Chapter XIX - The Cleopatra

My stay at La Terrasse was prolonged a fortnight beyond the close of the vacation. Mrs Bretton's kind management procured me this respite. Her son having one day delivered the dictum that 'Lucy was not yet strong enough to go back to that den of a pensionnat,' she at once drove over to the Rue Fossette, had an interview with the directress, and procured the indulgence, on the plea of prolonged rest and change being necessary to perfect recovery. Hereupon, however, followed an attention I could very well have dispensed with, viz - a polite call from Madame Beck.

That lady - one fine day - actually came out in a fiacre as far as the chateau. I suppose she had resolved within herself to see what manner of place Dr. John inhabited. Apparently, the pleasant site and neat interior surpassed her expectations; she eulogized all she saw, pronounced the blue salon 'une piece magnifique,' profusely congratulated me on the acquisition of friends, 'tellement dignes, aimables, et respectables,' turned also a neat compliment in my favour, and, upon Dr. John coming in, ran up to him with the utmost buoyancy, opening at the same time such a fire of rapid language, all sparkling with felicitations and protestations about his 'chateau,' - 'madame sa mere, la digne chatelaine:' also his looks; which, indeed, were very flourishing, and at the moment additionally embellished by the good-natured but amused smile with which he always listened to Madame's fluent and florid French. In short, Madame shone in her very best phase that day, and came in and went out quite a living catherine-wheel of compliments, delight, and affability. Half purposely, and half to ask some question about school-business, I followed her to the carriage, and looked in after she was seated and the door closed. In that brief fraction of time what a change had been wrought! An instant ago, all sparkles and jests, she now sat sterner than a judge and graver than a sage. Strange little woman!

I went back and teased Dr. John about Madame's devotion to him. How he laughed! What fun shone in his eyes as he recalled some of her fine speeches, and repeated them, imitating her voluble delivery! He had an acute sense of humour, and was the finest company in the world - when he could forget Miss Fanshawe.

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To 'sit in sunshine calm and sweet' is said to be excellent for weak people; it gives them vital force. When little Georgette Beck was recovering from her illness, I used to take her in my arms and walk with her in the garden by the hour together, beneath a certain wall hung with grapes, which the Southern sun was ripening: that sun

cherished her little pale frame quite as effectually as it mellowed and swelled the clustering fruit.

There are human tempers, bland, glowing, and genial, within whose influence it is as good for the poor in spirit to live, as it is for the feeble in frame to bask in the glow of noon. Of the number of these choice natures were certainly both Dr. Bretton's and his mother's. They liked to communicate happiness, as some like to occasion misery: they did it instinctively; without fuss, and apparently with little consciousness; the means to give pleasure rose spontaneously in their minds. Every day while I stayed with them, some little plan was proposed which resulted in beneficial enjoyment. Fully occupied as was Dr. John's time, he still made it in his way to accompany us in each brief excursion. I can hardly tell how he managed his engagements; they were numerous, yet by dint of system, he classed them in an order which left him a daily period of liberty. I often saw him hard-worked, yet seldom over-driven, and never irritated, confused, or oppressed. What he did was accomplished with the ease and grace of all-sufficing strength; with the bountiful cheerfulness of high and unbroken energies. Under his guidance I saw, in that one happy fortnight, more of Villette, its environs, and its inhabitants, than I had seen in the whole eight months of my previous residence. He took me to places of interest in the town, of whose names I had not before so much as heard; with willingness and spirit he communicates. much noteworthy information. He never seemed to think it a trouble to talk to me, and, I am sure, it was never a task to me to listen. It was not his way to treat subjects coldly and vaguely; he rarely generalized, never prosed. He seemed to like nice details almost as much as I liked them myself: he seemed observant of character: and not superficially observant, either. These points gave the quality of interest to his discourse; and the fact of his speaking direct from his own resources, and not borrowing or stealing from books - here a dry fact, and there a trite phrase, and elsewhere a hackneyed opinion - ensured a freshness, as welcome as it was rare. Before my eyes, too, his disposition seemed to unfold another phase; to pass to a fresh day: to rise in new and nobler dawn.

His mother possessed a good development of benevolence, but he owned a better and larger. I found, on accompanying him to the Basse-Ville - the poor and crowded quarter of the city - that his errands there were as much those of the philanthropist as the physician. I understood presently that cheerfully, habitually, and in single-minded unconsciousness of any special merit distinguishing his deeds - he was achieving, amongst a very wretched population, a world of active good. The lower orders liked him well; his poor, patients in the hospitals welcomed him with a sort of enthusiasm.

But stop - I must not, from the faithful narrator, degenerate into the partial eulogist. Well, full well, do I know that Dr. John was not

perfect, anymore than I am perfect. Human fallibility leavened him throughout: there was no hour, and scarcely a moment of the time I spent with him that in act or speech, or look, he did not betray something that was not of a god. A god could not have the cruel vanity of Dr. John, nor his sometime levity., No immortal could have resembled him in his occasional temporary oblivion of all but the present - in his passing passion for that present; shown not coarsely, by devoting it to material indulgence, but selfishly, by extracting from it whatever it could yield of nutriment to his masculine self- love: his delight was to feed that ravenous sentiment, without thought of the price of provender, or care for the cost of keeping it sleek and high-pampered.

The reader is requested to note a seeming contradiction in the two views which have been given of Graham Bretton - the public and private - the out-door and the in-door view. In the first, the public, he is shown oblivious of self; as modest in the display of his energies, as earnest in their exercise. In the second, the fireside picture, there is expressed consciousness of what he has and what he is; pleasure in homage, some recklessness in exciting, some vanity in receiving the same. Both portraits are correct.

It was hardly possible to oblige Dr. John quietly and in secret. When you thought that the fabrication of some trifle dedicated to his use had been achieved unnoticed, and that, like other men, he would use it when placed ready for his use, and never ask whence it came, he amazed you by a smilingly-uttered observation or two, proving that his eye had been on the work from commencement to close: that he had noted the design, traced its progress, and marked its completion. It pleased him to be thus served, and he let his pleasure beam in his eye and play about his mouth.

This would have been all very well, if he had not added to such kindly and unobtrusive evidence a certain wilfulness in discharging what he called debts. When his mother worked for him, he paid her by showering about her his bright animal spirits, with even more affluence than his gay, taunting, teasing, loving wont. If Lucy Snowe were discovered to have put her hand to such work, he planned, in recompence, some pleasant recreation.

I often felt amazed at his perfect knowledge of Villette; a knowledge not merely confined to its open streets, but penetrating to all its galleries, salles, and cabinets: of every door which shut in an object worth seeing, of every museum, of every hall, sacred to art or science, he seemed to possess the 'Open! Sesame.' I never had a head for science, but an ignorant, blind, fond instinct inclined me to art. I liked to visit the picture-galleries, and I dearly liked to be left there alone. In company, a wretched idiosyncracy forbade me to see much or to feel

anything. In unfamiliar company, where it was necessary to maintain a flow of talk on the subjects in presence, half an hour would knock me up, with a combined pressure of physical lassitude and entire mental incapacity. I never yet saw the well- reared child, much less the educated adult, who could not put me to shame, by the sustained intelligence of its demeanour under the ordeal of a conversable, sociable visitation of pictures, historical sights or buildings, or any lions of public interest. Dr. Bretton was a cicerone after my own heart; he would take me betimes, ere the galleries were filled, leave me there for two or three hours, and call for me when his own engagements were discharged. Meantime, I was happy; happy, not always in admiring, but in examining, questioning, and forming conclusions. In the commencement of these visits, there was some misunderstanding and consequent struggle between Will and Power. The former faculty exacted approbation of that which it was considered orthodox to admire; the latter groaned forth its utter inability to pay the tax; it was then self-sneered at, spurred up, goaded on to refine its taste, and whet its zest. The more it was chidden, however, the more it wouldn't praise. Discovering gradually that a wonderful sense of fatigue resulted from these conscientious efforts, I began to reflect whether I might not dispense with that great labour, and concluded eventually that I might, and so sank supine into a luxury of calm before ninety-nine out of a hundred of the exhibited frames.

It seemed to me that an original and good picture was just as scarce as an original and good book; nor did I, in the end, tremble to say to myself, standing before certain *chef-d'oeuvres* bearing great names, 'These are not a whit like nature. Nature's daylight never had that colour: never was made so turbid, either by storm or cloud, as it is laid out there, under a sky of indigo: and that indigo is not ether; and those dark weeds plastered upon it are not trees.' Several very well executed and complacent-looking fat women struck me as by no means the goddesses they appeared to consider themselves. Many scores of marvellously-finished little Flemish pictures, and also of sketches, excellent for fashion-books displaying varied costumes in the handsomest materials, gave evidence of laudable industry whimsically applied. And yet there were fragments of truth here and there which satisfied the conscience, and gleams of light that cheered the vision. Nature's power here broke through in a mountain snow-storm; and there her glory in a sunny southern day. An expression in this portrait proved clear insight into character; a face in that historical painting, by its vivid filial likeness, startlingly reminded you that genius gave it birth. These exceptions I loved: they grew dear as friends.

One day, at a quiet early hour, I found myself nearly alone in a certain gallery, wherein one particular picture of portentous size, set up in the best light, having a cordon of protection stretched before it, and a

cushioned bench duly set in front for the accommodation of worshipping connoisseurs, who, having gazed themselves off their feet, might be fain to complete the business sitting: this picture, I say, seemed to consider itself the queen of the collection.

It represented a woman, considerably larger, I thought, than the life. I calculated that this lady, put into a scale of magnitude, suitable for the reception of a commodity of bulk, would infallibly turn from fourteen to sixteen stone. She was, indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher's meat - to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids - must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh. She lay half-reclined on a couch: why, it would be difficult to say; broad daylight blazed round her; she appeared in hearty health, strong enough to do the work of two plain cooks; she could not plead a weak spine; she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright. She, had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case: out of abundance of material - seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery - she managed to make inefficient raiment. Then, for the wretched untidiness surrounding her, there could be no excuse. Pots and pans - perhaps I ought to say vases and goblets - were rolled here and there on the foreground; a perfect rubbish of flowers was mixed amongst them, and an absurd and disorderly mass of curtain upholstery smothered the couch and cumbered the floor. On referring to the catalogue, I found that this notable production bore the name ‘Cleopatra.’

Well, I was sitting wondering at it (as the bench was there, I thought I might as well take advantage of its accommodation), and thinking that while some of the details - as roses, gold cups, jewels, &c., were very prettily painted, it was on the whole an enormous piece of claptrap; the room, almost vacant when I entered, began to fill. Scarcely noticing this circumstance (as, indeed, it did not matter to me) I retained my seat; rather to rest myself than with a view to studying this huge, dark-complexioned gipsy-queen; of whom, indeed, I soon tired, and betook myself for refreshment to the contemplation of some exquisite little pictures of still life: wild-flowers, wild- fruit, mossy woodnests, casketing eggs that looked like pearls seen through clear green sea-water; all hung modestly beneath that coarse and preposterous canvas.

Suddenly a light tap visited my shoulder. Starting, turning, I met a face bent to encounter mine; a frowning, almost a shocked face it was.

‘Que faites-vous ici?’ said a voice.

‘Mais, Monsieur, je m'amuse.’

'Vous vous amusez! et a quoi, s'il vous plait? Mais d'abord, faites- moi le plaisir de vous lever; prenez mon bras, et allons de l'autre cote.'

I did precisely as I was bid. M. Paul Emanuel (it was he) returned from Rome, and now a travelled man, was not likely to be less tolerant of insubordination now, than before this added distinction laurelled his temples.

'Permit me to conduct you to your party,' said he, as we crossed the room.

'I have no party.'

'You are not alone?'

'Yes, Monsieur.'

'Did you come here unaccompanied?'

'No, Monsieur. Dr. Bretton brought me here.'

'Dr. Bretton and Madame his mother, of course?'

'No; only Dr. Bretton.'

'And he told you to look at *that* picture?'

'By no means; I found it out for myself.'

M. Paul's hair was shorn close as raven down, or I think it would have bristled on his head. Beginning now to perceive his drift, I had a certain pleasure in keeping cool, and working him up.

'Astounding insular audacity!' cried the Professor. 'Singulieres femmes que ces Anglaises!'

'What is the matter, Monsieur?'

'Matter! How dare you, a young person, sit coolly down, with the self-possession of a garcon, and look at *that* picture?'

'It is a very ugly picture, but I cannot at all see why I should not look at it'

'Bon! bon! Speak no more of it. But you ought not to be here alone.'

'If, however, I have no society - no *party*, as you say? And then, what does it signify whether I am alone, or accompanied? nobody meddles with me.'

'Taisez-vous, et asseyez-vous la - la!' - setting down a chair with emphasis in a particularly dull corner, before a series of most specially dreary 'cadres.'

'Mais, Monsieur?'

'Mais, Mademoiselle, asseyez-vous, et ne bougez pas - entendez-vous? - jusqu'a ce qu'on vienne vous chercher, ou que je vous donne la permission.'

'Quel triste coin!' cried I, 'et quelles laids tableaux!'

And 'laids,' indeed, they were; being a set of four, denominated in the catalogue 'La vie d'une femme.' They were painted rather in a remarkable style - flat, dead, pale, and formal. The first represented a 'Jeune Fille,' coming out of a church-door, a missal in her hand, her dress very prim, her eyes cast down, her mouth pursed up - the image of a most villanous little precocious she-hypocrite. The second, a 'Mariee,' with a long white veil, kneeling at a prie-dieu in her chamber, holding her hands plastered together, finger to finger, and showing the whites of her eyes in a most exasperating manner. The third, a 'Jeune Mere,' hanging disconsolate over a clayey and puffy baby with a face like an unwholesome full moon. The fourth, a 'Veuve,' being a black woman, holding by the hand a black little girl, and the twain studiously surveying an elegant French monument, set up in a corner of some Pere la Chaise. All these four 'Anges' were grim and grey as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts. What women to live with! insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities! As bad in their way as the indolent gipsy-giantess, the Cleopatra, in hers.

It was impossible to keep one's attention long confined to these master-pieces, and so, by degrees, I veered round, and surveyed the gallery.

A perfect crowd of spectators was by this time gathered round the Lioness, from whose vicinage I had been banished; nearly half this crowd were ladies, but M. Paul afterwards told me, these were 'des dames,' and it was quite proper for them to contemplate what no 'demoiselle' ought to glance at. I assured him plainly I could not agree in this doctrine, and did not see the sense of it; whereupon, with his usual absolutism, he merely requested my silence, and also, in the same breath, denounced my mingled rashness and ignorance. A more despotic little man than M. Paul never filled a professor's chair. I noticed, by the way, that he looked at the picture himself quite at his

ease, and for a very long while: he did not, however, neglect to glance from time to time my way, in order, I suppose, to make sure that I was obeying orders, and not breaking bounds. By-and- by, he again accosted me.

'Had I not been ill?' he wished to know: 'he understood I had.'

'Yes, but I was now quite well.'

'Where had I spent the vacation?'

'Chiefly in the Rue Fossette; partly with Madame Bretton.'

'He had heard that I was left alone in the Rue Fossette; was that so?'

'Not quite alone: Marie Broc' (the cretin) 'was with me.'

He shrugged his shoulders; varied and contradictory expressions played rapidly over his countenance. Marie Broc was well known to M. Paul; he never gave a lesson in the third division (containing the least advanced pupils), that she did not occasion in him a sharp conflict between antagonistic impressions. Her personal appearance, her repulsive manners, her often unmanageable disposition, irritated his temper, and inspired him with strong antipathy; a feeling he was too apt to conceive when his taste was offended or his will thwarted. On the other hand, her misfortunes, constituted a strong claim on his forbearance and compassion - such a claim as it was not in his nature to deny; hence resulted almost daily drawn battles between impatience and disgust on the one hand, pity and a sense of justice on the other; in which, to his credit be it said, it was very seldom that the former feelings prevailed: when they did, however, M. Paul showed a phase of character which had its terrors. His passions were strong, his aversions and attachments alike vivid; the force he exerted in holding both in check by no means mitigated an observer's sense of their vehemence. With such tendencies, it may well be supposed he often excited in ordinary minds fear and dislike; yet it was an error to fear him: nothing drove him so nearly frantic as the tremor of an apprehensive and distrustful spirit; nothing soothed him like confidence tempered with gentleness. To evince these sentiments, however, required a thorough comprehension of his nature; and his nature was of an order rarely comprehended.

'How did you get on with Marie Broc?' he asked, after some minutes' silence.

'Monsieur, I did my best; but it was terrible to be alone with her!'

'You have, then, a weak heart! You lack courage; and, perhaps, charity. Yours are not the qualities which might constitute a Sister of Mercy.'

[He was a religious little man, in his way: the self-denying and self-sacrificing part of the Catholic religion commanded the homage of his soul.]

'I don't know, indeed: I took as good care of her as I could; but when her aunt came to fetch her away, it was a great relief.'

'Ah! you are an egotist. There are women who have nursed hospitals-full of similar unfortunates. You could not do that?'

'Could Monsieur do it himself?'

'Women who are worthy the name ought infinitely to surpass; our coarse, fallible, self-indulgent sex, in the power to perform such duties.'

'I washed her, I kept her clean, I fed her, I tried to amuse her; but she made mouths at me instead of speaking.'

'You think you did great things?'

'No; but as great as I *could* do.'

'Then limited are your powers, for in tending one idiot you fell sick.'

'Not with that, Monsieur; I had a nervous fever: my mind was ill.'

'Vraiment! Vous valez peu de chose. You are not cast in an heroic mould; your courage will not avail to sustain you in solitude; it merely gives you the temerity to gaze with sang-froid at pictures of Cleopatra.'

It would have been easy to show anger at the teasing, hostile tone of the little man. I had never been angry with him yet, however, and had no present disposition to begin.

'Cleopatra!' I repeated, quietly. 'Monsieur, too, has been looking at Cleopatra; what does he think of her?'

'Cela ne vaut rien,' he responded. 'Une femme superbe - une taille d'imperatrice, des formes de Junon, mais une personne dont je ne voudrais ni pour femme, ni pour fille, ni pour soeur. Aussi vous ne jeterez plus un seul coup d'oeil de sa cote.'

‘But I have looked at her a great many times while Monsieur has been talking: I can see her quite well from this corner.’

‘Turn to the wall and study your four pictures of a woman's life.’

‘Excuse me, M. Paul; they are too hideous: but if you admire them, allow me to vacate my seat and leave you to their contemplation.’

‘Mademoiselle,’ he said, grimacing a half-smile, or what he intended for a smile, though it was but a grim and hurried manifestation. ‘You nurslings of Protestantism astonish me. You unguarded Englishwomen walk calmly amidst red-hot ploughshares and escape burning. I believe, if some of you were thrown into Nebuchadnezzar's hottest furnace you would issue forth untraversed by the smell of fire.’

‘Will Monsieur have the goodness to move an inch to one side?’

‘How! At what are you gazing now? You are not recognising an acquaintance amongst that group of jeunes gens?’

‘I think so - Yes, I see there a person I know.’

In fact, I had caught a glimpse of a head too pretty to belong to any other than the redoubted Colonel de Hamal. What a very finished, highly polished little pate it was! What a figure, so trim and natty! What womanish feet and hands! How daintily he held a glass to one of his optics! with what admiration he gazed upon the Cleopatra! and then, how engagingly he tittered and whispered a friend at his elbow! Oh, the man of sense! Oh, the refined gentleman of superior taste and tact! I observed him for about ten minutes, and perceived that he was exceedingly taken with this dusk and portly Venus of the Nile. So much was I interested in his bearing, so absorbed in divining his character by his looks and movements, I temporarily forgot M. Paul; in the interim a group came between that gentleman and me; or possibly his scruples might have received another and worse shock from my present abstraction, causing him to withdraw voluntarily: at any rate, when I again looked round, he was gone.

My eye, pursuant of the search, met not him, but another and dissimilar figure, well seen amidst the crowd, for the height as well as the port lent each its distinction. This way came Dr. John, in visage, in shape, in hue, as unlike the dark, acerb, and caustic little professor, as the fruit of the Hesperides might be unlike the sloe in the wild thicket; as the high-couraged but tractable Arabian is unlike the rude and stubborn ‘sheltie.’ He was looking for me, but had not yet explored the corner where the schoolmaster had just put me. I remained quiet; yet another minute I would watch.

He approached de Hamal; he paused near him; I thought he had a pleasure in looking over his head; Dr. Bretton, too, gazed on the Cleopatra. I doubt if it were to his taste: he did not simper like the little Count; his mouth looked fastidious, his eye cool; without demonstration he stepped aside, leaving room for others to approach. I saw now that he was waiting, and, rising, I joined him.

We took one turn round the gallery; with Graham it was very pleasant to take such a turn. I always liked dearly to hear what he had to say about either pictures or books; because without pretending to be a connoisseur, he always spoke his thought, and that was sure to be fresh: very often it was also just and pithy. It was pleasant also to tell him some things he did not know - he listened so kindly, so teachably; unformalized by scruples lest so to bend his bright handsome head, to gather a woman's rather obscure and stammering explanation, should imperil the dignity of his manhood. And when he communicated information in return, it was with a lucid intelligence that left all his words clear graven on the memory; no explanation of his giving, no fact of his narrating, did I ever forget.

As we left the gallery, I asked him what he thought of the Cleopatra (after making him laugh by telling him how Professor Emanuel had sent me to the right about, and taking him to see the sweet series of pictures recommended to my attention.)

'Pooh!' said he. 'My mother is a better-looking woman. I heard some French fops, yonder, designating her as 'le type du voluptueux;' if so, I can only say, 'le voluptueux' is little to my liking. Compare that mulatto with Ginevra!'