Chapter XXXV - Fraternity

'Oubliez les Professeurs.' So said Madame Beck. Madame Beck was a wise woman, but she should not have uttered those words. To do so was a mistake. That night she should have left me calm - not excited, indifferent, not interested, isolated in my own estimation and that of others - not connected, even in idea, with this second person whom I was to forget.

Forget him? Ah! they took a sage plan to make me forget him - the wiseheads! They showed me how good he was; they made of my dear little man a stainless little hero. And then they had prated about his manner of loving. What means had I, before this day, of being certain whether he could love at all or not?

I had known him jealous, suspicious; I had seen about him certain tendernesses, fitfulnesses - a softness which came like a warm air, and a ruth which passed like early dew, dried in the heat of his irritabilities: *this* was all I had seen. And they, Pere Silas and Modeste Maria Beck (that these two wrought in concert I could not doubt) opened up the adytum of his heart - showed me one grand love, the child of this southern nature's youth, born so strong and perfect, that it had laughed at Death himself, despised his mean rape of matter, clung to immortal spirit, and in victory and faith, had watched beside a tomb twenty years.

This had been done - not idly: this was not a mere hollow indulgence of sentiment; he had proven his fidelity by the consecration of his best energies to an unselfish purpose, and attested it by limitless personal sacrifices: for those once dear to her he prized - he had laid down vengeance, and taken up a cross.

Now, as for Justine Marie, I knew what she was as well as if I had seen her. I knew she was well enough; there were girls like her in Madame Beck's school - phlegmatics - pale, slow, inert, but kind-natured, neutral of evil, undistinguished for good.

If she wore angels' wings, I knew whose poet-fancy conferred them. If her forehead shone luminous with the reflex of a halo, I knew in the fire of whose irids that circlet of holy flame had generation.

Was I, then, to be frightened by Justine Marie? Was the picture of a pale dead nun to rise, an eternal barrier? And what of the charities which absorbed his worldly goods? What of his heart sworn to virginity?

Madame Beck - Pere Silas - you should not have suggested these questions. They were at once the deepest puzzle, the strongest

obstruction, and the keenest stimulus, I had ever felt. For a week of nights and days I fell asleep - I dreamt, and I woke upon these two questions. In the whole world there was no answer to them, except where one dark little man stood, sat, walked, lectured, under the head-piece of a bandit bonnet-grec, and within the girth of a sorry paletot, much be-inked, and no little adust.

After that visit to the Rue des Mages, I *did* want to see him again. I felt as if - knowing what I now knew - his countenance would offer a page more lucid, more interesting than ever; I felt a longing to trace in it the imprint of that primitive devotedness, the signs of that half-knightly, half-saintly chivalry which the priest's narrative imputed to his nature. He had become my Christian hero: under that character I wanted to view him.

Nor was opportunity slow to favour; my new impressions underwent her test the next day. Yes: I was granted an interview with my 'Christian hero' - an interview not very heroic, or sentimental, or biblical, but lively enough in its way.

About three o'clock of the afternoon, the peace of the first classe - safely established, as it seemed, under the serene sway of Madame Beck, who, *in propria persona* was giving one of her orderly and useful lessons - this peace, I say, suffered a sudden fracture by the wild inburst of a paletot.

Nobody at the moment was quieter than myself. Eased of responsibility by Madame Beck's presence, soothed by her uniform tones, pleased and edified with her clear exposition of the subject in hand (for she taught well), I sat bent over my desk, drawing - that is, copying an elaborate line engraving, tediously working up my copy to the finish of the original, for that was my practical notion of art; and, strange to say, I took extreme pleasure in the labour, and could even produce curiously finical Chinese facsimiles of steel or mezzotint plates - things about as valuable as so many achievements in worsted-work, but I thought pretty well of them in those days.

What was the matter? My drawing, my pencils, my precious copy, gathered into one crushed-up handful, perished from before my sight; I myself appeared to be shaken or emptied out of my chair, as a solitary and withered nutmeg might be emptied out of a spice-box by an excited cook. That chair and my desk, seized by the wild paletot, one under each sleeve, were borne afar; in a second, I followed the furniture; in two minutes they and I were fixed in the centre of the grand salle - a vast adjoining room, seldom used save for dancing and choral singing-lessons - fixed with an emphasis which seemed to prohibit the remotest hope of our ever being permitted to stir thence again.

Having partially collected my scared wits, I found myself in the presence of two men, gentlemen, I suppose I should say - one dark, the other light - one having a stiff, half-military air, and wearing a braided surtout; the other partaking, in garb and bearing, more of the careless aspect of the student or artist class: both flourishing in full magnificence of moustaches, whiskers, and imperial. M. Emanuel stood a little apart from these; his countenance and eyes expressed strong choler; he held forth his hand with his tribune gesture.

'Mademoiselle,' said he, 'your business is to prove to these gentlemen that I am no liar. You will answer, to the best of your ability, such questions as they shall put. You will also write on such theme as they shall select. In their eyes, it appears, I hold the position of an unprincipled impostor. I write essays; and, with deliberate forgery, sign to them my pupils' names, and boast of them as their work. You will disprove this charge.'

Grand ciel! Here was the show-trial, so long evaded, come on me like a thunder-clap. These two fine, braided, mustachioed, sneering personages, were none other than dandy professors of the college - Messieurs Boissec and Rochemorte - a pair of cold-blooded fops and pedants, sceptics, and scoffers. It seems that M. Paul had been rashly exhibiting something I had written - something, he had never once praised, or even mentioned, in my hearing, and which I deemed forgotten. The essay was not remarkable at all; it only *seemed* remarkable, compared with the average productions of foreign school-girls; in an English establishment it would have passed scarce noticed. Messieurs Boissec and Rochemorte had thought proper to question its genuineness, and insinuate a cheat; I was now to bear my testimony to the truth, and to be put to the torture of their examination.

A memorable scene ensued.

They began with classics. A dead blank. They went on to French history. I hardly knew Merovee from Pharamond. They tried me in various 'ologies, and still only got a shake of the head, and an unchanging 'Je n'en sais rien.'

After an expressive pause, they proceeded to matters of general information, broaching one or two subjects which I knew pretty well, and on which I had often reflected. M. Emanuel, who had hitherto stood looking on, dark as the winter-solstice, brightened up somewhat; he thought I should now show myself at least no fool.

He learned his error. Though answers to the questions surged up fast, my mind filling like a rising well, ideas were there, but not words. I

either *could* not, or *would* not speak - I am not sure which: partly, I think, my nerves had got wrong, and partly my humour was crossed.

I heard one of my examiners - he of the braided surtout - whisper to his co-professor, 'Est-elle donc idiote?'

'Yes,' I thought, 'an idiot she is, and always will be, for such as you.'

But I suffered - suffered cruelly; I saw the damps gather on M. Paul's brow, and his eye spoke a passionate yet sad reproach. He would not believe in my total lack of popular cleverness; he thought I *could* be prompt if I *would*.

At last, to relieve him, the professors, and myself, I stammered out:

'Gentlemen, you had better let me go; you will get no good of me; as you say, I am an idiot.'

I wish I could have spoken with calm and dignity, or I wish my sense had sufficed to make me hold my tongue; that traitor tongue tripped, faltered. Beholding the judges cast on M. Emanuel a hard look of triumph, and hearing the distressed tremor of my own voice, out I burst in a fit of choking tears. The emotion was far more of anger than grief; had I been a man and strong, I could have challenged that pair on the spot - but it *was* emotion, and I would rather have been scourged than betrayed it.

The incapables! Could they not see at once the crude hand of a novice in that composition they called a forgery? The subject was classical. When M. Paul dictated the trait on which the essay was to turn, I heard it for the first time; the matter was new to me, and I had no material for its treatment. But I got books, read up the facts, laboriously constructed a skeleton out of the dry bones of the real, and then clothed them, and tried to breathe into them life, and in this last aim I had pleasure. With me it was a difficult and anxious time till my facts were found, selected, and properly jointed; nor could I rest from research and effort till I was satisfied of correct anatomy; the strength of my inward repugnance to the idea of flaw or falsity sometimes enabled me to shun egregious blunders; but the knowledge was not there in my head, ready and mellow; it had not been sown in Spring, grown in Summer, harvested in Autumn, and garnered through Winter; whatever I wanted I must go out and gather fresh; glean of wild herbs my lapful, and shred them green into the pot. Messieurs Boissec and Rochemorte did not perceive this. They mistook my work for the work of a ripe scholar.

They would not yet let me go: I must sit down and write before them. As I dipped my pen in the ink with a shaking hand, and surveyed the

white paper with eyes half-blinded and overflowing, one of my judges began mincingly to apologize for the pain he caused.

'Nous agissons dans l'interet de la verite. Nous ne voulons pas vous blesser,' said he.

Scorn gave me nerve. I only answered, -

'Dictate, Monsieur.'

Rochemorte named this theme: 'Human Justice.'

Human Justice! What was I to make of it? Blank, cold abstraction, unsuggestive to me of one inspiring idea; and there stood M. Emanuel, sad as Saul, and stern as Joab, and there triumphed his accusers.

At these two I looked. I was gathering my courage to tell them that I would neither write nor speak another word for their satisfaction, that their theme did not suit, nor their presence inspire me, and that, notwithstanding, whoever threw the shadow of a doubt on M. Emanuel's honour, outraged that truth of which they had announced themselves the - champions: I *meant* to utter all this, I say, when suddenly, a light darted on memory.

Those two faces looking out of the forest of long hair, moustache, and whisker - those two cold yet bold, trustless yet presumptuous visages - were the same faces, the very same that, projected in full gaslight from behind the pillars of a portico, had half frightened me to death on the night of my desolate arrival in Villette. These, I felt morally certain, were the very heroes who had driven a friendless foreigner beyond her reckoning and her strength, chased her breathless over a whole quarter of the town.

'Pious mentors!' thought I. 'Pure guides for youth! If `Human Justice' were what she ought to be, you two would scarce hold your present post, or enjoy your present credit.'

An idea once seized, I fell to work. 'Human Justice' rushed before me in novel guise, a red, random beldame, with arms akimbo. I saw her in her house, the den of confusion: servants called to her for orders or help which she did not give; beggars stood at her door waiting and starving unnoticed; a swarm of children, sick and quarrelsome, crawled round her feet, and yelled in her ears appeals for notice, sympathy, cure, redress. The honest woman cared for none of these things. She had a warm seat of her own by the fire, she had her own solace in a short black pipe, and a bottle of Mrs Sweeny's soothing syrup; she smoked and she sipped, and she enjoyed her paradise; and whenever a cry of the suffering souls about her 'pierced her ears too

keenly - my jolly dame seized the poker or the hearth-brush: if the offender was weak, wronged, and sickly, she effectually settled him: if he was strong, lively, and violent, she only menaced, then plunged her hand in her deep pouch, and flung a liberal shower of sugar-plums.

Such was the sketch of 'Human Justice,' scratched hurriedly on paper, and placed at the service of Messrs. Boissec and Rochemorte. M. Emanuel read it over my shoulder. Waiting no comment, I curtsied to the trio, and withdrew.

After school that day, M. Paul and I again met. Of course the meeting did not at first run smooth; there was a crow to pluck with him; that forced examination could not be immediately digested. A crabbed dialogue terminated in my being called 'une petite moqueuse et sans-coeur,' and in Monsieur's temporary departure.

Not wishing him to go quite away, only desiring he should feel that such a transport as he had that day given way to, could not be indulged with perfect impunity, I was not sorry to see him, soon after, gardening in the berceau. He approached the glass door; I drew near also. We spoke of some flowers growing round it. By-and-by Monsieur laid down his spade; by-and-by he recommenced conversation, passed to other subjects, and at last touched a point of interest.

Conscious that his proceeding of that day was specially open to a charge of extravagance, M. Paul half apologized; he half regretted, too, the fitfulness of his moods at all times, yet he hinted that some allowance ought to be made for him. 'But,' said he, 'I can hardly expect it at your hands, Miss Lucy; you know neither me, nor my position, nor my history.'

His history. I took up the word at once; I pursued the idea.

'No, Monsieur,' I rejoined. 'Of course, as you say, I know neither your history, nor your position, nor your sacrifices, nor any of your sorrows, or trials, or affections, or fidelities. Oh, no! I know nothing about you; you are for me altogether a stranger.'

'Hein?' he murmured, arching his brows in surprise.

'You know, Monsieur, I only see you in classe - stern, dogmatic, hasty, imperious. I only hear of you in town as active and wilful, quick to originate, hasty to lead, but slow to persuade, and hard to bend. A man like you, without ties, can have no attachments; without dependants, no duties. All we, with whom you come in contact, are machines, which you thrust here and there, inconsiderate of their feelings. You seek your recreations in public, by the light of the evening chandelier: this school and yonder college are your

workshops, where you fabricate the ware called pupils. I don't so much as know where you live; it is natural to take it for granted that you have no home, and need none.'

'I am judged,' said he. 'Your opinion of me is just what I thought it was. For you I am neither a man nor a Christian. You see me void of affection and religion, unattached by friend or family, unpiloted by principle or faith. It is well, Mademoiselle; such is our reward in this life.'

'You are a philosopher, Monsieur; a cynic philosopher' (and I looked at his paletot, of which he straightway brushed the dim sleeve with his hand), 'despising the foibles of humanity - above its luxuries - independent of its comforts.'

'Et vous, Mademoiselle? vous etes proprette et douillette, et affreusement insensible, par-dessus le marche.'

'But, in short, Monsieur, now I think of it, you *must* live somewhere? Do tell me where; and what establishment of servants do you keep?'

With a fearful projection of the under-lip, implying an impetus of scorn the most decided, he broke out -

'Je vis dans un trou! I inhabit a den, Miss - a cavern, where you would not put your dainty nose. Once, with base shame of speaking the whole truth, I talked about my 'study' in that college: know now that this 'study' is my whole abode; my chamber is there and my drawing-room. As for my 'establishment of servants'' (mimicking my voice) 'they number ten; les voila.'

And he grimly spread, close under my eyes, his ten fingers.

'I black my boots,' pursued he savagely. 'I brush my paletot.'

'No, Monsieur, it is too plain; you never do that,' was my parenthesis.

'Je fais mon lit et mon menage; I seek my dinner in a restaurant; my supper takes care, of itself; I pass days laborious and loveless; nights long and lonely; I am ferocious, and bearded and monkish; and nothing now living in this world loves me, except some old hearts worn like my own, and some few beings, impoverished, suffering, poor in purse and in spirit, whom the kingdoms of this world own not, but to whom a will and testament not to be disputed has bequeathed the kingdom of heaven.'

'Ah, Monsieur; but I know!'

‘What do you know? many things, I verily believe; yet not me, Lucy!’

‘I know that you have a pleasant old house in a pleasant old square of the Basse-Ville - why don't you go and live there?’

‘Hein?’ muttered he again.

‘I liked it much, Monsieur; with the steps ascending to the door, the grey flags in front, the nodding trees behind - real trees, not shrubs - trees dark, high, and of old growth. And the boudoir-oratoire - you should make that room your study; it is so quiet and solemn.’

He eyed me closely; he half-smiled, half-coloured. ‘Where did you pick up all that? Who told you?’ he asked.

‘Nobody told me. Did I dream it, Monsieur, do you think?’

‘Can I enter into your visions? Can I guess a woman's waking thoughts, much less her sleeping fantasies?’

‘If I dreamt it, I saw in my dream human beings as well as a house. I saw a priest, old, bent, and grey, and a domestic - old, too, and picturesque; and a lady, splendid but strange; her head would scarce reach to my elbow - her magnificence might ransom a duke. She wore a gown bright as lapis-lazuli - a shawl worth a thousand francs: she was decked with ornaments so brilliant, I never saw any with such a beautiful sparkle; but her figure looked as if it had been broken in two and bent double; she seemed also to have outlived the common years of humanity, and to have attained those which are only labour and sorrow. She was become morose - almost malevolent; yet *somebody*, it appears, cared for her in her infirmities - somebody forgave her trespasses, hoping to have his trespasses forgiven. They lived together, these three people - the mistress, the chaplain, the servant - all old, all feeble, all sheltered under one kind wing.’

He covered with his hand the upper part of his face, but did not conceal his mouth, where I saw hovering an expression I liked.

‘I see you have entered into my secrets,’ said he, ‘but how was it done?’

So I told him how - the commission on which I had been sent, the storm which had detained me, the abruptness of the lady, the kindness of the priest.

‘As I sat waiting for the rain to cease, Pere Silas whiled away the time with a story,’ I said.

‘A story! What story? Pere Silas is no romancist.’

‘Shall I tell Monsieur the tale?’

‘Yes: begin at the beginning. Let me hear some of Miss Lucy's French - her best or her worst - I don't much care which: let us have a good poignee of barbarisms, and a bounteous dose of the insular accent.’

‘Monsieur is not going to be gratified by a tale of ambitious proportions, and the spectacle of the narrator sticking fast in the midst. But I will tell him the title - the 'Priest's Pupil.'‘

‘Bah!’ said he, the swarthy flush again dyeing his dark cheek. ‘The good old father could not have chosen a worse subject; it is his weak point. But what of the 'Priest's Pupil?'‘

‘Oh! many things.’

You may as well define *what* things. I mean to know.’

‘There was the pupil's youth, the pupil's manhood; - his avarice, his ingratitude, his implacability, his inconstancy. Such a bad pupil, Monsieur! - so thankless, cold-hearted, unchivalrous, unforgiving!

‘Et puis?’ said he, taking a cigar.

‘Et puis,’ I pursued, ‘he underwent calamities which one did not pity - bore them in a spirit one did not admire - endured wrongs for which one felt no sympathy; finally took the unchristian revenge of heaping coals of fire on his adversary's head.’

‘You have not told me all,’ said he.

‘Nearly all, I think: I have indicated the heads of Pere Silas's chapters.’

‘You have forgotten one-that which touched on the pupil's lack of affection - on his hard, cold, monkish heart.’

‘True; I remember now. Pere Silas did say that his vocation was almost that of a priest - that his life was considered consecrated.’

‘By what bonds or duties?’

‘By the ties of the past and the charities of the present.’

‘You have, then, the whole situation?’

‘I have now told Monsieur all that was told me.’

Some meditative minutes passed.

'Now, Mademoiselle Lucy, look at me, and with that truth which I believe you never knowingly violate, answer me one question. Raise your eyes; rest them on mine; have no hesitation; fear not to trust me - I am a man to be trusted.'

I raised my eyes.

'Knowing me thoroughly now - all my antecedents, all my responsibilities - having long known my faults, can you and I still be friends?'

'If Monsieur wants a friend in me, I shall be glad to have a friend in him.'

'But a close friend I mean - intimate and real - kindred in all but blood. Will Miss Lucy be the sister of a very poor, fettered, burdened, encumbered man?'

I could not answer him in words, yet I suppose I *did* answer him; he took my hand, which found comfort, in the shelter of his. *His* friendship was not a doubtful, wavering benefit - a cold, distant hope - a sentiment so brittle as not to bear the weight of a finger: I at once felt (or *thought* I felt) its support like that of some rock.

'When I talk of friendship, I mean *true* friendship,' he repeated emphatically; and I could hardly believe that words so earnest had blessed my ear; I hardly could credit the reality of that kind, anxious look he gave. If he *really* wished for my confidence and regard, and *really* would give me his - why, it seemed to me that life could offer nothing more or better. In that case, I was become strong and rich: in a moment I was made substantially happy. To ascertain the fact, to fix and seal it, I asked -

'Is Monsieur quite serious? Does he really think he needs me, and can take an interest in me as a sister?'

'Surely, surely,' said he; 'a lonely man like me, who has no sister, must be but too glad to find in some woman's heart a sister's pure affection.'

'And dare I rely on Monsieur's regard? Dare I speak to him when I am so inclined?'

'My little sister must make her own experiments,' said he; 'I will give no promises. She must tease and try her wayward brother till she has

drilled him into what she wishes. After all, he is no inductile material in some hands.'

While he spoke, the tone of his voice, the light of his now affectionate eye, gave me such a pleasure as, certainly, I had never felt. I envied no girl her lover, no bride her bridegroom, no wife her husband; I was content with this my voluntary, self-offering friend. If he would but prove reliable, and he *looked* reliable, what, beyond his friendship, could I ever covet? But, if all melted like a dream, as once before had happened - ?

'Qu'est-ce donc? What is it?' said he, as this thought threw its weight on my heart, its shadow on my countenance. I told him; and after a moment's pause, and a thoughtful smile, he showed me how an equal fear - lest I should weary of him, a man of moods so difficult and fitful - had haunted his mind for more than one day, or one month.

On hearing this, a quiet courage cheered me. I ventured a word of re-assurance. That word was not only tolerated; its repetition was courted. I grew quite happy - strangely happy - in making him secure, content, tranquil. Yesterday, I could not have believed that earth held, or life afforded, moments like the few I was now passing. Countless times it had been my lot to watch apprehended sorrow close darkly in; but to see unhoped-for happiness take form, find place, and grow more real as the seconds sped, was indeed a new experience.

'Lucy,' said M. Paul, speaking low, and still holding my hand, 'did you see a picture in the boudoir of the old house?'

'I did; a picture painted on a panel.'

'The portrait of a nun?'

'Yes.'

'You heard her history?'

'Yes.'

'You remember what we saw that night in the berceau?'

'I shall never forget it.'

'You did not connect the two ideas; that would be folly?'

'I thought of the apparition when I saw the portrait,' said I; which was true enough.

'You did not, nor will you fancy,' pursued he, 'that a saint in heaven perturbs herself with rivalries of earth? Protestants are rarely superstitious; these morbid fancies will not beset *you?*'

'I know not what to think of this matter; but I believe a perfectly natural solution of this seeming mystery will one day be arrived at.'

'Doubtless, doubtless. Besides, no good-living woman - much less a pure, happy spirit-would trouble amity like ours n'est-il pas vrai?'

Ere I could answer, Fifine Beck burst in, rosy and abrupt, calling out that I was wanted. Her mother was going into town to call on some English family, who had applied for a prospectus: my services were needed as interpreter. The interruption was not unseasonable: sufficient for the day is always the evil; for this hour, its good sufficed. Yet I should have liked to ask M. Paul whether the 'morbid fancies,' against which he warned me, wrought in his own brain.