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Chapter 28 - The Watchguard

M. Paul Emanuel owned an acute sensitiveness to the annoyance of interruption, from whatsoever cause occurring, during his lessons: to pass through the classe under such circumstances was considered by the teachers and pupils of the school, individually and collectively, to be as much as a woman's or girl's life was worth.

Madame Beck herself, if forced to the enterprise, would "skurry" through, retrenching her skirts, and carefully coasting the formidable estrade, like a ship dreading breakers. As to Rosine, the portress - on whom, every half-hour, devolved the fearful duty of fetching pupils out of the very heart of one or other of the divisions to take their music-lessons in the oratory, the great or little saloon, the salle-à-manger, or some other piano-station - she would, upon her second or third attempt, frequently become almost tongue-tied from excess of consternation - a sentiment inspired by the unspeakable looks levelled at her through a pair of dart-dealing spectacles.

One morning I was sitting in the carré, at work upon a piece of embroidery which one of the pupils had commenced but delayed to finish, and while my fingers wrought at the frame, my ears regaled themselves with listening to the crescendos and cadences of a voice haranguing in the neighbouring classe, in tones that waxed momentarily more unquiet, more ominously varied. There was a good strong partition-wall between me and the gathering storm, as well as a facile means of flight through the glass-door to the court, in case it swept this way; so I am afraid I derived more amusement than alarm from these thickening symptoms. Poor Rosine was not safe: four times that blessed morning had she made the passage of peril; and now, for the fifth time, it became her dangerous duty to snatch, as it were, a brand from the burning - a pupil from under M. Paul's nose.

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!" cried she. "Que vais-je devenir? Monsieur va me tuer, je suis sûre; car il est d'une colère!"

Nerved by the courage of desperation, she opened the door.

"Mademoiselle La Malle au piano!" was her cry.

Ere she could make good her retreat, or quite close the door, this voice uttered itself: -

"Dès ce moment! - la classe est défendue. La première qui ouvrira cette porte, ou passera par cette division, sera pendue - fut-ce Madame Beck elle-même!"

Ten minutes had not succeeded the promulgation of this decree when Rosine's French pantoufles were again heard shuffling along the corridor.

"Mademoiselle," said she, "I would not for a five-franc piece go into that classe again just now: Monsieur's lunettes are really terrible; and here is a commissaire come with a message from the Athénée. I have told Madame Beck I dare not deliver it, and she says I am to charge you with it."

"Me? No, that is rather too bad! It is not in my line of duty. Come, come, Rosine! bear your own burden. Be brave - charge once more!"

"I, Mademoiselle? - impossible! Five times I have crossed him this day. Madame must really hire a gendarme for this service. Ouf! Je n'en puis plus!"

"Bah! you are only a coward. What is the message?"

"Precisely of the kind with which Monsieur least likes to be pestered: an urgent summons to go directly to the Athénée, as there is an official visitor - inspector - I know not what - arrived, and Monsieur must meet him: you know how he hates a must."

Yes, I knew well enough. The restive little man detested spur or curb: against whatever was urgent or obligatory, he was sure to revolt. However, I accepted the responsibility - not, certainly, without fear, but fear blent with other sentiments, curiosity, amongst them. I opened the door, I entered, I closed it behind me as quickly and quietly as a rather unsteady hand would permit; for to be slow or bustling, to rattle a latch, or leave a door gaping wide, were aggravations of crime often more disastrous in result than the main crime itself. There I stood then, and there he sat; his humour was visibly bad - almost at its worst; he had been giving a lesson in arithmetic - for he gave lessons on any and every subject that struck his fancy - and arithmetic being a dry subject, invariably disagreed with him: not a pupil but trembled when he spoke of figures. He sat, bent above his desk: to look up at the sound of an entrance, at the occurrence of a direct breach of his will and law, was an effort he could not for the moment bring himself to make. It was quite as well: I thus gained time to walk up the long classe; and it suited my idiosyncrasy far better to encounter the near burst of anger like his, than to bear its menace at a distance.

At his estrade I paused, just in front; of course I was not worthy of immediate attention: he proceeded with his lesson. Disdain would not do: he must hear and he must answer my message.

Not being quite tall enough to lift my head over his desk, elevated upon the estrade, and thus suffering eclipse in my present position, I ventured to peep round, with the design, at first, of merely getting a better view of his face, which had struck me when I entered as bearing a close and picturesque resemblance to that of a black and sallow tiger. Twice did I enjoy this side-view with impunity, advancing and receding unseen; the third time my eye had scarce dawned beyond the obscuration of the desk, when it was caught and transfixed through its very pupil - transfixed by the "lunettes." Rosine was right; these utensils had in them a blank and immutable terror, beyond the mobile wrath of the wearer's own unglazed eyes.

I now found the advantage of proximity: these short-sighted "lunettes" were useless for the inspection of a criminal under Monsieur's nose; accordingly, he doffed them, and he and I stood on more equal terms.

I am glad I was not really much afraid of him - that, indeed, close in his presence, I felt no terror at all; for upon his demanding cord and gibbet to execute the sentence recently pronounced, I was able to furnish him with a needleful of embroidering thread with such accommodating civility as could not but allay some portion at least of his surplus irritation. Of course I did not parade this courtesy before public view: I merely handed the thread round the angle of the desk, and attached it, ready noosed, to the barred back of the Professor's chair.

"Que me voulez-vous?" said he in a growl of which the music was wholly confined to his chest and throat, for he kept his teeth clenched; and seemed registering to himself an inward vow that nothing earthly should wring from him a smile.

My answer commenced uncompromisingly: "Monsieur," I said, "je veux l'impossible, des choses inouïes;" and thinking it best not to mince matters, but to administer the "douche" with decision, in a low but quick voice, I delivered the Athenian message, floridly exaggerating its urgency.

Of course, he would not hear a word of it. "He would not go; he would not leave his present class, let all the officials of Villette send for him. He would not put himself an inch out of his way at the bidding of king, cabinet, and chambers together."

I knew, however, that he must go; that, talk as he would, both his duty and interest commanded an immediate and literal compliance with the summons: I stood, therefore, waiting in silence, as if he had not yet spoken. He asked what more I wanted.

"Only Monsieur's answer to deliver to the commissionaire."

He waved an impatient negative.

I ventured to stretch my hand to the bonnet-grec which lay in grim repose on the window-sill. He followed this daring movement with his eye, no doubt in mixed pity and amazement at its presumption.

"Ah!" he muttered, "if it came to that - if Miss Lucy meddled with his bonnet-grec - she might just put it on herself, turn garçon for the occasion, and benevolently go to the Athénée in his stead."

With great respect, I laid the bonnet on the desk, where its tassel seemed to give me an awful nod.

"I'll write a note of apology - that will do!" said he, still bent on evasion.

Knowing well it would not do, I gently pushed the bonnet towards his hand. Thus impelled, it slid down the polished slope of the varnished and unbaized desk, carried before it the light steel-framed "lunettes," and, fearful to relate, they fell to the estrade. A score of times ere now had I seen them fall and receive no damage - this time, as Lucy Snowe's hapless luck would have it, they so fell that each clear pebble became a shivered and shapeless star.

Now, indeed, dismay seized me - dismay and regret. I knew the value of these "lunettes": M. Paul's sight was peculiar, not easily fitted, and these glasses suited him. I had heard him call them his treasures: as I picked them up, cracked and worthless, my hand trembled. Frightened through all my nerves I was to see the mischief I had done, but I think I was even more sorry than afraid. For some seconds I dared not look the bereaved Professor in the face; he was the first to speak.

"Là!" said he: "me voilà veuf de mes lunettes! I think Mademoiselle Lucy will now confess that the cord and gallows are amply earned; she trembles in anticipation of her doom. Ah, traitress! traitress! You are resolved to have me quite blind and helpless in your hands!"

I lifted my eyes: his face, instead of being irate, lowering, and furrowed, was overflowing with the smile, coloured with the bloom I had seen brightening it that evening at the Hotel Crécy. He was not angry - not even grieved. For the real injury he showed himself full of clemency; under the real provocation, patient as a saint. This event, which seemed so untoward - which I thought had ruined at once my chance of successful persuasion - proved my best help. Difficult of management so long as I had done him no harm, he became graciously pliant as soon as I stood in his presence a conscious and contrite offender.

Still gently railing at me as "une forte femme - une Anglaise terrible - une petite casse-tout" - he declared that he dared not but obey one who had given such an instance of her dangerous prowess; it was absolutely like the "grand Empereur smashing the vase to inspire dismay." So, at last, crowning himself with his bonnet-grec, and taking his ruined "lunettes" from my hand with a clasp of kind pardon and encouragement, he made his bow, and went off to the Athénée in first-rate humour and spirits.

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After all this amiability, the reader will be sorry for my sake to hear that I was quarrelling with M. Paul again before night; yet so it was, and I could not help it.

It was his occasional custom - and a very laudable, acceptable custom, too - to arrive of an evening, always à l'improviste, unannounced, burst in on the silent hour of study, establish a sudden despotism over us and our occupations, cause books to be put away, work-bags to be brought out, and, drawing forth a single thick volume, or a handful of pamphlets, substitute for the besotted "lecture pieuse," drawled by a sleepy pupil, some tragedy made grand by grand reading, ardent by fiery action - some drama, whereof, for my part, I rarely studied the intrinsic merit; for M. Emanuel made it a vessel for an outpouring, and filled it with his native verve and passion like a cup with a vital brewage. Or else he would flash through our conventual darkness a reflex of a brighter world, show us a glimpse of the current literature of the day, read us passages from some enchanting tale, or the last witty feuilleton which had awakened laughter in the saloons of Paris; taking care always to expunge, with the severest hand, whether from tragedy, melodrama, tale, or essay, whatever passage, phrase, or word, could be deemed unsuited to an audience of "jeunes filles." I noticed more than once, that where retrenchment without substitute would have left unmeaning vacancy, or introduced weakness, he could, and did, improvise whole paragraphs, no less vigorous than irrefragable; the dialogue - the description - he engrafted was often far better than that he pruned away.

Well, on the evening in question, we were sitting silent as nuns in a "retreat," the pupils studying, the teachers working. I remember my work; it was a slight matter of fancy, and it rather interested me; it had a purpose; I was not doing it merely to kill time; I meant it when finished as a gift; and the occasion of presentation being near, haste was requisite, and my fingers were busy.

We heard the sharp bell-peal which we all knew; then the rapid step familiar to each ear: the words "Voilà Monsieur!" had scarcely broken simultaneously from every lip, when the two-leaved door split (as split it always did for his admission - such a slow word as "open" is inefficient to describe his movements), and he stood in the midst of us.

There were two study tables, both long and flanked with benches; over the centre of each hung a lamp; beneath this lamp, on either side the table, sat a teacher; the girls were arranged to the right hand and the left; the eldest and most studious nearest the lamps or tropics; the idlers and little ones towards the north and south poles. Monsieur's habit was politely to hand a chair to some teacher, generally Zélie St. Pierre, the senior mistress; then to take her vacated seat; and thus avail himself of the full beam of Cancer or Capricorn, which, owing to his near sight, he needed.

As usual, Zélie rose with alacrity, smiling to the whole extent of her mouth, and the full display of her upper and under rows of teeth - that strange smile which passes from ear to ear, and is marked only by a sharp thin curve, which fails to spread over the countenance, and neither dimples the cheek nor lights the eye. I suppose Monsieur did not see her, or he had taken a whim that he would not notice her, for he was as capricious as women are said to be; then his "lunettes" (he had got another pair) served him as an excuse for all sorts of little oversights and shortcomings. Whatever might be his reason, he passed by Zélie, came to the other side of the table, and before I could start up to clear the way, whispered, "Ne bougez pas," and established himself between me and Miss Fanshawe, who always would be my neighbour, and have her

elbow in my side, however often I declared to her, "Genevra, I wish you were at Jericho."

It was easy to say, "Ne bougez pas;" but how could I help it? I must make him room, and I must request the pupils to recede that I might recede. It was very well for Genevra to be gummed to me, "keeping herself warm," as she said, on the winter evenings, and harassing my very heart with her fidgetings and pokings, obliging me, indeed, sometimes to put an artful pin in my girdle by way of protection against her elbow; but I suppose M. Emanuel was not to be subjected to the same kind of treatment, so I swept away my working materials, to clear space for his book, and withdrew myself to make room for his person; not, however, leaving more than a yard of interval, just what any reasonable man would have regarded as a convenient, respectful allowance of bench. But M. Emanuel never was reasonable; flint and tinder that he was! he struck and took fire directly.

"Vous ne voulez pas de moi pour voisin," he growled: "vous vous donnez des airs de caste; vous me traitez en paria;" he scowled. "Soit! je vais arranger la chose!" And he set to work.

"Levez vous toutes, Mesdemoiselles!" cried he.

The girls rose. He made them all file off to the other table. He then placed me at one extremity of the long bench, and having duly and carefully brought me my work-basket, silk, scissors, all my implements, he fixed himself quite at the other end.

At this arrangement, highly absurd as it was, not a soul in the room dared to laugh; luckless for the giggler would have been the giggle. As for me, I took it with entire coolness. There I sat, isolated and cut off from human intercourse; I sat and minded my work, and was quiet, and not at all unhappy.

"Est ce assez de distance?" he demanded.

"Monsieur en est l'arbitre," said I.

"Vous savez bien que non. C'est vous qui avez crée ce vide immense: moi je n'y ai pas mis la main."

And with this assertion he commenced the reading.

For his misfortune he had chosen a French translation of what he called "un drame de Williams Shackspeare; le faux dieu," he further announced, "de ces sots paiens, les Anglais." How far otherwise he would have characterized him had his temper not been upset, I scarcely need intimate.

Of course, the translation being French, was very inefficient; nor did I make any particular effort to conceal the contempt which some of its forlorn lapses were calculated to excite. Not that it behoved or beseemed me to say anything; but one can occasionally look the opinion it is forbidden to embody in words. Monsieur's lunettes being on the alert, he gleaned up every stray look; I don't think he lost one: the consequence was, his eyes soon discarded a screen, that their blaze might sparkle free, and he waxed hotter at the north pole to which he had voluntarily exiled himself, than, considering the general temperature of the room, it would have been reasonable to become under the vertical ray of Cancer itself.

The reading over, it appeared problematic whether he would depart with his anger unexpressed, or whether he would give it vent. Suppression was not much in his habits; but still, what had been done to him definite enough to afford matter for overt reproof? I had not uttered a sound, and could not justly be deemed amenable to reprimand or penalty for having permitted a slightly freer action than usual to the muscles about my eyes and mouth.

The supper, consisting of bread, and milk diluted with tepid water, was brought in. In respectful consideration of the Professor's presence, the rolls and glasses were allowed to stand instead of being immediately handed round.

"Take your supper, ladies," said he, seeming to be occupied in making marginal notes to his "Williams Shackspeare." They took it. I also accepted a roll and glass, but being now more than ever interested in my work, I kept my seat of punishment, and wrought while I munched my bread and sipped my beverage, the whole with easy sang-froid; with a certain snugness of composure, indeed, scarcely in my habits, and pleasantly novel to my feelings. It seemed as if the presence of a nature so restless, chafing, thorny as that of M. Paul absorbed all feverish and unsettling influences like a magnet, and left me none but such as were placid and harmonious.

He rose. "Will he go away without saying another word?" Yes; he turned to the door.

No: he re-turned on his steps; but only, perhaps, to take his pencil-case, which had been left on the table.

He took it - shut the pencil in and out, broke its point against the wood, re-cut and pocketed it, and . . . walked promptly up to me.

The girls and teachers, gathered round the other table, were talking pretty freely: they always talked at meals; and, from the constant habit of speaking fast and loud at such times, did not now subdue their voices much.

M. Paul came and stood behind me. He asked at what I was working; and I said I was making a watchguard.

He asked, "For whom?" And I answered, "For a gentleman - one of my friends."

M. Paul stooped down and proceeded - as novel-writers say, and, as was literally true in his case - to "hiss" into my ear some poignant words.

He said that, of all the women he knew, I was the one who could make herself the most consummately unpleasant: I was she with whom it was least possible to live on friendly terms. I had a "caractère intraitable," and perverse to a miracle. How I managed it, or what possessed me, he, for his part, did not know; but with whatever pacific and amicable intentions a person accosted me - crac! I turned concord to discord, good-will to enmity. He was sure, he - M. Paul - wished me well enough; he had never done me any harm that he knew of; he might, at least, he supposed, claim a right to be regarded as a neutral acquaintance, guiltless of hostile sentiments: yet, how I behaved to him! With what pungent vivacities - what an impetus of mutiny - what a "fougue" of injustice!

Here I could not avoid opening my eyes somewhat wide, and even slipping in a slight interjectional observation: "Vivacities? Impetus? Fougue? I didn't know...."

"Chut! à l'instant! There! there I went - vive comme la poudre!" He was sorry - he was very sorry: for my sake he grieved over the hapless peculiarity. This "emportement," this "chaleur" - generous, perhaps, but excessive - would yet, he feared, do me a mischief. It was a pity: I was not - he believed, in his soul - wholly without good qualities: and would I but hear reason, and be more sedate, more sober, less "en l'air," less "coquette," less taken by show, less prone to set an undue value on outside excellence - to make much of the attentions of people remarkable chiefly for so many feet of stature, "des couleurs de poupée," "un nez plus ou moins bien fait," and an enormous amount of fatuity - I might yet prove an useful, perhaps an exemplary character. But, as it was - And here, the little man's voice was for a minute choked.

I would have looked up at him, or held out my hand, or said a soothing word; but I was afraid, if I stirred, I should either laugh or cry; so odd, in all this, was the mixture of the touching and the absurd.

I thought he had nearly done: but no; he sat down that he might go on at his ease.

"While he, M. Paul, was on these painful topics, he would dare my anger for the sake of my good, and would venture to refer to a change he had noticed in my dress. He was free to confess that when he first knew me - or, rather, was in the habit of catching a passing glimpse of me from time to time - I satisfied him on this point: the gravity, the austere simplicity, obvious in this particular, were such as to inspire the highest hopes for my best interests. What fatal influence had impelled me lately to introduce flowers under the brim of my bonnet, to wear 'des cols brodés,' and even to appear on one occasion in a scarlet gown - he might indeed conjecture, but, for the present, would not openly declare."

Again I interrupted, and this time not without an accent at once indignant and horror-struck.

"Scarlet, Monsieur Paul? It was not scarlet! It was pink, and pale pink to: and further subdued by black lace."

"Pink or scarlet, yellow or crimson, pea-green or sky-blue, it was all one: these were all flaunting, giddy colours; and as to the lace I talked of, that was but a 'colifichet de plus.'" And he sighed over my degeneracy. "He could not, he was sorry to say, be so particular on this theme as he could wish: not possessing the exact names of these 'babioles,' he might run into small verbal errors which would not fail to lay him open to my sarcasm, and excite my unhappily sudden and passionate disposition. He would merely say, in general terms - and in these general terms he knew he was correct - that my costume had of late assumed 'des façons mondaines,' which it wounded him to see."

What "façons mondaines" he discovered in my present winter merino and plain white collar, I own it puzzled me to guess: and when I asked him, he said it was all made with too much attention to effect - and besides, "had I not a bow of ribbon at my neck?"

"And if you condemn a bow of ribbon for a lady, Monsieur, you would necessarily disapprove of a thing like this for a gentleman?" - holding up my bright little chainlet of silk and gold. His sole reply was a groan - I suppose over my levity.

After sitting some minutes in silence, and watching the progress of the chain, at which I now wrought more assiduously than ever, he inquired: "Whether what he had just said would have the effect of making me entirely detest him?"

I hardly remember what answer I made, or how it came about; I don't think I spoke at all, but I know we managed to bid good-night on friendly terms: and, even after M. Paul had reached the door, he turned back just to explain, "that he would not be understood to speak in entire condemnation of the scarlet dress" ("Pink! pink!" I threw in): "that he had no intention to deny it the merit of looking rather well" (the fact was, M. Emanuel's taste in colours decidedly leaned to the brilliant); "only he wished to counsel me, whenever, I wore it, to do so in the same spirit as if its material were 'bure,' and its hue 'gris de poussière.'"

"And the flowers under my bonnet, Monsieur?" I asked. "They are very little ones - ?"

"Keep them little, then," said he. "Permit them not to become full-blown."

"And the bow, Monsieur - the bit of ribbon?"

"Va pour le ruban!" was the propitious answer.

And so we settled it.

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"Well done, Lucy Snowe!" cried I to myself: "you have come in for a pretty lecture - brought on yourself a 'rude savant,' and all through your wicked fondness for worldly vanities! Who would have thought it? You deemed yourself a melancholy sober-sides enough! Miss Fanshawe there regards you as a second Diogenes. M. de Bassompierre, the other day, politely turned the conversation when it ran on the wild gifts of the actress Vashti, because, as he kindly said, 'Miss Snowe looked uncomfortable.' Dr. John Bretton knows you only as 'quiet Lucy' - 'a creature inoffensive as a shadow;' he has said, and you have heard him say it: 'Lucy's disadvantages spring from over-gravity in tastes and manner - want of colour in character and costume.' Such are your own and your friends' impressions; and behold! there starts up a little man, differing diametrically from all these, roundly charging you with being too airy and cheery - too volatile and versatile - too flowery and coloury. This harsh little man - this pitiless censor - gathers up all your poor scattered sins of vanity, your luckless chiffon of rose-colour, your small fringe of a wreath, your small scrap of ribbon, your silly bit of lace, and calls you to account for the lot, and for each item. You are well habituated to be passed by as a shadow in Life's sunshine: it is a new thing to see one testily lifting his hand to screen his eyes, because you tease him with an obtrusive ray."