

Chapter 9 - Isidore

My time was now well and profitably filled up. What with teaching others and studying closely myself, I had hardly a spare moment. It was pleasant. I felt I was getting, on; not lying the stagnant prey of mould and rust, but polishing my faculties and whetting them to a keen edge with constant use. Experience of a certain kind lay before me, on no narrow scale. Villette is a cosmopolitan city, and in this school were girls of almost every European nation, and likewise of very varied rank in life. Equality is much practised in Labassecour; though not republican in form, it is nearly so in substance, and at the desks of Madame Beck's establishment the young countess and the young bourgeoisie sat side by side. Nor could you always by outward indications decide which was noble and which plebeian; except that, indeed, the latter had often franker and more courteous manners, while the former bore away the bell for a delicately-balanced combination of insolence and deceit. In the former there was often quick French blood mixed with the marsh-phlegm: I regret to say that the effect of this vivacious fluid chiefly appeared in the oilier glibness with which flattery and fiction ran from the tongue, and in a manner lighter and livelier, but quite heartless and insincere.

To do all parties justice, the honest aboriginal Labassecouriennes had an hypocrisy of their own, too; but it was of a coarse order, such as could deceive few. Whenever a lie was necessary for their occasions, they brought it out with a careless ease and breadth altogether untroubled by the rebuke of conscience. Not a soul in Madame Beck's house, from the scullion to the directress herself, but was above being ashamed of a lie; they thought nothing of it: to invent might not be precisely a virtue, but it was the most venial of faults. "J'ai menti plusieurs fois," formed an item of every girl's and woman's monthly confession: the priest heard unshocked, and absolved unreluctant. If they had missed going to mass, or read a chapter of a novel, that was another thing: these were crimes whereof rebuke and penance were the unfailing weed.

While yet but half-conscious of this state of things, and unlearned in its results, I got on in my new sphere very well. After the first few difficult lessons, given amidst peril and on the edge of a moral volcano that rumbled under my feet and sent sparks and hot fumes into my eyes, the eruptive spirit seemed to subside, as far as I was concerned. My mind was a good deal bent on success: I could not bear the thought of being baffled by mere undisciplined disaffection and wanton indocility, in this first attempt to get on in life. Many hours of the night I used to lie awake, thinking what plan I had best adopt to get a reliable hold on these mutineers, to bring this stiff-necked tribe under permanent influence. In, the first place, I saw plainly that aid in no shape was to be expected from Madame: her righteous plan was to maintain an unbroken popularity with the pupils, at any and every cost of justice or comfort to the teachers. For a teacher to seek her alliance in any crisis of insubordination was equivalent to securing her own expulsion. In intercourse with her pupils, Madame only took to herself what was pleasant, amiable, and recommendatory; rigidly requiring of her lieutenants sufficiency for every annoying crisis, where to act with adequate promptitude was to be unpopular. Thus, I must look only to myself.

Imprimis - it was clear as the day that this swinish multitude were not to be driven by force. They were to be humoured, borne with very patiently: a courteous though sedate manner impressed them; a very rare flash of raillery did good. Severe or continuous mental application they could not, or would not, bear: heavy demand on the memory, the reason, the attention, they rejected point-blank. Where an English girl of not more than average capacity and docility would quietly take a theme and bind herself to the task of comprehension and mastery, a Labassecourienne would laugh in your face, and throw it back to you with the phrase, - "Dieu, que c'est difficile! Je n'en veux pas. Cela m'ennuie trop."

A teacher who understood her business would take it back at once, without hesitation, contest, or expostulation - proceed with even exaggerated care to smoothe every difficulty, to reduce it to the level of their understandings, return it to them thus modified, and lay on the lash of sarcasm with unsparing hand. They would feel the sting, perhaps wince a little under it; but they bore no malice against this sort of attack, provided the sneer was not sour, but heartly, and that it held well up to them, in a clear, light, and bold type, so that she who ran might read, their incapacity, ignorance, and sloth. They would riot for three additional lines to a lesson; but I never knew them rebel against a wound given to their self-respect: the little they had of that quality was trained to be crushed, and it rather liked the pressure of a firm heel than otherwise.

By degrees, as I acquired fluency and freedom in their language, and could make such application of its more nervous idioms as suited their case, the elder and more intelligent girls began rather to like me in their way: I noticed that whenever a pupil had been roused to feel in her soul the stirring of worthy emulation, or the quickening of honest shame, from that date she was won. If I could but once make their (usually large) ears burn under their thick glossy hair, all was comparatively well. By-and-by bouquets began to be laid on my desk in the morning; by way of acknowledgment for this little foreign attention, I used sometimes to walk with a select few during recreation. In the course of conversation it befel once or twice that I made an unpremeditated attempt to rectify some of their singularly distorted notions of principle; especially I expressed my ideas of the evil and baseness of a lie. In an unguarded moment, I chanced to say that, of the two errors; I considered falsehood worse than an occasional lapse in church-attendance. The poor girls were tutored to report in Catholic ears whatever the Protestant teacher said. An edifying consequence ensued. Something - an unseen, an indefinite, a nameless - something stole between myself and these my best pupils: the bouquets continued to be offered, but conversation thenceforth became impracticable. As I paced the alleys or sat in the berceau, a girl never came to my right hand but a teacher, as if by magic, appeared at my left. Also, wonderful to relate, Madame's shoes of silence brought her continually to my back, as quick, as noiseless and unexpected, as some wandering zephyr.

The opinion of my Catholic acquaintance concerning my spiritual prospects was somewhat naively expressed to me on one occasion. A pensionnaire, to whom I had rendered some little service, exclaimed one day as she sat beside me: "Mademoiselle, what a pity you are a Protestant!"

"Why, Isabelle?"

"Parceque, quand vous serez morte - vous brûlerez tout de suite dans l'Enfer."

"Croyez-vous?"

"Certainement que j'y crois: tout le monde le sait; et d'ailleurs le prêtre me l'a dit."

Isabelle was an odd, blunt little creature. She added, *_sotto voce_*: "Pour assurer votre salut là-haut, on ferait bien de vous brûler toute vive ici-bas."

I laughed, as, indeed, it was impossible to do otherwise.

Has the reader forgotten Miss Ginevra Fanshawe? If so, I must be allowed to re-introduce that young lady as a thriving pupil of Madame Beck's; for such she was. On her arrival in the Rue Fossette, two or three days after my sudden settlement there, she encountered me with very little surprise. She must have had good blood in her veins, for never was any duchess more perfectly, radically, unaffectedly nonchalante than she: a weak, transient amaze was all she knew of the sensation of wonder. Most of her other faculties seemed to be in the same flimsy condition: her liking and disliking, her love and hate, were mere cobweb and gossamer; but she had one thing about her that seemed strong and durable enough, and that was - her selfishness.

She was not proud; and - bonne d'enfants as I was - she would forthwith have made of me a sort of friend and confidant. She teased me with a thousand vapid complaints about school-quarrels and household economy: the cookery was not to her taste; the people about her, teachers and pupils, she held to be despicable, because they were foreigners. I bore with her abuse of the Friday's salt fish and hard eggs - with her invective against the soup, the bread, the coffee - with some patience for a time; but at last, wearied by iteration, I turned crusty, and put her to rights: a thing I ought to have done in the very beginning, for a salutary setting down always agreed with her.

Much longer had I to endure her demands on me in the way of work. Her wardrobe, so far as concerned articles of external wear, was well and elegantly supplied; but there were other habiliments not so carefully provided: what she had, needed frequent repair. She hated needle- drudgery herself, and she would bring her hose, &c. to me in heaps, to be mended. A compliance of some weeks threatening to result in the establishment of an intolerable bore - I at last distinctly told her she must make up her mind to mend her own garments. She cried on receiving this information, and accused me of having ceased to be her friend; but I held by my decision, and let the hysterics pass as they could.

Notwithstanding these foibles, and various others needless to mention - but by no means of a refined or elevating character - how pretty she was! How charming she looked, when she came down on a sunny Sunday morning, well-dressed and well-humoured, robed in pale lilac silk, and with her fair long curls reposing on her white shoulders. Sunday was a holiday which she always passed with friends resident in town; and amongst these friends she speedily gave me to understand was one who would fain become something more. By glimpses and hints it was shown me, and by the general buoyancy of her look and manner it was ere long proved, that ardent admiration - perhaps genuine love - was at her command. She called her suitor "Isidore:" this, however, she intimated was not his real name, but one by which it pleased her to baptize him - his own, she hinted, not being "very pretty." Once, when she had been bragging about the vehemence of "Isidore's" attachment, I asked if she loved him in return.

"Comme cela," said she: "he is handsome, and he loves me to distraction, so that I am well amused. Ca suffit."

Finding that she carried the thing on longer than, from her very fickle tastes, I had anticipated, I one day took it upon me to make serious inquiries as to whether the gentleman was such as her parents, and especially her uncle - on whom, it appeared, she was dependent - would be likely to approve. She allowed that this was very doubtful, as she did not believe "Isidore" had much money.

"Do you encourage him?" I asked.

"Furieusement sometimes," said she.

"Without being certain that you will be permitted to marry him?"

"Oh, how dowdyish you are! I don't want to be married. I am too young."

"But if he loves you as much as you say, and yet it comes to nothing in the end, he will be made miserable."

"Of course he will break his heart. I should be shocked and, disappointed if he didn't."

"I wonder whether this M. Isidore is a fool?" said I.

"He is, about me; but he is wise in other things, à ce qu'on dit. Mrs. Cholmondeley considers him extremely clever: she says he will push his way by his talents; all I know is, that he does little more than sigh in my presence, and that I can wind him round my little finger."

Wishing to get a more definite idea of this love-stricken M. Isidore; whose position seemed to me of the least secure, I requested her to favour me with a personal description; but she could not describe: she had neither words nor the power of putting them together so as to make graphic phrases. She even seemed not properly to have noticed him: nothing of his looks, of the changes in his countenance, had touched her heart or dwelt in her memory - that he was "beau, mais plutôt bel homme que joli garçon," was all she could assert. My patience would often have failed, and my interest flagged, in listening to her, but for one thing. All the hints she dropped, all the details she gave, went unconsciously to prove, to my thinking, that M. Isidore's homage was offered with great delicacy and respect. I informed her very plainly that I believed him much too good for her, and intimated with equal plainness my impression that she was but a vain coquette. She laughed, shook her curls from her eyes, and danced away as if I had paid her a compliment.

Miss Ginevra's school-studies were little better than nominal; there were but three things she practised in earnest, viz. music, singing, and dancing; also embroidering the fine cambric handkerchiefs which she could not afford to buy ready worked: such mere trifles as lessons in history, geography, grammar, and arithmetic, she left undone, or got others to do for her. Very much of her time was spent in visiting. Madame, aware that her stay at school was now limited to a certain period, which would not be extended whether she made progress or not, allowed her great licence in this particular. Mrs. Cholmondeley - her chaperon - a gay, fashionable lady, invited her whenever she had company at her own house, and sometimes took her to evening-parties at the houses of her acquaintance. Ginevra perfectly approved this mode of procedure: it had but one inconvenience; she was obliged to be well dressed, and she had not money to buy variety of dresses. All her thoughts turned on this difficulty; her whole soul was occupied with expedients for effecting its solution. It was wonderful to witness the activity of her otherwise indolent mind on this point, and to see the much-daring intrepidity to which she was spurred by a sense of necessity, and the wish to shine.

She begged boldly of Mrs. Cholmondeley - boldly, I say: not with an air of reluctant shame, but in this strain: -

"My darling Mrs. C., I have nothing in the world fit to wear for your party next week; you must give me a book-muslin dress, and then a ceinture bleu celeste: do - there's an angel! will you?"

The "darling Mrs. C." yielded at first; but finding that applications increased as they were complied with, she was soon obliged, like all Miss Fanshawe's friends, to oppose resistance to encroachment. After a while I heard no more of Mrs. Cholmondeley's presents; but still, visiting went on, and the absolutely necessary dresses continued to be supplied: also many little expensive etcetera - gloves, bouquets, even trinkets. These things, contrary to her custom, and even nature - for she was not secretive - were most sedulously kept out of sight for a time; but one evening, when she was going to a large party for which particular care and elegance of costume were demanded, she could not resist coming to my chamber to show herself in all her splendour.

Beautiful she looked: so young, so fresh, and with a delicacy of skin and flexibility of shape altogether English, and not found in the list of continental female charms. Her dress was new, costly, and perfect. I saw at a glance that it lacked none of those finishing details which cost so much, and give to the general effect such an air of tasteful

completeness.

I viewed her from top to toe. She turned airily round that I might survey her on all sides. Conscious of her charms, she was in her best humour: her rather small blue eyes sparkled gleefully. She was going to bestow on me a kiss, in her school-girl fashion of showing her delights but I said, "Steady! Let us be Steady, and know what we are about, and find out the meaning of our magnificence" - and so put her off at arm's length, to undergo cooler inspection.

"Shall I do?" was her question.

"Do?" said I. "There are different ways of doing; and, by my word, I don't understand yours."

"But how do I look?"

"You look well dressed."

She thought the praise not warm enough, and proceeded to direct attention to the various decorative points of her attire. "Look at this parure," said she. "The brooch, the ear-rings, the bracelets: no one in the school has such a set - not Madame herself"

"I see them all." (Pause.) "Did M. de Bassompierre give you those jewels?"

"My uncle knows nothing about them."

"Were they presents from Mrs. Cholmondeley?"

"Not they, indeed. Mrs. Cholmondeley is a mean, stingy creature; she never gives me anything now."

I did not choose to ask any further questions, but turned abruptly away.

"Now, old Crusty - old Diogenes" (these were her familiar terms for me when we disagreed), "what is the matter now?"

"Take yourself away. I have no pleasure in looking at you or your parure."

For an instant, she seemed taken by surprise.

"What now, Mother Wisdom? I have not got into debt for it - that is, not for the jewels, nor the gloves, nor the bouquet. My dress is certainly not paid for, but uncle de Bassompierre will pay it in the bill: he never notices items, but just looks at the total; and he is so rich, one need not care about a few guineas more or less."

"Will you go? I want to shut the door.... Ginevra, people may tell you you are very handsome in that ball-attire; but, in my eyes, you will never look so pretty as you did in the gingham gown and plain straw bonnet you wore when I first saw you."

"Other people have not your puritanical tastes," was her angry reply. "And, besides, I see no right you have to sermonize me."

"Certainly! I have little right; and you, perhaps, have still less to come flourishing and fluttering into my chamber - a mere jay in borrowed plumes. I have not the least respect for your feathers, Miss Fanshawe; and especially the peacock's eyes you call a parure: very pretty things, if you had bought them with money which was your own, and which you could well spare, but not at all pretty under present circumstances."

"On est là pour Mademoiselle Fanshawe!" was announced by the portress, and away she tripped.

This semi-mystery of the parure was not solved till two or three days afterwards, when she came to make a voluntary confession.

"You need not be sulky with me," she began, "in the idea that I am running somebody, papa or M. de Bassompierre, deeply into debt. I assure you nothing remains unpaid for, but the few dresses I have lately had: all the rest is settled."

"There," I thought, "lies the mystery; considering that they were not given you by Mrs. Cholmondeley, and that your own means are limited to a few shillings, of which I know you to be excessively careful."

"Ecoutez!" she went on, drawing near and speaking in her most confidential and coaxing tone; for my "sulkiness" was inconvenient to her: she liked me to be in a talking and listening mood, even if I only talked to chide and listened to rail. "Ecoutez, chère grogneuse! I will tell you all how and about it; and you will then see, not only how right the whole thing is, but how cleverly managed. In the first place, I must go out. Papa himself said that he wished me to see something of the world; he particularly remarked to Mrs. Cholmondeley, that, though I was a sweet creature enough, I had rather a bread-and-butter-eating, school-girl air; of which it was his special desire that I should get rid, by an introduction to society here, before I make my regular début in England. Well, then, if I go out, I must dress. Mrs. Cholmondeley is turned shabby, and will give nothing more; it would be too hard upon uncle to make him pay for all the things I need: that you can't deny - that agrees with your own preachments. Well, but SOMEBODY who heard me (quite by chance, I assure you) complaining to Mrs. Cholmondeley of my distressed circumstances, and what straits I was put to for an ornament or two - somebody, far from grudging one a present, was quite delighted at the idea of being permitted to offer some trifle. You should have seen what a blanc-bec he looked when he first spoke of it: how he hesitated and blushed, and positively trembled from fear of a repulse."

"That will do, Miss Fanshawe. I suppose I am to understand that M. Isidore is the benefactor: that it is from him you have accepted that costly parure; that he supplies your bouquets and your gloves?"

"You express yourself so disagreeably," said she, "one hardly knows how to answer; what I mean to say is, that I occasionally allow Isidore the pleasure and honour of expressing his homage by the offer of a trifle."

"It comes to the same thing.... Now, Ginevra, to speak the plain truth, I don't very well understand these matters; but I believe you are doing very wrong - seriously wrong. Perhaps, however, you now feel certain that you will be able to marry M. Isidore; your parents and uncle have given their consent, and, for your part, you love him entirely?"

"Mais pas du tout!" (she always had recourse to French when about to say something specially heartless and perverse). "Je suis sa reine, mais il n'est pas mon roi."

"Excuse me, I must believe this language is mere nonsense and coquetry. There is nothing great about you, yet you are above profiting by the good nature and purse of

man to whom you feel absolute indifference. You love M. Isidore far more than you think, or will avow."

"No. I danced with a young officer the other night, whom I love a thousand times more than he. I often wonder why I feel so very cold to Isidore, for everybody says he is handsome, and other ladies admire him; but, somehow, he bores me: let me see now how it is...."

And she seemed to make an effort to reflect. In this I encouraged her.

"Yes!" I said, "try to get a clear idea of the state of your mind. To me it seems in a great mess - chaotic as a rag-bag."

"It is something in this fashion," she cried out ere long: "the man is too romantic and devoted, and he expects something more of me than I find it convenient to be. He thinks I am perfect: furnished with all sorts of sterling qualities and solid virtues, such as I never had, nor intend to have. Now, one can't help, in his presence, rather trying to justify his good opinion; and it does so tire one to be goody, and to talk sense, - for he really thinks I am sensible. I am far more at my ease with you, old lady - you, you dear crosspatch - who take me at my lowest, and know me to be coquettish, and ignorant, and flirting, and fickle, and silly, and selfish, and all the other sweet things you and I have agreed to be a part of my character."

"This is all very well," I said, making a strenuous effort to preserve that gravity and severity which ran risk of being shaken by this whimsical candour, "but it does not alter that wretched business of the presents. Pack them up, Ginevra, like a good, honest girl, and send them back."

"Indeed, I won't," said she, stoutly.

"Then you are deceiving M. Isidore. It stands to reason that by accepting his presents you give him to understand he will one day receive an equivalent, in your regard..."

"But he won't," she interrupted: "he has his equivalent now, in the pleasure of seeing me wear them - quite enough for him: he is only bourgeois."

This phrase, in its senseless arrogance, quite cured me of the temporary weakness which had made me relax my tone and aspect. She rattled on:

"My present business is to enjoy youth, and not to think of fettering myself, by promise or vow, to this man or that. When first I saw Isidore, I believed he would help me to enjoy it I believed he would be content with my being a pretty girl; and that we should meet and part and flutter about like two butterflies, and be happy. Lo, and behold! I find him at times as grave as a judge, and deep-feeling and thoughtful. Bah! Les penseurs, les hommes profonds et passionnés ne sont pas à mon goût. Le Colonel Alfred de Hamal suits me far better. Va pour les beaux fats et les jolis fripons! Vive les joies et les plaisirs! A bas les grandes passions et les sévères vertus!"

She looked for an answer to this tirade. I gave none.

"J'aime mon beau Colonel," she went on: "Je n'aimerai jamais son rival. Je ne serai jamais femme de bourgeois, moi!"

I now signified that it was imperatively necessary my apartment should be relieved of the honour of her presence: she went away laughing.