Chapter XXXII - The First Letter

Where, it becomes time to inquire, was Paulina Mary? How fared my intercourse with the sumptuous Hotel Crecy? That intercourse had, for an interval, been suspended by absence; M. and Miss de Bassompierre had been travelling, dividing some weeks between the provinces and capital of France. Chance apprised me of their return very shortly after it took place.

I was walking one mild afternoon on a quiet boulevard, wandering slowly on, enjoying the benign April sun, and some thoughts not unpleasing, when I saw before me a group of riders, stopping as if they had just encountered, and exchanging greetings in the midst of the broad, smooth, linden-bordered path; on one side a middle-aged gentleman and young lady, on the other - a young and handsome man. Very graceful was the lady's mien, choice her appointments, delicate and stately her whole aspect. Still, as I looked, I felt they were known to me, and, drawing a little nearer, I fully recognised them all: the Count Home de Bassompierre, his daughter, and Dr. Graham Bretton.

How animated was Graham's face! How true, how warm, yet how retiring the joy it expressed! This was the state of things, this the combination of circumstances, at once to attract and enchain, to subdue and excite Dr. John. The pearl he admired was in itself of great price and truest purity, but he was not the man who, in appreciating the gem, could forget its setting. Had he seen Paulina with the same youth, beauty, and grace, but on foot, alone, unguarded, and in simple attire, a dependent worker, a demi-grisette, he would have thought her a pretty little creature, and would have loved with his eye her movements and her mien, but it required other than this to conquer him as he was now vanquished, to bring him safe under dominion as now, without loss, and even with gain to his manly honour, one saw that he was reduced; there was about Dr. John all the man of the world; to satisfy himself did not suffice; society must approve - the world must admire what he did, or he counted his measures false and futile. In his victrix he required all that was here visible - the imprint of high cultivation, the consecration of a careful and authoritative protection, the adjuncts that Fashion decrees, Wealth purchases, and Taste adjusts; for these conditions his spirit stipulated ere it surrendered: they were here to the utmost fulfilled; and now, proud, impassioned, yet fearing, he did homage to Paulina as his sovereign. As for her, the smile of feeling, rather than of conscious power, slept soft in her eyes.

They parted. He passed me at speed, hardly feeling the earth he skimmed, and seeing nothing on either hand. He looked very handsome; mettle and purpose were roused in him fully.

'Papa, there is Lucy!' cried a musical, friendly voice. 'Lucy, dear Lucy - *do* come here!'

I hastened to her. She threw back her veil, and stooped from her saddle to kiss me.

'I was coming to see you to-morrow,' said she; 'but now to-morrow you will come and see me.'

She named the hour, and I promised compliance.

The morrow's evening found me with her - she and I shut into her own room. I had not seen her since that occasion when her claims were brought into comparison with those of Ginevra Fanshawe, and had so signally prevailed; she had much to tell me of her travels in the interval. A most animated, rapid speaker was she in such a tete-a-tete, a most lively describer; yet with her artless diction and clear soft voice, she never seemed to speak too fast or to say too much. My own attention I think would not soon have flagged, but by-and-by, she herself seemed to need some change of subject; she hastened to wind up her narrative briefly. Yet why she terminated with so concise an abridgment did not immediately appear; silence followed - a restless silence, not without symptoms of abstraction. Then, turning to me, in a diffident, half-appealing voice - 'Lucy - '

'Well, I am at your side.'

'Is my cousin Ginevra still at Madame Beck's?'

'Your cousin is still there; you must be longing to see her.'

'No - not much.'

'You want to invite her to spend another evening?'

'No... I suppose she still talks about being married?'

'Not to any one you care for.'

'But of course she still thinks of Dr. Bretton? She cannot have changed her mind on that point, because it was so fixed two months ago.'

'Why, you know, it does not matter. You saw the terms on which they stood.'

'There was a little misunderstanding that evening, certainly; does she seem unhappy?'

'Not she. To change the subject. Have you heard or seen nothing of, or from. Graham during your absence?'

'Papa had letters from him once or twice about business, I think. He undertook the management of some affair which required attention while we were away. Dr. Bretton seems to respect papa, and to have pleasure in obliging him.'

'Yes: you met him yesterday on the boulevard; you would be able to judge from his aspect that his friends need not be painfully anxious about his health?'

'Papa seems to have thought with you. I could not help smiling. He is not particularly observant, you know, because he is often thinking of other things than what pass before his eyes; but he said, as Dr. Bretton rode away, `Really it does a man good to see the spirit and energy of that boy.' He called Dr. Bretton a boy; I believe he almost thinks him so, just as he thinks me a little girl; he was not speaking to me, but dropped that remark to himself. Lucy....'

Again fell the appealing accent, and at the same instant she left her chair, and came and sat on the stool at my feet.

I liked her. It is not a declaration I have often made concerning my acquaintance, in the course of this book: the reader will bear with it for once. Intimate intercourse, close inspection, disclosed in Paulina only what was delicate, intelligent, and sincere; therefore my regard for her lay deep. An admiration more superficial might have been more demonstrative; mine, however, was quiet.

'What have you to ask of Lucy?' said I; 'be brave, and speak out'

But there was no courage in her eye; as it met mine, it fell; and there was no coolness on her cheek - not a transient surface-blush, but a gathering inward excitement raised its tint and its temperature.

'Lucy, I *do* wish to know your thoughts of Dr. Bretton. Do, *do* give me your real opinion of his character, his disposition.'

'His character stands high, and deservedly high.'

'And his disposition? Tell me about his disposition,' she urged; 'you know him well.'

'I know him pretty well.'

'You know his home-side. You have seen him with his mother; speak of him as a son.'

‘He is a fine-hearted son; his mother's comfort and hope, her pride and pleasure.’

She held my hand between hers, and at each favourable word gave it a little caressing stroke.

‘In what other way is he good, Lucy?’

‘Dr. Bretton is benevolent - humanely disposed towards all his race, Dr. Bretton would have benignity for the lowest savage, or the worst criminal.’

‘I heard some gentlemen, some of papa's friends, who were talking about him, say the same. They say many of the poor patients at the hospitals, who tremble before some pitiless and selfish surgeons, welcome him.’

‘They are right; I have witnessed as much. He once took me over a hospital; I saw how he was received: your father's friends are right.’

The softest gratitude animated her eye as she lifted it a moment. She had yet more to say, but seemed hesitating about time and place. Dusk was beginning to reign; her parlour fire already glowed with twilight ruddiness; but I thought she wished the room dimmer, the hour later.

‘How quiet and secluded we feel here!’ I remarked, to reassure her.

‘Do we? Yes; it is a still evening, and I shall not be called down to tea; papa is dining out.’

Still holding my hand, she played with the fingers unconsciously, dressed them, now in her own rings, and now circled them with a twine of her beautiful hair; she patted the palm against her hot cheek, and at last, having cleared a voice that was naturally liquid as a lark's, she said: -

‘You must think it rather strange that I should talk so much about Dr. Bretton, ask so many questions, take such an interest, but - ’.

‘Not at all strange; perfectly natural; you like him.’

‘And if I did,’ said she, with slight quickness, ‘is that a reason why I should talk? I suppose you think me weak, like my cousin Ginevra?’

‘If I thought you one whit like Madame Ginevra, I would not sit here waiting for your communications. I would get up, walk at my ease

about the room, and anticipate all you had to say by a round lecture. Go on.'

'I mean to go on,' retorted she; 'what else do you suppose I mean to do?'

And she looked and spoke - the little Polly of Bretton - petulant, sensitive.

'If,' said she, emphatically, 'if I liked Dr. John till I was fit to die for liking him, that alone could not license me to be otherwise than dumb - dumb as the grave - dumb as you, Lucy Snowe - you know it - and you know you would despise me if I failed in self-control, and whined about some rickety liking that was all on my side.'

'It is true I little respect women or girls who are loquacious either in boasting the triumphs, or bemoaning the mortifications, of feelings. But as to you, Paulina, speak, for I earnestly wish to hear you. Tell me all it will give you pleasure or relief to tell: I ask no more.'

'Do you care for me, Lucy?'

'Yes, I do, Paulina.'

'And I love you. I had an odd content in being with you even when I was a little, troublesome, disobedient girl; it was charming to me then to lavish on you my naughtiness and whims. Now you are acceptable to me, and I like to talk with and trust you. So listen, Lucy.'

And she settled herself, resting against my arm - resting gently, not with honest Mistress Fanshawe's fatiguing and selfish weight.

'A few minutes since you asked whether we had not heard from Graham during our absence, and I said there were two letters for papa on business; this was true, but I did not tell you all.'

'You evaded?'

'I shuffled and equivocated, you know. However, I am going to speak the truth now; it is getting darker; one can talk at one's ease. Papa often lets me open the letter-bag and give him out the contents. One morning, about three weeks ago, you don't know how surprised I was to find, amongst a dozen letters for M. de Bassompierre, a note addressed to Miss de Bassompierre. I spied it at once, amidst all the rest; the handwriting was not strange; it attracted me directly. I was going to say, 'Papa, here is another letter from Dr. Bretton;' but the 'Miss' struck me mute. I actually never received a letter from a gentleman before. Ought I to have shown it to papa, and let him open

it and read it first? I could not for my life, Lucy. I know so well papa's ideas about me: he forgets my age; he thinks I am a mere school-girl; he is not aware that other people see I am grown up as tall as I shall be; so, with a curious mixture of feelings, some of them self-reproachful, and some so fluttering and strong, I cannot describe them, I gave papa his twelve letters - his herd of possessions - and kept back my one, my ewe-lamb. It lay in my lap during breakfast, looking up at me with an inexplicable meaning, making me feel myself a thing double-existent - a child to that dear papa, but no more a child to myself. After breakfast I carried my letter up-stairs, and having secured myself by turning the key in the door, I began to study the outside of my treasure: it was some minutes before I could get over the direction and penetrate the seal; one does not take a strong place of this kind by instant storm - one sits down awhile before it, as beleaguers say. Graham's hand is like himself, Lucy, and so is his seal - all clear, firm, and rounded - no slovenly splash of wax - a full, solid, steady drop - a distinct impress; no pointed turns harshly pricking the optic nerve, but a clean, mellow, pleasant manuscript, that soothes you as you read. It is like his face - just like the chiselling of his features: do you know his autograph?'

'I have seen it: go on.'

'The seal was too beautiful to be broken, so I cut it round with my scissors. On the point of reading the letter at last, I once more drew back voluntarily; it was too soon yet to drink that draught - the sparkle in the cup was so beautiful - I would watch it yet a minute. Then I remembered all at once that I had not said my prayers that morning. Having heard papa go down to breakfast a little earlier than usual, I had been afraid of keeping him waiting, and had hastened to join him as soon as dressed, thinking no harm to put off prayers till afterwards. Some people would say I ought to have served God first and then man; but I don't think heaven could be jealous of anything I might do for papa. I believe I am superstitious. A voice seemed now to say that another feeling than filial affection was in question - to urge me to pray before I dared to read what I so longed to read - to deny myself yet a moment, and remember first a great duty. I have had these impulses ever since I can remember. I put the letter down and said my prayers, adding, at the end, a strong entreaty that whatever happened, I might not be tempted or led to cause papa any sorrow, and might never, in caring for others, neglect him. The very thought of such a possibility, so pierced my heart that it made me cry. But still, Lucy, I felt that in time papa would have to be taught the truth, managed, and induced to hear reason.

'I read the letter. Lucy, life is said to be all disappointment. *I* was not disappointed. Ere I read, and while I read, my heart did more than throb - it trembled fast - every quiver seemed like the pant of an

animal athirst, laid down at a well and drinking; and the well proved quite full, gloriously clear; it rose up munificently of its own impulse; I saw the sun through its gush, and not a mote, Lucy, no moss, no insect, no atom in the thrice-refined golden gurgle.

'Life,' she went on, 'is said to be full of pain to some. I have read biographies where the wayfarer seemed to journey on from suffering to suffering; where Hope flew before him fast, never alighting so near, or lingering so long, as to give his hand a chance of one realizing grasp. I have read of those who sowed in tears, and whose harvest, so far from being reaped in joy, perished by untimely blight, or was borne off by sudden whirlwind; and, alas! some of these met the winter with empty garners, and died of utter want in the darkest and coldest of the year.'

'Was it their fault, Paulina, that they of whom you speak thus died?'

'Not always their fault. Some of them were good endeavouring people. I am not endeavouring, nor actively good, yet God has caused me to grow in sun, due moisture, and safe protection, sheltered, fostered, taught, by my dear father; and now - now - another comes. Graham loves me.'

For some minutes we both paused on this climax.

'Does your father know?' I inquired, in a low voice.

'Graham spoke with deep respect of papa, but implied that he dared not approach that quarter as yet; he must first prove his worth: he added that he must have some light respecting myself and my own feelings ere he ventured to risk a step in the matter elsewhere.'

'How did you reply?'

'I replied briefly, but I did not repulse him. Yet I almost trembled for fear of making the answer too cordial: Graham's tastes are so fastidious. I wrote it three times - chastening and subduing the phrases at every rescript; at last, having confected it till it seemed to me to resemble a morsel of ice flavoured with ever so slight a zest of fruit or sugar, I ventured to seal and despatch it.'

'Excellent, Paulina! Your instinct is fine; you understand Dr. Bretton.'

'But how must I manage about papa? There I am still in pain.'

'Do not manage at all. Wait now. Only maintain no further correspondence till your father knows all, and gives his sanction.'

'Will he ever give it?'

‘Time will show. Wait.’

‘Dr. Bretton wrote one other letter, deeply grateful for my calm, brief note; but I anticipated your advice, by saying, that while my sentiments continued the same, I could not, without my fathers knowledge, write again.’

‘You acted as you ought to have done; so Dr. Bretton will feel: it will increase his pride in you, his love for you, if either be capable of increase. Paulina, that gentle hoar-frost of yours, surrounding so much pure, fine flame, is a priceless privilege of nature.’

‘You see I feel Graham's disposition,’ said she. ‘I feel that no delicacy can be too exquisite for his treatment.’

‘It is perfectly proved that you comprehend him, and then - whatever Dr. Bretton's disposition, were he one who expected to be more nearly met - you would still act truthfully, openly, tenderly, with your father.’

‘Lucy, I trust I shall thus act always. Oh, it will be pain to wake papa from his dream, and tell him I am no more a little girl!’

‘Be in no hurry to do so, Paulina. Leave the revelation to Time and your kind Fate. I also have noticed the gentleness of her cares for you: doubt not she will benignantly order the circumstances, and fitly appoint the hour. Yes: I have thought over your life just as you have yourself thought it over; I have made comparisons like those to which you adverted. We know not the future, but the past has been propitious.

‘As a child I feared for you; nothing that has life was ever more susceptible than your nature in infancy: under harshness or neglect, neither your outward nor your inward self would have ripened to what they now are. Much pain, much fear, much struggle, would have troubled the very lines of your features, broken their regularity, would have harassed your nerves into the fever of habitual irritation you would have lost in health and cheerfulness, in grace and sweetness. Providence has protected and cultured you, not only for your own sake, but I believe for Graham's. His star, too, was fortunate: to develop fully the best of his nature, a companion like you was needed: there you are, ready. You must be united. I knew it the first day I saw you together at La Terrasse. In all that mutually concerns you and Graham there seems to me promise, plan, harmony. I do not think the sunny youth of either will prove the forerunner of stormy age. I think it is deemed good that you two should live in peace and be happy - not as angels, but as few are happy amongst mortals. Some lives *are* thus blessed: it is God's will: it is the attesting trace and lingering evidence of Eden. Other lives run from the first another course. Other travellers

encounter weather fitful and gusty, wild and variable - breast adverse winds, are belated and overtaken by the early closing winter night. Neither can this happen without the sanction of God; and I know that, amidst His boundless works, is somewhere stored the secret of this last fate's justice: I know that His treasures contain the proof as the promise of its mercy.'