

Chapter 29 - Monsieur's F閘e

I was up the next morning an hour before daybreak, and finished my guard, kneeling on the dormitory floor beside the centre stand, for the benefit of such expiring glimmer as the night-lamp afforded in its last watch.

All my materials - my whole stock of beads and silk - were used up before the chain assumed the length and richness I wished; I had wrought it double, as I knew, by the rule of contraries, that to, suit the particular taste whose gratification was in view, an effective appearance was quite indispensable. As a finish to the ornament, a little gold clasp was needed; fortunately I possessed it in the fastening of my sole necklace; I duly detached and re-attached it, then coiled compactly the completed guard; and enclosed it in a small box I had bought for its brilliancy, made of some tropic shell of the colour called "nacarat," and decked with a little coronal of sparkling blue stones. Within the lid of the box, I carefully graved with my scissors' point certain initials.

The reader will, perhaps, remember the description of Madame Beck's f閘e; nor will he have forgotten that at each anniversary, a handsome present was subscribed for and offered by the school. The observance of this day was a distinction accorded to none but Madame, and, in a modified form, to her kinsman and counsellor, M. Emanuel. In the latter case it was an honour spontaneously awarded, not plotted and contrived beforehand, and offered an additional proof, amongst many others, of the estimation in which - despite his partialities, prejudices, and irritabilities - the professor of literature was held by his pupils. No article of value was offered to him: he distinctly gave it to be understood, that he would accept neither plate nor jewellery. Yet he liked a slight tribute; the cost, the money-value, did not touch him: a diamond ring, a gold snuff-box, presented, with pomp, would have pleased him less than a flower, or a drawing, offered simply and with sincere feelings. Such was his nature. He was a man, not wise in his generation, yet could he claim a filial sympathy with "the dayspring on high."

M. Paul's f閘e fell on the first of March and a Thursday. It proved a fine sunny day; and being likewise the morning on which it was customary to attend mass; being also otherwise distinguished by the half-holiday which permitted the privilege of walking out, shopping, or paying visits in the afternoon: these combined considerations induced a general smartness and freshness of dress. Clean collars were in vogue; the ordinary dingy woollen classe-dress was exchanged for something lighter and clearer. Mademoiselle Z閘ie St. Pierre, on this particular Thursday, even assumed a "robe de soie," deemed in economical Labassecour an article of hazardous splendour and luxury; nay, it was remarked that she sent for a "coiffeur" to dress her hair that morning; there were pupils acute enough to discover that she had bedewed her handkerchief and her hands with a new and fashionable perfume. Poor Z閘ie! It was much her wont to declare about this time, that she was tired to death of a life of seclusion and labour: that she longed to have the means and leisure for relaxation; to have some one to work for her - a husband who would pay her debts (she was woefully encumbered with debt), supply her wardrobe, and leave her at liberty, as she said, to "goûter un peu les plaisirs." It had long been rumoured, that her eye was upon M. Emanuel. Monsieur Emanuel's eye was certainly often upon her. He would sit and watch her perseveringly for minutes together. I have seen him give her a quarter-of-an-hour's gaze, while the class was silently composing, and he sat throned on his estrade, unoccupied. Conscious always of this basilisk attention, she would writhe under it, half-flattered, half-puzzled, and Monsieur would follow her sensations, sometimes looking appallingly acute; for in some cases, he had the terrible unerring penetration of instinct, and pierced in its hiding-place the last lurking thought of the heart, and discerned under florid veillings the bare; barren places of the spirit: yes, and its perverted tendencies, and its hidden false curves - all that men and women would not have known - the twisted spine, the malformed limb that was born with them, and far worse, the stain or disfigurement they have perhaps brought on themselves. No calamity so accursed but M. Emanuel could pity and forgive, if it were acknowledged candidly; but where his questioning eyes met dishonest denial - where his ruthless researches found deceitful concealment - oh, then, he could be cruel, and I thought wicked! he would exultantly snatch the screen from poor shrinking wretches, passionately hurry them to the summit of the mount of exposure, and there show them all naked, all false - poor living lies - the spawn of that horrid Truth which cannot be looked on unveiled. He thought he did justice; for my part I doubt whether man has a right to do such justice on man: more than once in these his visitations, I have felt compelled to give tears to his victims, and not spared ire and keen reproach to himself. He deserved it; but it was difficult to shake him in his firm conviction that the work was righteous and needed.

Breakfast being over and mass attended, the school-bell rang and the rooms filled: a very pretty spectacle was presented in classe. Pupils and teachers sat neatly arrayed, orderly and expectant, each bearing in her hand the bouquet of felicitation - the prettiest spring-flowers all fresh, and filling the air with their fragrance: I only had no bouquet. I like to see flowers growing, but when they are gathered, they cease to please. I look on them as things rootless and perishable; their likeness to life makes me sad. I never offer flowers to those I love; I never wish to receive them from hands dear to me. Mademoiselle St. Pierre marked my empty hands - she could not believe I had been so remiss; with avidity her eye roved over and round me: surely I must have some solitary symbolic flower somewhere: some small knot of violets, something to win myself praise for taste, commendation for ingenuity. The unimaginative "Anglaise" proved better than the Parisienne's fears: she sat literally unprovided, as bare of bloom or leaf as the winter tree. This ascertained, Z閘ie smiled, well pleased.

"How wisely you have acted to keep your money, Miss Lucie," she said: "silly I have gone and thrown away two francs on a bouquet of hot-house flowers!"

And she showed with pride her splendid nosegay.

But hush! a step: the step. It came prompt, as usual, but with a promptitude, we felt disposed to flatter ourselves, inspired by other feelings than mere excitability of nerve and vehemence of intent. We thought our Professor's "foot-fall" (to speak romantically) had in it a friendly promise this morning; and so it had.

He entered in a mood which made him as good as a new sunbeam to the already well-lit first classe. The morning light playing amongst our plants and laughing on our walls, caught an added lustre from M. Paul's all-benignant salute. Like a true Frenchman (though I don't know why I should say so, for he was of strain neither French nor Labassecourien), he had dressed for the "situation" and the occasion. Not by the vague folds, sinister and conspirator-like, of his soot-dark paletôt were the outlines of his person obscured; on the contrary, his figure (such as it was, I don't boast of it) was well set off by a civilized coat and a silken vest quite pretty to behold. The defiant and pagan bonnet-grec had vanished: bare-headed, he came upon us, carrying a Christian hat in his gloved hand. The little man looked well, very well; there was a clearness of amity in his blue eye, and a glow of good feeling on his dark complexion, which passed perfectly in the place of beauty: one really did not care to observe that his nose, though far from small, was of no particular shape, his cheek thin, his brow marked and square, his mouth no rose-bud: one accepted him as he was, and felt his presence the reverse of damping or insignificant.

He passed to his desk; he placed on the same his hat and gloves. "Bon jour, mes amies," said he, in a tone that somehow made amends to some amongst us for many a sharp snap and savage snarl: not a jocund, good-fellow tone, still less an unctuous priestly, accent, but a voice he had belonging to himself - a voice used when his heart passed

the words from his lips. That same day did speak sometimes; though an irritable organ: in its core was a place, tender beyond a man's tenderness; a place that humbled him to little children, that bound him to girls and women to whom, rebel as he would, he could not disown his affinity, nor quite deny that, on the whole, he was better with them than with his own sex.

"We all wish Monsieur a good day, and present to him our congratulations on the anniversary of his fête," said Mademoiselle Zélie, constituting herself spokeswoman of the assembly; and advancing with no more twists of affectation than were with her indispensable to the achievement of motion, she laid her costly bouquet before him. He bowed over it.

The long train of offerings followed: all the pupils, sweeping past with the gliding step foreigners practise, left their tributes as they went by. Each girl so dexterously adjusted her separate gift, that when the last bouquet was laid on the desk, it formed the apex to a blooming pyramid - a pyramid blooming, spreading, and towering with such exuberance as, in the end, to eclipse the hero behind it. This ceremony over, seats were resumed, and we sat in dead silence, expectant of a speech.

I suppose five minutes might have elapsed, and the hush remained unbroken; ten - and there was no sound.

Many present began, doubtless, to wonder for what Monsieur waited; as well they might. Voiceless and viewless, stirless and wordless, he kept his station behind the pile of flowers.

At last there issued forth a voice, rather deep, as if it spoke out of a hollow: -

"Est-ce là tout?"

Mademoiselle Zélie looked round.

"You have all presented your bouquets?" inquired she of the pupils.

Yes; they had all given their nosegays, from the eldest to the youngest, from the tallest to the most diminutive. The senior mistress signified as much.

"Est-ce là tout?" was reiterated in an intonation which, deep before, had now descended some notes lower.

"Monsieur," said Mademoiselle St. Pierre, rising, and this time speaking with her own sweet smile, "I have the honour to tell you that, with a single exception, every person in classe has offered her bouquet. For Meess Lucie, Monsieur will kindly make allowance; as a foreigner she probably did not know our customs, or did not appreciate their significance. Meess Lucie has regarded this ceremony as too frivolous to be honoured by her observance."

"Famous!" I muttered between my teeth: "you are no bad speaker, Zélie, when you begin."

The answer vouchsafed to Mademoiselle St Pierre from the estrade was given in the gesticulation of a hand from behind the pyramid. This manual action seemed to deprecate words, to enjoin silence.

A form, ere long, followed the hand. Monsieur emerged from his eclipse; and producing himself on the front of his estrade, and gazing straight and fixedly before him at a vast "mappe-monde" covering the wall opposite, he demanded a third time, and now in really tragic tones -

"Est-ce là tout?"

I might yet have made all right, by stepping forwards and slipping into his hand the ruddy little shell-box I at that moment held tight in my own. It was what I had fully purposed to do; but, first, the comic side of Monsieur's behaviour had tempted me to delay, and now, Mademoiselle St. Pierre's affected interference provoked contumacity. The reader not having hitherto had any cause to ascribe to Miss Snowe's character the most distant pretensions to perfection, will be scarcely surprised to learn that she felt too perverse to defend herself from any imputation the Parisienne might choose to insinuate and besides, M. Paul was so tragic, and took my defection so seriously, he deserved to be vexed. I kept, then, both my box and my countenance, and sat insensate as any stone.

"It is well!" dropped at length from the lips of M. Paul; and having uttered this phrase, the shadow of some great paroxysm - the swell of wrath, scorn, resolve - passed over his brow, rippled his lips, and lined his cheeks. Gulping down all further comment, he launched into his customary "discours."

I can't at all remember what this "discours" was; I did not listen to it: the gulping-down process, the abrupt dismissal of his mortification or vexation, had given me a sensation which half- counteracted the ludicrous effect of the reiterated "Est-ce là tout?"

Towards the close of the speech there came a pleasing diversion my attention was again amusingly arrested.

Owing to some little accidental movement - I think I dropped my thimble on the floor, and in stooping to regain it, hit the crown of my head against the sharp corner of my desk; which casualties (exasperating to me, by rights, if to anybody) naturally made a slight bustle - M. Paul became irritated, and dismissing his forced equanimity, and casting to the winds that dignity and self-control with which he never cared long to encumber himself, he broke forth into the strain best calculated to give him ease.

I don't know how, in the progress of his "discours," he had contrived to cross the Channel and land on British ground; but there I found him when I began to listen.

Casting a quick, cynical glance round the room - a glance which scathed, or was intended to scathe, as it crossed me - he fell with fury upon "les Anglaises."

Never have I heard English women handled as M. Paul that morning handled them: he spared nothing - neither their minds, morals, manners, nor personal appearance. I specially remember his abuse of their tall stature, their long necks, their thin arms, their slovenly dress, their pedantic education, their impious scepticism(!), their insufferable pride, their pretentious virtue: over which he ground his teeth malignantly, and looked as if, had he dared, he would have said singular things. Oh! he was spiteful, acrid, savage; and, as a natural consequence, detestably ugly.

"Little wicked venomous man!" thought I; "am I going to harass myself with fears of displeasing you, or hurting your feelings? No, indeed; you shall be indifferent to me, as the shabbiest bouquet in your pyramid"

I grieve to say I could not quite carry out this resolution. For some time the abuse of England and the English found and left me stolid: I bore it some fifteen minutes stoically enough; but this hissing cockatrice was determined to sting, and he said such things at last - fastening not only upon our women, but upon our greatest names and best men; sullyng, the shield of Britannia, and dabbling the union jack in mud - that I was stung. With vicious relish he brought up the most spicy current continental historical falsehoods - than which nothing can be conceived more offensive. Zélie, and the whole class, became one grin of vindictive delight; for it is curious to discover how these clowns of Labassecour secretly hate England. At last, I struck a sharp stroke on my desk, opened my lips, and let loose this cry: -

"Vive l'Angleterre, l'Histoire et les Héros! A bas la France, la Fiction et les Faquins!"

The class was struck of a heap. I suppose they thought me mad. The Professor put up his handkerchief, and fiendishly smiled into its folds. Little monster of malice! He now thought he had got the victory, since he had made me angry. In a second he became good-humoured. With great blandness he resumed the subject of his flowers; talked poetically and symbolically of their sweetness, perfume, purity, etcetera; made Frenchified comparisons between the "jeunes filles" and the sweet blossoms before him; paid Mademoiselle St. Pierre a very full-blown compliment on the superiority of her bouquet; and ended by announcing that the first really fine, mild, and balmy morning in spring, he intended to take the whole class out to breakfast in the country. "Such of the class, at least," he added, with emphasis, "as he could count amongst the number of his friends."

"Donc je n'y serai pas," declared I, involuntarily.

"Soit!" was his response; and, gathering his flowers in his arms, he flashed out of classe; while I, consigning my work, scissors, thimble, and the neglected little box, to my desk, swept up-stairs. I don't know whether he felt hot and angry, but I am free to confess that I did.

Yet with a strange evanescent anger, I had not sat an hour on the edge of my bed, picturing and repicturing his look, manner, words ere I smiled at the whole scene. A little pang of regret I underwent that the box had not been offered. I had meant to gratify him. Fate would not have it so.

In the course of the afternoon, remembering that desks in classe were by no means inviolate repositories, and thinking that it was as well to secure the box, on account of the initials in the lid, P. C. D. E., for Paul Carl (or Carlos) David Emanuel - such was his full name - these foreigners must always have a string of baptisms - I descended to the schoolroom.

It slept in holiday repose. The day pupils were all gone home, the boarders were out walking, the teachers, except the surveillante of the week, were in town, visiting or shopping; the suite of divisions was vacant; so was the grande salle, with its huge solemn globe hanging in the midst, its pair of many-branched chandeliers, and its horizontal grand piano closed, silent, enjoying its mid-week Sabbath. I rather wondered to find the first classe door ajar; this room being usually locked when empty, and being then inaccessible to any save Madame Beck and myself, who possessed a duplicate key. I wondered still more, on approaching, to hear a vague movement as of life - a step, a chair stirred, a sound like the opening of a desk.

"It is only Madame Beck doing inspection duty," was the conclusion following a moment's reflection. The partially-opened door gave opportunity for assurance on this point. I looked. Behold! not the inspecting garb of Madame Beck - the shawl and the clean cap - but the coat, and the close-shorn, dark head of a man. This person occupied my chair; his olive hand held my desk open, his nose was lost to view amongst my papers. His back was towards me, but there could not be a moment's question about identity. Already was the attire of ceremony discarded: the cherished and ink-stained paletôt was resumed; the perverse bonnet-grec lay on the floor, as if just dropped from the hand, culpably busy.

Now I knew, and I had long known, that that hand of M. Emanuel's was on the most intimate terms with my desk; that it raised and lowered the lid, ransacked and arranged the contents, almost as familiarly as my own. The fact was not dubious, nor did he wish it to be so: he left signs of each visit palpable and unmistakable; hitherto, however, I had never caught him in the act: watch as I would, I could not detect the hours and moments of his coming. I saw the brownie's work in exercises left overnight full of faults, and found next morning carefully corrected: I profited by his capricious good-will in loans full welcome and refreshing. Between a sallow dictionary and worn-out grammar would magically grow a fresh interesting new work, or a classic, mellow and sweet in its ripe age. Out of my work-basket would laughingly peep a romance, under it would lurk the pamphlet, the magazine, whence last evening's reading had been extracted. Impossible to doubt the source whence these treasures flowed: had there been no other indication, one condemning and traitor peculiarity, common to them all, settled the question - they smelt of cigars. This was very shocking, of course: I thought so at first, and used to open the window with some bustle, to air my desk, and with fastidious finger and thumb, to hold the peccant brochures forth to the purifying breeze. I was cured of that formality suddenly. Monsieur caught me at it one day, understood the inference, instantly relieved my hand of its burden, and, in another moment, would have thrust the same into the glowing stove. It chanced to be a book, on the perusal of which I was bent; so for once I proved as decided and quicker than himself; recaptured the spoil, and - having saved this volume - never hazarded a second. With all this, I had never yet been able to arrest in his visits the freakish, friendly, cigar-loving phantom.

But now at last I had him: there he was - the very brownie himself; and there, curling from his lips, was the pale blue breath of his Indian darling: he was smoking into my desk: it might well betray him. Provoked at this particular, and yet pleased to surprise him - pleased, that is, with the mixed feeling of the housewife who discovers at last her strange elfin ally busy in the dairy at the untimely churn - I softly stole forward, stood behind him, bent with precaution over his shoulder.

My heart smote me to see that - after this morning's hostility, after my seeming remissness, after the puncture experienced by his feelings, and the ruffling undergone by his temper - he, all willing to forget and forgive, had brought me a couple of handsome volumes, of which the title and authorship were guarantees for interest. Now, as he sat bending above the desk, he was stirring up its contents; but with gentle and careful hand; disarranging indeed, but not harming. My heart smote me: as I bent over him, as he sat unconscious, doing me what good he could, and I daresay not feeling towards me unkindly, my morning's anger quite melted: I did not dislike Professor Emanuel.

I think he heard me breathe. He turned suddenly: his temperament was nervous, yet he never started, and seldom changed colour: there was something hardy about him.

"I thought you were gone into town with the other teachers," said he, taking a grim gripe of his self-possession, which half-escaped him - "It is as well you are not. Do you think I care for being caught? Not I. I often visit your desk."

"Monsieur, I know it."

"You find a brochure or tome now and then; but you don't read them, because they have passed under this?" - touching his cigar.

"They have, and are no better for the process; but I read them."

"Without pleasure?"

"Monsieur must not be contradicted."

"Do you like them, or any of them? - are they acceptable?" "Monsieur has seen me reading them a hundred times, and knows I have not so many recreations as to undervalue those he provides."

"I mean well; and, if you see that I mean well, and derive some little amusement from my efforts, why can we not be friends?"

"A fatalist would say - because we cannot."

"This morning," he continued, "I awoke in a bright mood, and came into classe happy; you spoiled my day."

"No, Monsieur, only an hour or two of it, and that unintentionally."

"Unintentionally! No. It was my fête-day; everybody wished me happiness but you. The little children of the third division gave each her knot of violets, lisped each her congratulation: - you - nothing. Not a bud, leaf, whisper - not a glance. Was this unintentional?"

"I meant no harm."

"Then you really did not know our custom? You were unprepared? You would willingly have laid out a few centimes on a flower to give me pleasure, had you been aware that it was expected? Say so, and all is forgotten, and the pain soothed."

"I did know that it was expected: I was prepared; yet I laid out no centimes on flowers."

"It is well - you do right to be honest. I should almost have hated you had you flattered and lied. Better declare at once 'Paul Carl Emanuel - je te déteste, mon garçon!' - than smile an interest, look an affection, and be false and cold at heart. False and cold I don't think you are; but you have made a great mistake in life, that I believe; I think your judgment is warped - that you are indifferent where you ought to be grateful - and perhaps devoted and infatuated, where you ought to be cool as your name. Don't suppose that I wish you to have a passion for me, Mademoiselle; Dieu vous en garde! What do you start for? Because I said passion? Well, I say it again. There is such a word, and there is such a thing - though not within these walls, thank heaven! You are no child that one should not speak of what exists; but I only uttered the word - the thing, I assure you, is alien to my whole life and views. It died in the past - in the present it lies buried - its grave is deep-dug, well-heaped, and many winters old: in the future there will be a resurrection, as I believe to my souls consolation; but all will then be changed - form and feeling: the mortal will have put on immortality - it will rise, not for earth, but heaven. All I say to you, Miss Lucy Snowe, is - that you ought to treat Professor Paul Emanuel decently."

I could not, and did not contradict such a sentiment.

"Tell me," he pursued, "when it is your fête-day, and I will not grudge a few centimes for a small offering."

"You will be like me, Monsieur: this cost more than a few centimes, and I did not grudge its price."

And taking from the open desk the little box, I put it into his hand.

"It lay ready in my lap this morning," I continued; "and if Monsieur had been rather more patient, and Mademoiselle St. Pierre less interfering - perhaps I should say, too, if I had been calmer and wiser - I should have given it then."

He looked at the box: I saw its clear warm tint and bright azure circlet, pleased his eyes. I told him to open it.

"My initials!" said he, indicating the letters in the lid. "Who told you I was called Carl David?"

"A little bird, Monsieur."

"Does it fly from me to you? Then one can tie a message under its wing when needful."

He took out the chain - a trifle indeed as to value, but glossy with silk and sparkling with beads. He liked that too - admired it artlessly, like a child.

"For me?"

"Yes, for you."

"This is the thing you were working at last night?"

"The same."

"You finished it this morning?"

"I did."

"You commenced it with the intention that it should be mine?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And offered on my fête-day?"

"Yes."

"This purpose continued as you wove it?"

Again I assented.

"Then it is not necessary that I should cut out any portion - saying, this part is not mine: it was plaited under the idea and for the adornment of another?"

"By no means. It is neither necessary, nor would it be just."

"This object is all mine?"

"That object is yours entirely."

Straightway Monsieur opened his paletôt, arranged the guard splendidly across his chest, displaying as much and suppressing as little as he could: for he had no notion of concealing what he admired and thought decorative. As to the box, he pronounced it a superb bonbonnière - he was fond of bonbons, by the way - and as he always liked to share with others what pleased himself, he would give his "dragées" as freely as he lent his books. Amongst the kind brownie's gifts left in my desk, I forgot to enumerate

many a paper of chocolate confits. His tastes in these matters were southern, and what we think infantine. His simple lunch consisted frequently of a "brioche," which, as often as not, to shared with some child of the third division.

"A présent c'est un fait accompli," said he, re-adjusting his paletôt; and we had no more words on the subject. After looking over the two volumes he had brought, and cutting away some pages with his penknife (he generally pruned before lending his books, especially if they were novels, and sometimes I was a little provoked at the severity of his censorship, the retrenchments interrupting the narrative), he rose, politely touched his bonnet-grec, and bade me a civil good-day.

"We are friends now," thought I, "till the next time we quarrel."

We might have quarrelled again that very same evening, but, wonderful to relate, failed, for once, to make the most of our opportunity.

Contrary to all expectation, M. Paul arrived at the study-hour. Having seen so much of him in the morning, we did not look for his presence at night. No sooner were we seated at lessons, however, than he appeared. I own I was glad to see him, so glad that I could not help greeting his arrival with a smile; and when he made his way to the same seat about which so serious a misunderstanding had formerly arisen, I took good care not to make too much room for him; he watched with a jealous, side-long look, to see whether I shrank away, but I did not, though the bench was a little crowded. I was losing the early impulse to recoil from M. Paul. Habituated to the paletôt and bonnet-grec, the neighbourhood of these garments seemed no longer uncomfortable or very formidable. I did not now sit restrained, "asphyxiée" (as he used to say) at his side; I stirred when I wished to stir, coughed when it was necessary, even yawned when I was tired - did, in short, what I pleased, blindly reliant upon his indulgence. Nor did my temerity, this evening at least, meet the punishment it perhaps merited; he was both indulgent and good-natured; not a cross glance shot from his eyes, not a hasty word left his lips. Till the very close of the evening, he did not indeed address me at all, yet I felt, somehow, that he was full of friendliness. Silence is of different kinds, and breathes different meanings; no words could inspire a pleasanter content than did M. Paul's worldless presence. When the tray came in, and the bustle of supper commenced, he just said, as he retired, that he wished me a good night and sweet dreams; and a good night and sweet dreams I had.