

Chapter XXXIV - Malevola

Madame Beck called me on Thursday afternoon, and asked whether I had any occupation to hinder me from going into town and executing some little commissions for her at the shops.

Being disengaged, and placing myself at her service, I was presently furnished with a list of the wools, silks, embroidering thread, etcetera, wanted in the pupils' work, and having equipped myself in a manner suiting the threatening aspect of a cloudy and sultry day, I was just drawing the spring-bolt of the street-door, in act to issue forth, when Madame's voice again summoned me to the *salle-a-manger*.

'Pardon, Meess Luciel!' cried she, in the seeming haste of an impromptu thought, 'I have just recollected one more errand for you, if your good-nature will not deem itself over-burdened?'

Of course I 'confounded myself' in asseverations to the contrary; and Madame, running into the little salon, brought thence a pretty basket, filled with fine hothouse fruit, rosy, perfect, and tempting, reposing amongst the dark green, wax-like leaves, and pale yellow stars of, I know not what, exotic plant.

'There,' she said, 'it is not heavy, and will not shame your neat toilette, as if it were a household, servant-like detail. Do me the favour to leave this little basket at the house of Madame Walravens, with my felicitations on her fete. She lives down in the old town, Numero 3, Rue des Mages. I fear you will find the walk rather long, but you have the whole afternoon before you, and do not hurry; if you are not back in time for dinner, I will order a portion to be saved, or Goton, with whom you are a favourite, will have pleasure in tossing up some trifle, for your especial benefit. You shall not be forgotten, ma bonne Meess. And oh! please!' (calling me back once more) 'be sure to insist on seeing Madame Walravens herself, and giving the basket into her own hands, in order that there may be no mistake, for she is rather a punctilious personage. Adieu! Au revoir!'

And at last I got away. The shop commissions took some time to execute, that choosing and matching of silks and wools being always a tedious business, but at last I got through my list. The patterns for the slippers, the bell-ropes, the cabas were selected - the slides and tassels for the purses chosen - the whole 'tripotage,' in short, was off my mind; nothing but the fruit and the felicitations remained to be attended to.

I rather liked the prospect of a long walk, deep into the old and grim Basse-Ville; and I liked it no worse because the evening sky, over the

city, was settling into a mass of black-blue metal, heated at the rim, and inflaming slowly to a heavy red.

I fear a high wind, because storm demands that exertion of strength and use of action I always yield with pain; but the sullen down-fall, the thick snow-descent, or dark rush of rain, ask only resignation - the quiet abandonment of garments and person to be, drenched. In return, it sweeps a great capital clean before you; it makes you a quiet path through broad, grand streets; it petrifies a living city as if by eastern enchantment; it transforms a Villette into a Tadmor. Let, then, the rains fall, and the floods descend - only I must first get rid of this basket of fruit.

An unknown clock from an unknown tower (Jean Baptiste's voice was now too distant to be audible) was tolling the third quarter past five, when I reached that street and house whereof Madame Beck had given me the address. It was no street at all; it seemed rather to be part of a square: it was quiet, grass grew between the broad grey flags, the houses were large and looked very old - behind them rose the appearance of trees, indicating gardens at the back. Antiquity brooded above this region, business was banished thence. Rich men had once possessed this quarter, and once grandeur had made her seat here. That church, whose dark, half-ruinous turrets overlooked the square, was the venerable and formerly opulent shrine of the Magi. But wealth and greatness had long since stretched their gilded pinions and fled hence, leaving these their ancient nests, perhaps to house Penury for a time, or perhaps to stand cold and empty, mouldering untenanted in the course of winters.

As I crossed this deserted 'place,' on whose pavement drops almost as large as a five-franc piece were now slowly darkening, I saw, in its whole expanse, no symptom or evidence of life, except what was given in the figure of an infirm old priest, who went past, bending and propped on a staff - the type of eld and decay.

He had issued from the very house to which I was directed; and when I paused before the door just closed after him, and rang the bell, he turned to look at me. Nor did he soon avert his gaze; perhaps he thought me, with my basket of summer fruit, and my lack of the dignity age confers, an incongruous figure in such a scene. I know, had a young ruddy-faced bonne opened the door to admit me, I should have thought such a one little in harmony with her dwelling; but, when I found myself confronted by a very old woman, wearing a very antique peasant costume, a cap alike hideous and costly, with long flaps of native lace, a petticoat and jacket of cloth, and sabots more like little boats than shoes, it seemed all right, and soothingly in character.

The expression of her face was not quite so soothing as the cut of her costume; anything more cantankerous I have seldom seen; she would scarcely reply to my inquiry after Madame Walravens; I believe she would have snatched the basket of fruit from my hand, had not the old priest, hobbling up, checked her, and himself lent an ear to the message with which I was charged.

His apparent deafness rendered it a little difficult to make him fully understand that I must see Madame Walravens, and consign the fruit into her own hands. At last, however, he comprehended the fact that such were my orders, and that duty enjoined their literal fulfilment. Addressing the aged bonne, not in French, but in the aboriginal tongue of Labassecour, he persuaded her, at last, to let me cross the inhospitable threshold, and himself escorting me up-stairs, I was ushered into a sort of salon, and there left.

The room was large, and had a fine old ceiling, and almost church-like windows of coloured-glass; but it was desolate, and in the shadow of a coming storm, looked strangely lowering. Within - opened a smaller room; there, however, the blind of the single casement was closed; through the deep gloom few details of furniture were apparent. These few I amused myself by puzzling to make out; and, in particular, I was attracted by the outline of a picture on the wall.

By-and-by the picture seemed to give way: to my bewilderment, it shook, it sunk, it rolled back into nothing; its vanishing left an opening arched, leading into an arched passage, with a mystic winding stair; both passage and stair were of cold stone, uncarpeted and unpainted. Down this donjon stair descended a tap, tap, like a stick; soon there fell on the steps a shadow, and last of all, I was aware of a substance.

Yet, was it actual substance, this appearance approaching me? this obstruction, partially darkening the arch?

It drew near, and I saw it well. I began to comprehend where I was. Well might this old square be named quarter of the Magi - well might the three towers, overlooking it, own for godfathers three mystic sages of a dead and dark art. Hoar enchantment here prevailed; a spell had opened for me elf-land - that cell-like room, that vanishing picture, that arch and passage, and stair of stone, were all parts of a fairy tale. Distincter even than these scenic details stood the chief figure - Cunegonde, the sorceress! Malevola, the evil fairy. How was she?

She might be three feet high, but she had no shape; her skinny hands rested upon each other, and pressed the gold knob of a wand-like ivory staff. Her face was large, set, not upon her shoulders, but before her breast; she seemed to have no neck; I should have said there were

a hundred years in her features, and more perhaps in her eyes - her malign, unfriendly eyes, with thick grey brows above, and livid lids all round. How severely they viewed me, with a sort of dull displeasure!

This being wore a gown of brocade, dyed bright blue, full-tinted as the gentianella flower, and covered with satin foliage in a large pattern; over the gown a costly shawl, gorgeously bordered, and so large for her, that its many-coloured fringe swept the floor. But her chief points were her jewels: she had long, clear earrings, blazing with a lustre which could not be borrowed or false; she had rings on her skeleton hands, with thick gold hoops, and stones - purple, green, and blood-red. Hunchbacked, dwarfish, and doting, she was adorned like a barbarian queen.

'Que me voulez-vous?' said she, hoarsely, with the voice rather of male than of female old age; and, indeed, a silver beard bristled her chin.

I delivered my basket and my message.

'Is that all?' she demanded.

'It is all,' said I.

'Truly, it was well worth while,' she answered. 'Return to Madame Beck, and tell her I can buy fruit when I want it, et quant a ses felicitations, je m'en moque!' And this courteous dame turned her back.

Just as she turned, a peal of thunder broke, and a flash of lightning blazed broad over salon and boudoir. The tale of magic seemed to proceed with due accompaniment of the elements. The wanderer, decoyed into the enchanted castle, heard rising, outside, the spell-wakened tempest.

What, in all this, was I to think of Madame Beck? She owned strange acquaintance; she offered messages and gifts at an unique shrine, and inauspicious seemed the bearing of the uncouth thing she worshipped. There went that sullen Sidonia, tottering and trembling like palsy incarnate, tapping her ivory staff on the mosaic parquet, and muttering venomously as she vanished.

Down washed the rain, deep lowered the welkin; the clouds, ruddy a while ago, had now, through all their blackness, turned deadly pale, as if in terror. Notwithstanding my late boast about not fearing a shower, I hardly liked to go out under this waterspout. Then the gleams of lightning were very fierce, the thunder crashed very near; this storm had gathered immediately above Villette; it seemed to have burst at the zenith; it rushed down prone; the forked, slant bolts

pierced athwart vertical torrents; red zigzags interlaced a descent blanched as white metal: and all broke from a sky heavily black in its swollen abundance.

Leaving Madame Walravens' inhospitable salon, I betook myself to her cold staircase; there was a seat on the landing - there I waited. Somebody came gliding along the gallery just above; it was the old priest.

'Indeed Mademoiselle shall not sit there,' said he. 'It would displease our benefactor if he knew a stranger was so treated in this house.'

And he begged me so earnestly to return to the salon, that, without discourtesy, I could not but comply. The smaller room was better furnished and more habitable than the larger; thither he introduced me. Partially withdrawing the blind, he disclosed what seemed more like an oratory than a boudoir, a very solemn little chamber, looking as if it were a place rather dedicated to relics and remembrance, than designed for present use and comfort.

The good father sat down, as if to keep me company; but instead of conversing, he took out a book, fastened on the page his eyes, and employed his lips in whispering - what sounded like a prayer or litany. A yellow electric light from the sky gilded his bald head; his figure remained in shade - deep and purple; he sat still as sculpture; he seemed to forget me for his prayers; he only looked up when a fiercer bolt, or a harsher, closer rattle told of nearing danger; even then, it was not in fear, but in seeming awe, he raised his eyes. I too was awe-struck; being, however, under no pressure of slavish terror, my thoughts and observations were free.

To speak truth, I was beginning to fancy that the old priest resembled that Pere Silas, before whom I had kneeled in the church of the Beguinage. The idea was vague, for I had seen my confessor only in dusk and in profile, yet still I seemed to trace a likeness: I thought also I recognized the voice. While I watched him, he betrayed, by one lifted look, that he felt my scrutiny; I turned to note the room; that too had its half mystic interest.

Beside a cross of curiously carved old ivory, yellow with time, and sloped above a dark-red *prie-dieu*, furnished duly, with rich missal and ebon rosary - hung the picture whose dim outline had drawn my eyes before - the picture which moved, fell away with the wall and let in phantoms. Imperfectly seen, I had taken it for a Madonna; revealed by clearer light, it proved to be a woman's portrait in a nun's dress. The face, though not beautiful, was pleasing; pale, young, and shaded with the dejection of grief or ill health. I say again it was not beautiful; it was not even intellectual; its very amiability was the amiability of a

weak frame, inactive passions, acquiescent habits: yet I looked long at that picture, and could not choose but look.

The old priest, who at first had seemed to me so deaf and infirm, must yet have retained his faculties in tolerable preservation; absorbed in his book as he appeared, without once lifting his head, or, as far as I knew, turning his eyes, he perceived the point towards which my attention was drawn, and, in a slow distinct voice, dropped, concerning it, these four observations: -

‘She was much beloved.

‘She gave herself to God.

‘She died young.

‘She is still remembered, still wept.’

‘By that aged lady, Madame Walravens?’ I inquired, fancying that I had discovered in the incurable grief of bereavement, a key to that same aged lady's desperate ill-humour.

The father shook his head with half a smile.

‘No, no,’ said he; ‘a grand-dame's affection for her children's children may be great, and her sorrow for their loss, lively; but it is only the affianced lover, to whom Fate, Faith, and Death have trebly denied the bliss of union, who mourns what he has lost, as Justine Marie is still mourned.’

I thought the father rather wished to be questioned, and therefore I inquired who had lost and who still mourned ‘Justine Marie.’ I got, in reply, quite a little romantic narrative, told not unimpressively, with the accompaniment of the now subsiding storm. I am bound to say it might have been made much more truly impressive, if there had been less French, Rousseau-like sentimentalizing and wire-drawing; and rather more healthful carelessness of effect. But the worthy father was obviously a Frenchman born and bred (I became more and more persuaded of his resemblance to my confessor) - he was a true son of Rome; when he did lift his eyes, he looked at me out of their corners, with more and sharper subtlety than, one would have thought, could survive the wear and tear of seventy years. Yet, I believe, he was a good old man.

The hero of his tale was some former pupil of his, whom he now called his benefactor, and who, it appears, had loved this pale Justine Marie, the daughter of rich parents, at a time when his own worldly prospects were such as to justify his aspiring to a well-dowered hand.

The pupil's father - once a rich banker - had failed, died, and left behind him only debts and destitution. The son was then forbidden to think of Marie; especially that old witch of a grand-dame I had seen, Madame Walravens, opposed the match with all the violence of a temper which deformity made sometimes demoniac. The mild Marie had neither the treachery to be false, nor the force to be quite staunch to her lover; she gave up her first suitor, but, refusing to accept a second with a heavier purse, withdrew to a convent, and there died in her noviciate.

Lasting anguish, it seems, had taken possession of the faithful heart which worshipped her, and the truth of that love and grief had been shown in a manner which touched even me, as I listened.

Some years after Justine Marie's death, ruin had come on her house too: her father, by nominal calling a jeweller, but who also dealt a good deal on the Bourse, had been concerned in some financial transactions which entailed exposure and ruinous fines. He died of grief for the loss, and shame for the infamy. His old hunchbacked mother and his bereaved wife were left penniless, and might have died too of want; but their lost daughter's once-despised, yet most true-hearted suitor, hearing of the condition of these ladies, came with singular devotedness to the rescue. He took on their insolent pride the revenge of the purest charity - housing, caring for, befriending them, so as no son could have done it more tenderly and efficiently. The mother - on the whole a good woman - died blessing him; the strange, godless, loveless, misanthrope grandmother lived still, entirely supported by this self-sacrificing man. Her, who had been the bane of his life, blighting his hope, and awarding him, for love and domestic happiness, long mourning and cheerless solitude, he treated with the respect a good son might offer a kind mother. He had brought her to this house, 'and,' continued the priest, while genuine tears rose to his eyes, 'here, too, he shelters me, his old tutor, and Agnes, a superannuated servant of his father's family. To our sustenance, and to other charities, I know he devotes three-parts of his income, keeping only the fourth to provide himself with bread and the most modest accommodations. By this arrangement he has rendered it impossible to himself ever to marry: he has given himself to God and to his angel-bride as much as if he were a priest, like me.'

The father had wiped away his tears before he uttered these last words, and in pronouncing them, he for one instant raised his eyes to mine. I caught this glance, despite its veiled character; the momentary gleam shot a meaning which struck me.

These Romanists are strange beings. Such a one among them - whom you know no more than the last Inca of Peru, or the first Emperor of China - knows you and all your concerns; and has his reasons for

saying to you so and so, when you simply thought the communication sprang impromptu from the instant's impulse: his plan in bringing it about that you shall come on such a day, to such a place, under such and such circumstances, when the whole arrangement seems to your crude apprehension the ordinance of chance, or the sequel of exigency. Madame Beck's suddenly-recollected message and present, my artless embassy to the Place of the Magi, the old priest accidentally descending the steps and crossing the square, his interposition on my behalf with the bonne who would have sent me away, his reappearance on the staircase, my introduction to this room, the portrait, the narrative so affably volunteered - all these little incidents, taken as they fell out, seemed each independent of its successor; a handful of loose beads: but threaded through by that quick-shot and crafty glance of a Jesuit-eye, they dropped pendent in a long string, like that rosary on the prie-dieu. Where lay the link of junction, where the little clasp of this monastic necklace? I saw or felt union, but could not yet find the spot, or detect the means of connection.

Perhaps the musing-fit into which I had by this time fallen, appeared somewhat suspicious in its abstraction; he gently interrupted: 'Mademoiselle,' said he, 'I trust you have not far to go through these inundated streets?'

'More than half a league.'

'You live - - ?'

'In the Rue Fossette.'

'Not' (with animation), 'not at the pensionnat of Madame Beck?'

'The same.'

'Donc' (clapping his hands), 'donc, vous devez connaitre mon noble eleve, mon Paul?'

'Monsieur Paul Emanuel, Professor of Literature?'

'He and none other.'

A brief silence fell. The spring of junction seemed suddenly to have become palpable; I felt it yield to pressure.

'Was it of M. Paul you have been speaking?' I presently inquired. 'Was he your pupil and the benefactor of Madame Walravens?'

'Yes, and of Agnes, the old servant: and moreover, (with a certain emphasis), he was and *is* the lover, true, constant and eternal, of that saint in heaven - Justine Marie.'

'And who, father, are *you*?' I continued; and though I accentuated the question, its utterance was well nigh superfluous; I was ere this quite prepared for the answer which actually came.

'I, daughter, am Pere Silas; that unworthy son of Holy Church whom you once honoured with a noble and touching confidence, showing me the core of a heart, and the inner shrine of a mind whereof, in solemn truth, I coveted the direction, in behalf of the only true faith. Nor have I for a day lost sight of you, nor for an hour failed to take in you a rooted interest. Passed under the discipline of Rome, moulded by her high training, inoculated with her salutary doctrines, inspired by the zeal she alone gives - I realize what then might be your spiritual rank, your practical value; and I envy Heresy her prey.'

This struck me as a special state of things - I half-realized myself in that condition also; passed under discipline, moulded, trained, inoculated, and so on. 'Not so,' thought I, but I restrained deprecation, and sat quietly enough.

'I suppose M. Paul does not live here?' I resumed, pursuing a theme which I thought more to the purpose than any wild renegade dreams.

'No; he only comes occasionally to worship his beloved saint, to make his confession to me, and to pay his respects to her he calls his mother. His own lodging consists but of two rooms: he has no servant, and yet he will not suffer Madame Walravens to dispose of those splendid jewels with which you see her adorned, and in which she takes a puerile pride as the ornaments of her youth, and the last relics of her son the jeweller's wealth.'

'How often,' murmured I to myself, 'has this man, this M. Emanuel, seemed to me to lack magnanimity in trifles, yet how great he is in great things!'

I own I did not reckon amongst the proofs of his greatness, either the act of confession, or the saint-worship.

'How long is it since that lady died?' I inquired, looking at Justine Marie.

'Twenty years. She was somewhat older than M. Emanuel; he was then very young, for he is not much beyond forty.'

'Does he yet weep her?'

'His heart will weep her always: the essence of Emanuel's nature is - constancy.'

This was said with marked emphasis.

And now the sun broke out pallid and waterish; the rain yet fell, but there was no more tempest: that hot firmament had cloven and poured out its lightnings. A longer delay would scarce leave daylight for my return, so I rose, thanked the father for his hospitality and his tale, was benignantly answered by a 'pax vobiscum,' which I made kindly welcome, because it seemed uttered with a true benevolence; but I liked less the mystic phrase accompanying it.

'Daughter, you *shall* be what you *shall* be!' an oracle that made me shrug my shoulders as soon as I had got outside the door. Few of us know what we are to come to certainly, but for all that had happened yet, I had good hopes of living and dying a sober-minded Protestant: there was a hollowness within, and a flourish around 'Holy Church' which tempted me but moderately. I went on my way pondering many things. Whatever Romanism may be, there are good Romanists: this man, Emanuel, seemed of the best; touched with superstition, influenced by priestcraft, yet wondrous for fond faith, for pious devotion, for sacrifice of self, for charity unbounded. It remained to see how Rome, by her agents, handled such qualities; whether she cherished them for their own sake and for God's, or put them out to usury and made booty of the interest.

By the time I reached home, it was sundown. Goton had kindly saved me a portion of dinner, which indeed I needed. She called me into the little cabinet to partake of it, and there Madame Beck soon made her appearance, bringing me a glass of wine.

'Well,' began she, chuckling, 'and what sort of a reception did Madame Walravens give you? Elle est drole, n'est-ce pas?'

I told her what had passed, delivering verbatim the courteous message with which I had been charged.

'Oh la singuliere petite bossue!' laughed she. 'Et figurez-vous qu'elle me deteste, parcequ'elle me croit amoureuse de mon cousin Paul; ce petit devot qui n'ose pas bouger, a moins que son confesseur ne lui donne la permission! Au reste' (she went on), 'if he wanted to marry ever so much - soit moi, soit une autre - he could not do it; he has too large a family already on his hands: Mere Walravens, Pere Silas, Dame Agnes, and a whole troop of nameless paupers. There never was a man like him for laying on himself burdens greater than he can bear, voluntarily incurring needless responsibilities. Besides, he harbours a romantic idea about some pale-faced Marie Justine - personnage

assez niaise a ce que je pense' (such was Madame's irreverent remark), 'who has been an angel in heaven, or elsewhere, this score of years, and to whom he means to go, free from all earthly ties, pure comme un lis, a ce qu'il dit. Oh, you would laugh could you but know half M. Emanuel's crotchets and eccentricities! But I hinder you from taking refreshment, ma bonne Meess, which you must need; eat your supper, drink your wine, oubliez les anges, les bossues, et surtout, les Professeurs - et bon soir!'