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Chapter 4 - Miss Ladd's Drawing-Master

Francine was awakened the next morning by one of the housemaids, bringing up her breakfast on a tray. Astonished at this concession to laziness, in an institution devoted to the practice of all virtues, she looked round. The bedroom was deserted.

"The other young ladies are as busy as bees, miss," the housemaid explained. "They were up and dressed two hours ago: and the breakfast has been cleared away long since. It's Miss Emily's fault. She wouldn't allow them to wake you: she said you could be of no possible use downstairs, and you had better be treated like a visitor. Miss Cecilia was so distressed at your missing your breakfast that she spoke to the housekeeper, and I was sent up to you. Please to excuse it if the tea's cold. This is Grand Day, and we are all topsy-turvy in consequence."

Inquiring what "Grand Day" meant, and why it produced this extraordinary result in a ladies' school, Francine discovered that the first day of the vacation was devoted to the distribution of prizes, in the presence of parents, guardians and friends. An Entertainment was added, comprising those merciless tests of human endurance called Recitations; light refreshments and musical performances being distributed at intervals, to encourage the exhausted audience. The local newspaper sent a reporter to describe the proceedings, and some of Miss Ladd's young ladies enjoyed the intoxicating luxury of seeing their names in print.

"It begins at three o'clock," the housemaid went on, "and, what with practicing and rehearsing, and ornamenting the schoolroom, there's a hubbub fit to make a person's head spin. Besides which," said the girl, lowering her voice, and approaching a little nearer to Francine, "we have all been taken by surprise. The first thing in the morning Miss Jethro left us, without saying good-by to anybody."

"Who is Miss Jethro?"

"The new teacher, miss. We none of us liked her, and we all suspect there's something wrong. Miss Ladd and the clergyman had a long talk together yesterday (in private, you know), and they sent for Miss Jethro--which looks bad, doesn't it? Is there anything more I can do for you, miss? It's a beautiful day after the rain. If I was you, I should go and enjoy myself in the garden."

Having finished her breakfast, Francine decided on profiting by this sensible suggestion.

The servant who showed her the way to the garden was not favorably impressed by the new pupil: Francine's temper asserted itself a little too plainly in her face. To a girl possessing a high opinion of her own importance it was not very agreeable to feel herself excluded, as an illiterate stranger, from the one absorbing interest of her schoolfellows. "Will the time ever come," she wondered bitterly, "when I shall win a prize, and sing and play before all the company? How I should enjoy making the girls envy me!"

A broad lawn, overshadowed at one end by fine old trees--flower beds and shrubberies, and winding paths prettily and invitingly laid out--made the garden a welcome refuge on that fine summer morning. The novelty of the scene, after her experience in the West Indies, the delicious breezes cooled by the rain of the night, exerted their cheering influence even on the sullen disposition of Francine. She smiled, in spite of herself, as she followed the pleasant paths, and heard the birds singing their summer songs over her head.

Wandering among the trees, which occupied a considerable extent of ground, she passed into an open space beyond, and discovered an old fish-pond, overgrown by aquatic plants. Driblets of water trickled from a dilapidated fountain in the middle. On the further side of the pond the ground sloped downward toward the south, and revealed, over a low paling, a pretty view of a village and its church, backed by fir woods mounting the heathy sides of a range of hills beyond. A fanciful little wooden building, imitating the form of a Swiss cottage, was placed so as to command the prospect. Near it, in the shadow of the building, stood a rustic chair and table--with a color-box on one, and a portfolio on the other. Fluttering over the grass, at the mercy of the capricious breeze, was a neglected sheet of drawing-paper. Francine ran round the pond, and picked up the paper just as it was on the point of being tilted into the water. It contained a sketch in water colors of the village and the woods, and Francine had looked at the view itself with indifference--the picture of the view interested her. Ordinary visitors to Galleries of Art, which admit students, show the same strange perversity. The work of the copyist commands their whole attention; they take no interest in the original picture.

Looking up from the sketch, Francine was startled. She discovered a man, at the window of the Swiss summer-house, watching her.

"When you have done with that drawing," he said quietly, "please let me have it back again."

He was tall and thin and dark. His finely-shaped intelligent face--hidden, as to the lower part of it, by a curly black beard--would have been absolutely handsome, even in the eyes of a schoolgirl, but for the deep furrows that marked it prematurely between the eyebrows, and at the sides of the mouth. In the same way, an underlying mockery impaired the attraction of his otherwise refined and gentle manner. Among his fellow-creatures, children and dogs were the only critics who appreciated his merits without discovering the defects which lessened the favorable appreciation of him by men and women. He dressed neatly, but his morning coat was badly made, and his picturesque felt hat was too old. In short, there seemed to be no good quality about him which was not perversely associated with a drawback of some kind. He was one of those harmless and luckless men, possessed of excellent qualities, who fail nevertheless to achieve popularity in their social sphere.

Francine handed his sketch to him, through the window; doubtful whether the words that he had addressed to her were spoken in jest or in earnest.

"I only presumed to touch your drawing," she said, "because it was in danger."

"What danger?" he inquired.

Francine pointed to the pond. "If I had not been in time to pick it up, it would have been blown into the water."

"Do you think it was worth picking up?"

Putting that question, he looked first at the sketch--then at the view which it represented--then back again at the sketch. The corners of his mouth turned upward with a humorous expression of scorn. "Madam Nature," he said, "I beg your pardon." With those words, he composedly tore his work of art into small pieces, and scattered them out of the window.

"What a pity!" said Francine.

He joined her on the ground outside the cottage. "Why is it a pity?" he asked.

"Such a nice drawing."

"It isn't a nice drawing."

"You're not very polite, sir."

He looked at her--and sighed as if he pitied so young a woman for having a temper so ready to take offense. In his flattest contradictions he always preserved the character of a politely-positive man.

"Put it in plain words, miss," he replied. "I have offended the predominant sense in your nature--your sense of self-esteem. You don't like to be told, even indirectly, that you know nothing of Art. In these days, everybody knows everything--and thinks nothing worth knowing after all. But beware how you presume on an appearance of indifference, which is nothing but conceit in disguise. The ruling passion of civilized humanity is, Conceit. You may try the regard of your dearest friend in any other way, and be forgiven. Ruffle the smooth surface of your friend's self-esteem--and there will be an acknowledged coolness between you which will last for life. Excuse me for giving you the benefit of my trumpery experience. This sort of smart talk is _my_ form of conceit. Can I be of use to you in some better way? Are you looking for one of our young ladies?"

Francine began to feel a certain reluctant interest in him when he spoke of "our young ladies." She asked if he belonged to the school.

The corners of his mouth turned up again. "I'm one of the masters," he said. "Are _you_ going to belong to the school, too?"

Francine bent her head, with a gravity and condescension intended to keep him at his proper distance. Far from being discouraged, he permitted his curiosity to take additional liberties. "Are you to have the misfortune of being one of my pupils?" he asked.

"I don't know who you are."

"You won't be much wiser when you do know. My name is Alban Morris."

Francine corrected herself. "I mean, I don't know what you teach."

Alban Morris pointed to the fragments of his sketch from Nature. "I am a bad artist," he said. "Some bad artists become Royal Academicians. Some take to drink. Some get a pension. And some--I am one of them--find refuge in schools. Drawing is an 'Extra' at this school. Will you take my advice? Spare your good father's pocket; say you don't want to learn to draw."

He was so gravely in earnest that Francine burst out laughing. "You are a strange man," she said.

"Wrong again, miss. I am only an unhappy man."

The furrows in his face deepened, the latent humor died out of his eyes. He turned to the summer-house window, and took up a pipe and tobacco pouch, left on the ledge.

"I lost my only friend last year," he said. "Since the death of my dog, my pipe is the one companion I have left. Naturally I am not allowed to enjoy the honest fellow's society in the presence of ladies. They have their own taste in perfumes. Their clothes and their letters reek with the foetid secretion of the musk deer. The clean vegetable smell of tobacco is unendurable to them. Allow me to retire--and let me thank you for the trouble you took to save my drawing."

The tone of indifference in which he expressed his gratitude piqued Francine. She resented it by drawing her own conclusion from what he had said of the ladies and the musk deer. "I was wrong in admiring your drawing," she remarked; "and wrong again in thinking you a strange man. Am I wrong, for the third time, in believing that you dislike women?"

"I am sorry to say you are right," Alban Morris answered gravely.

"Is there not even one exception?"

The instant the words passed her lips, she saw that there was some secretly sensitive feeling in him which she had hurt. His black brows gathered into a frown, his piercing eyes looked at her with angry surprise. It was over in a moment. He raised his shabby hat, and made her a bow.

"There is a sore place still left in me," he said; "and you have innocently hit it. Good-morning."

Before she could speak again, he had turned the corner of the summer-house, and was lost to view in a shrubbery on the westward side of the grounds.