I deny that I am; yet I must possess something of the artist's faculty of making the most of present pleasure: that is to say, when it is of the kind to my taste. I enjoyed that day, though we travelled slowly, though it was cold, though it rained. Somewhat bare, flat, and treeless was the route along which our journey lay; and slimy canals crept, like half-torpid green snakes, beside the road; and formal pollard willows edged level fields, tilled like kitchen-garden beds. The sky, too, was monotonously gray; the atmosphere was stagnant and humid; yet amidst all these deadening influences, my fancy budded fresh and my heart basked in sunshine. These feelings, however, were well kept in check by the secret but ceaseless consciousness of anxiety lying in wait on enjoyment, like a tiger crouched in a jungle. The breathing of that beast of prey was in my ear always; his fierce heart panted close against mine; he never stirred in his lair but I felt him: I knew he waited only for sun-down to bound ravenous from his ambush.

I had hoped we might reach Villette ere night set in, and that thus I might escape the deeper embarrassment which obscurity seems to throw round a first arrival at an unknown bourne; but, what with our slow progress and long stoppages - what with a thick fog and small, dense rain - darkness, that might almost be felt, had settled on the city by the time we gained its suburbs.

I know we passed through a gate where soldiers were stationed - so much I could see by lamplight; then, having left behind us the miry Chaussee, we rattled over a pavement of strangely rough and flinty surface. At a bureau, the diligence stopped, and the passengers alighted. My first business was to get my trunk; a small matter enough, but important to me. Understanding that it was best not to be importunate or over-eager about luggage, but to wait and watch quietly the delivery of other boxes till I saw my own, and then promptly claim and secure it, I stood apart; my eye fixed on that part of the vehicle in which I had seen my little portmanteau safely stowed, and upon which piles of additional bags and boxes were now heaped. One by one, I saw these removed, lowered, and seized on.

I was sure mine ought to be by this time visible: it was not. I had tied on the direction-card with a piece of green ribbon, that I might know it at a glance: not a fringe or fragment of green was perceptible. Every package was removed; every tin-case and brown-paper parcel; the oilcloth cover was lifted; I saw with distinct vision that not an umbrella, cloak, cane, hat-box or band-box remained.

And my portmanteau, with my few clothes and little pocket-book enclasping the remnant of my fifteen pounds, where were they?

I ask this question now, but I could not ask it then. I could say nothing whatever; not possessing a phrase of *speaking* French: and it was French, and French only, the whole world seemed now gabbling around me. *What* should I do? Approaching the conductor, I just laid my hand on his arm, pointed to a trunk, thence to the diligence-roof, and tried to express a question with my eyes. He misunderstood me, seized the trunk indicated, and was about to hoist it on the vehicle.

'Let that alone - will you?' said a voice in good English; then, in correction, 'Qu'est-ce que vous faites donc? Cette malle est a moi.'

But I had heard the Fatherland accents; they rejoiced my heart; I turned: 'Sir,' said I, appealing to the stranger, without, in my distress, noticing what he was like, 'I cannot speak French. May I entreat you to ask this man what he has done with my trunk?'

Without discriminating, for the moment, what sort of face it was to which my eyes were raised and on which they were fixed, I felt in its

expression half-surprise at my appeal and half-doubt of the wisdom of interference.

'*Do* ask him; I would do as much for you,' said I.

I don't know whether he smiled, but he said in a gentlemanly tone - that is to say, a tone not hard nor terrifying, - 'What sort of trunk was yours?'

I described it, including in my description the green ribbon. And forthwith he took the conductor under hand, and I felt, through all the storm of French which followed, that he raked him fore and aft. Presently he returned to me.

'The fellow avers he was overloaded, and confesses that he removed your trunk after you saw it put on, and has left it behind at Boue-Marine with other parcels; he has promised, however, to forward it to-morrow; the day after, therefore, you will find it safe at this bureau.'

'Thank you,' said I: but my heart sank.

Meantime what should I do? Perhaps this English gentleman saw the failure of courage in my face; he inquired kindly, 'Have you any friends in this city?'

'No, and I don't know where to go.'

There was a little pause, in the course of which, as he turned more fully to the light of a lamp above him, I saw that he was a young, distinguished, and handsome man; he might be a lord, for anything I knew: nature had made him good enough for a prince, I thought. His face was very pleasant; he looked high but not arrogant, manly but not overbearing. I was turning away, in the deep consciousness of all absence of claim to look for further help from such a one as he.

'Was all your money in your trunk?' he asked, stopping me.

How thankful was I to be able to answer with truth - 'No. I have enough in my purse' (for I had near twenty francs) 'to keep me at a quiet inn till the day after to-morrow; but I am quite a stranger in Villette, and don't know the streets and the inns.'

'I can give you the address of such an inn as you want,' said he; 'and it is not far off: with my direction you will easily find it.'

He tore a leaf from his pocket-book, wrote a few words and gave it to me. I *did* think him kind; and as to distrusting him, or his advice, or his address, I should almost as soon have thought of distrusting the

Bible. There was goodness in his countenance, and honour in his bright eyes.

'Your shortest way will be to follow the Boulevard and cross the park,' he continued; 'but it is too late and too dark for a woman to go through the park alone; I will step with you thus far.'

He moved on, and I followed him, through the darkness and the small soaking rain. The Boulevard was all deserted, its path miry, the water dripping from its trees; the park was black as midnight. In the double gloom of trees and fog, I could not see my guide; I could only follow his tread. Not the least fear had I: I believe I would have followed that frank tread, through continual night, to the world's end.

'Now,' said he, when the park was traversed, 'you will go along this broad street till you come to steps; two lamps will show you where they are: these steps you will descend: a narrower street lies below; following that, at the bottom you will find your inn. They speak English there, so your difficulties are now pretty well over. Good-night.'

'Good-night, sir,' said I: 'accept my sincerest thanks.' And we parted.

The remembrance of his countenance, which I am sure wore a light not unbenignant to the friendless - the sound in my ear of his voice, which spoke a nature chivalric to the needy and feeble, as well as the youthful and fair - were a sort of cordial to me long after. He was a true young English gentleman.

On I went, hurrying fast through a magnificent street and square, with the grandest houses round, and amidst them the huge outline of more than one overbearing pile; which might be palace or church - I could not tell. Just as I passed a portico, two mustachioed men came suddenly from behind the pillars; they were smoking cigars: their dress implied pretensions to the rank of gentlemen, but, poor things! they were very plebeian in soul. They spoke with insolence, and, fast as I walked, they kept pace with me a long way. At last I met a sort of patrol, and my dreaded hunters were turned from the pursuit; but they had driven me beyond my reckoning: when I could collect my faculties, I no longer knew where I was; the staircase I must long since have passed. Puzzled, out of breath, all my pulses throbbing in inevitable agitation, I knew not where to turn. It was terrible to think of again encountering those bearded, sneering simpletons; yet the ground must be retraced, and the steps sought out.

I came at last to an old and worn flight, and, taking it for granted that this must be the one indicated, I descended them. The street into which they led was indeed narrow, but it contained no inn. On I

wandered. In a very quiet and comparatively clean and well-paved street, I saw a light burning over the door of a rather large house, loftier by a story than those round it. *This* might be the inn at last. I hastened on: my knees now trembled under me: I was getting quite exhausted.

No inn was this. A brass-plate embellished the great porte-cochere: 'Pensionnat de Demoiselles' was the inscription; and beneath, a name, 'Madame Beck.'

I started. About a hundred thoughts volleyed through my mind in a moment. Yet I planned nothing, and considered nothing: I had not time. Providence said, 'Stop here; this is *your* inn.' Fate took me in her strong hand; mastered my will; directed my actions: I rang the door-bell.

While I waited, I would not reflect. I fixedly looked at the street-stones, where the door-lamp shone, and counted them and noted their shapes, and the glitter of wet on their angles. I rang again. They opened at last. A bonne in a smart cap stood before me.

'May I see Madame Beck?' I inquired.

I believe if I had spoken French she would not have admitted me; but, as I spoke English, she concluded I was a foreign teacher come on business connected with the pensionnat, and, even at that late hour, she let me in, without a word of reluctance, or a moment of hesitation.

The next moment I sat in a cold, glittering salon, with porcelain stove, unlit, and gilded ornaments, and polished floor. A pendule on the mantel-piece struck nine o'clock.

A quarter of an hour passed. How fast beat every pulse in my frame! How I turned cold and hot by turns! I sat with my eyes fixed on the door - a great white folding-door, with gilt mouldings: I watched to see a leaf move and open. All had been quiet: not a mouse had stirred; the white doors were closed and motionless.

'You ayre Engliss?' said a voice at my elbow. I almost bounded, so unexpected was the sound; so certain had I been of solitude.

No ghost stood beside me, nor anything of spectral aspect; merely a motherly, dumpy little woman, in a large shawl, a wrapping-gown, and a clean, trim nightcap.

I said I was English, and immediately, without further prelude, we fell to a most remarkable conversation. Madame Beck (for Madame Beck it was - she had entered by a little door behind me, and, being shod

with the shoes of silence, I had heard neither her entrance nor approach) - Madame Beck had exhausted her command of insular speech when she said, 'You ayre Engliss,' and she now proceeded to work away volubly in her own tongue. I answered in mine. She partly understood me, but as I did not at all understand her - though we made together an awful clamour (anything like Madame's gift of utterance I had not hitherto heard or imagined) - we achieved little progress. She rang, ere long, for aid; which arrived in the shape of a 'maitresse,' who had been partly educated in an Irish convent, and was esteemed a perfect adept in the English language. A bluff little personage this maitresse was - Labassecourienne from top to toe: and how she did slaughter the speech of Albion! However, I told her a plain tale, which she translated. I told her how I had left my own country, intent on extending my knowledge, and gaining my bread; how I was ready to turn my hand to any useful thing, provided it was not wrong or degrading; how I would be a child's-nurse, or a lady's-maid, and would not refuse even housework adapted to my strength. Madame heard this; and, questioning her countenance, I almost thought the tale won her ear:

'Il n'y a que les Anglaises pour ces sortes d'entreprises,' said she: 'sont-elles donc intrepides ces femmes la!'

She asked my name, my age; she sat and looked at me - not pityingly, not with interest: never a gleam of sympathy, or a shade of compassion, crossed her countenance during the interview. I felt she was not one to be led an inch by her feelings: grave and considerate, she gazed, consulting her judgment and studying my narrative. A bell rang.

'Voila pour la priere du soir!' said she, and rose. Through her interpreter, she desired me to depart now, and come back on the morrow; but this did not suit me: I could not bear to return to the perils of darkness and the street. With energy, yet with a collected and controlled manner, I said, addressing herself personally, and not the maitresse: 'Be assured, madame, that by instantly securing my services, your interests will be served and not injured: you will find me one who will wish to give, in her labour, a full equivalent for her wages; and if you hire me, it will be better that I should stay here this night: having no acquaintance in Villette, and not possessing the language of the country, how can I secure a lodging?'

'It is true,' said she; 'but at least you can give a reference?'

'None.'

She inquired after my luggage: I told her when it would arrive. She mused. At that moment a man's step was heard in the vestibule,

hastily proceeding to the outer door. (I shall go on with this part of my tale as if I had understood all that passed; for though it was then scarce intelligible to me, I heard it translated afterwards).

'Who goes out now?' demanded Madame Beck, listening to the tread.

'M. Paul,' replied the teacher. 'He came this evening to give a reading to the first class.'

'The very man I should at this moment most wish to see. Call him.'

The teacher ran to the salon door. M. Paul was summoned. He entered: a small, dark and spare man, in spectacles.

'Mon cousin,' began Madame, 'I want your opinion. We know your skill in physiognomy; use it now. Read that countenance.'

The little man fixed on me his spectacles: A resolute compression of the lips, and gathering of the brow, seemed to say that he meant to see through me, and that a veil would be no veil for him.

'I read it,' he pronounced.

'Et qu'en dites vous?'

'Mais - bien des choses,' was the oracular answer.

'Bad or good?'

'Of each kind, without doubt,' pursued the diviner.

'May one trust her word?'

'Are you negotiating a matter of importance?'

'She wishes me to engage her as bonne or gouvernante; tells a tale full of integrity, but gives no reference.'

'She is a stranger?'

'An Englishwoman, as one may see.'

'She speaks French?'

'Not a word.' 'She understands it?'

'No.'

'One may then speak plainly in her presence?'

'Doubtless.'

He gazed steadily. 'Do you need her services?'

'I could do with them. You know I am disgusted with Madame Svini.'

Still he scrutinized. The judgment, when it at last came, was as indefinite as what had gone before it.

'Engage her. If good predominates in that nature, the action will bring its own reward; if evil - eh bien! ma cousine, ce sera toujours une bonne oeuvre.' And with a bow and a 'bon soir,' this vague arbiter of my destiny vanished.

And Madame did engage me that very night - by God's blessing I was spared the necessity of passing forth again into the lonesome, dreary, hostile street.