

The Professor

Charlotte Brontë

Chapter 18

THE young Anglo-Swiss evidently derived both pleasure and profit from the study of her mother-tongue. In teaching her I did not, of course, confine myself to the ordinary school routine; I made instruction in English a channel for instruction in literature. I prescribed to her a course of reading; she had a little selection of English classics, a few of which had been left her by her mother, and the others she had purchased with her own penny-fee. I lent her some more modern works; all these she read with avidity, giving me, in writing, a clear summary of each work when she had perused it. Composition, too, she delighted in. Such occupation seemed the very breath of her nostrils, and soon her improved productions wrung from me the avowal that those qualities in her I had termed taste and fancy ought rather to have been denominated judgment and imagination. When I intimated so much, which I did as usual in dry and stinted phrase, I looked for the radiant and exulting smile my one word of eulogy had elicited before; but Frances coloured. If she did smile, it was very softly and shyly; and instead of looking up to me with a conquering glance, her eyes rested on my hand, which, stretched over her shoulder, was writing some directions with a pencil on the margin of her book.

“Well, are you pleased that I am satisfied with your progress?” I asked.

“Yes,” said she slowly, gently, the blush that had half subsided returning.

“But I do not say enough, I suppose?” I continued. “My praises are too cool?”

She made no answer, and, I thought, looked a little sad. I divined her thoughts, and should much have liked to have responded to them, had it been expedient so to do. She was not now very ambitious of my admiration—not eagerly desirous of dazzling me; a little affection—ever so little—pleased her better than all the panegyrics in the world. Feeling this, I stood a good while behind her, writing on the margin of her book. I could hardly quit my station or relinquish my occupation;



something retained me bending there, my head very near hers, and my hand near hers too; but the margin of a copy-book is not an illimitable space—so, doubtless, the directress thought; and she took occasion to walk past in order to ascertain by what art I prolonged so disproportionately the period necessary for filling it. I was obliged to go. Distasteful effort—to leave what we most prefer!

Frances did not become pale or feeble in consequence of her sedentary employment; perhaps the stimulus it communicated to her mind counterbalanced the inaction it imposed on her body. She changed, indeed, changed obviously and rapidly; but it was for the better. When I first saw her, her countenance was sunless, her complexion colourless; she looked like one who had no source of enjoyment, no store of bliss anywhere in the world; now the cloud had passed from her mien, leaving space for the dawn of hope and interest, and those feelings rose like a clear morning, animating what had been depressed, tinting what had been pale. Her eyes, whose colour I had not at first known, so dim were they with repressed tears, so shadowed with ceaseless dejection, now, lit by a ray of the sunshine that cheered her heart, revealed irids of bright hazel—irids large and full, screened with long lashes; and pupils instinct with fire. That look of wan emaciation which anxiety or low spirits often communicates to a thoughtful, thin face, rather long than round, having vanished from hers; a clearness of skin almost bloom, and a plumpness almost embonpoint, softened the decided lines of her features. Her figure shared in this beneficial change; it became rounder, and as the harmony of her form was complete and her stature of the graceful middle height, one did not regret (or at least I did not regret) the absence of confirmed fulness, in contours, still slight, though compact, elegant, flexible—the exquisite turning of waist, wrist, hand, foot, and ankle satisfied completely my notions of symmetry, and allowed a lightness and freedom of movement which corresponded with my ideas of grace.

Thus improved, thus wakened to life, Mdlle. Henri began to take a new footing in the school; her mental power, manifested gradually but steadily, ere long extorted recognition even from the envious; and when the young and healthy saw that she could smile brightly, converse gaily, move with vivacity and alertness, they acknowledged in her a sisterhood of youth and health, and tolerated her as of their kind accordingly.

To speak truth, I watched this change much as a gardener watches the growth of a precious plant, and I contributed to it too, even as the said gardener contributes to the development of his favourite. To me it was not difficult to discover how I could best



foster my pupil, cherish her starved feelings, and induce the outward manifestation of that inward vigour which sunless drought and blighting blast had hitherto forbidden to expand. Constancy of attention—a kindness as mute as watchful, always standing by her, cloaked in the rough garb of austerity, and making its real nature known only by a rare glance of interest, or a cordial and gentle word; real respect masked with seeming imperiousness, directing, urging her actions, yet helping her too, and that with devoted care: these were the means I used, for these means best suited Frances' feelings, as susceptible as deep vibrating—her nature at once proud and shy.

The benefits of my system became apparent also in her altered demeanour as a teacher; she now took her place amongst her pupils with an air of spirit and firmness which assured them at once that she meant to be obeyed—and obeyed she was. They felt they had lost their power over her. If any girl had rebelled, she would no longer have taken her rebellion to heart; she possessed a source of comfort they could not drain, a pillar of support they could not overthrow: formerly, when insulted, she wept; now, she smiled.

The public reading of one of her *devoirs* achieved the revelation of her talents to all and sundry; I remember the subject—it was an emigrant's letter to his friends at home. It opened with simplicity; some natural and graphic touches disclosed to the reader the scene of virgin forest and great, New-World river —barren of sail and flag—amidst which the epistle was supposed to be indited. The difficulties and dangers that attend a settler's life, were hinted at; and in the few words said on that subject, Mdlle. Henri failed not to render audible the voice of resolve, patience, endeavour. The disasters which had driven him from his native country were alluded to; stainless honour, inflexible independence, indestructible self-respect there took the word. Past days were spoken of; the grief of parting, the regrets of absence, were touched upon; feeling, forcible and fine, breathed eloquent in every period. At the close, consolation was suggested; religious faith became there the speaker, and she spoke well.

The *devoir* was powerfully written in language at once chaste and choice, in a style nerved with vigour and graced with harmony.

Mdlle. Reuter was quite sufficiently acquainted with English to understand it when read or spoken in her presence, though she could neither speak nor write it herself. During the perusal of this *devoir*, she sat placidly busy, her eyes and fingers occupied with the formation of a “riviere” or open-work hem round a cambric handkerchief; she said nothing, and her face and forehead, clothed with a mask of



purely negative expression, were as blank of comment as her lips. As neither surprise, pleasure, approbation, nor interest were evinced in her countenance, so no more were disdain, envy, annoyance, weariness; if that inscrutable mien said anything, it was simply this—

“The matter is too trite to excite an emotion, or call forth an opinion.”

As soon as I had done, a hum rose; several of the pupils, pressing round Mdlle. Henri, began to beset her with compliments; the composed voice of the directress was now heard:—

“Young ladies, such of you as have cloaks and umbrellas will hasten to return home before the shower becomes heavier” (it was raining a little), “the remainder will wait till their respective servants arrive to fetch them.” And the school dispersed, for it was four o’clock.

“Monsieur, a word,” said Mdlle. Reuter, stepping on to the estrade, and signifying, by a movement of the hand, that she wished me to relinquish, for an instant, the castor I had clutched.

“Mademoiselle, I am at your service.”

“Monsieur, it is of course an excellent plan to encourage effort in young people by making conspicuous the progress of any particularly industrious pupil; but do you not think that in the present instance, Mdlle. Henri can hardly be considered as a concurrent with the other pupils? She is older than most of them, and has had advantages of an exclusive nature for acquiring a knowledge of English; on the other hand, her sphere of life is somewhat beneath theirs; under these circumstances, a public distinction, conferred upon Mdlle. Henri, may be the means of suggesting comparisons, and exciting feelings such as would be far from advantageous to the individual forming their object. The interest I take in Mdlle. Henri’s real welfare makes me desirous of screening her from annoyances of this sort; besides, monsieur, as I have before hinted to you, the sentiment of AMOUR-PROPRE has a somewhat marked preponderance in her character; celebrity has a tendency to foster this sentiment, and in her it should be rather repressed—she rather needs keeping down than bringing forward; and then I think, monsieur—it appears to me that ambition, LITERARY ambition especially, is not a feeling to be cherished in the mind of a woman: would not Mdlle. Henri be much safer and happier if taught to believe that in the quiet discharge of social duties consists her real vocation, than if stimulated to aspire after applause and publicity? She may never marry; scanty as are her resources, obscure as are her connections, uncertain as is her health (for I think



her consumptive, her mother died of that complaint), it is more than probable she never will. I do not see how she can rise to a position, whence such a step would be possible; but even in celibacy it would be better for her to retain the character and habits of a respectable decorous female.”

“Indisputably, mademoiselle,” was my answer. “Your opinion admits of no doubt;” and, fearful of the harangue being renewed, I retreated under cover of that cordial sentence of assent.

At the date of a fortnight after the little incident noted above, I find it recorded in my diary that a hiatus occurred in Mdlle. Henri’s usually regular attendance in class. The first day or two I wondered at her absence, but did not like to ask an explanation of it; I thought indeed some chance word might be dropped which would afford me the information I wished to obtain, without my running the risk of exciting silly smiles and gossiping whispers by demanding it. But when a week passed and the seat at the desk near the door still remained vacant, and when no allusion was made to the circumstance by any individual of the class—when, on the contrary, I found that all observed a marked silence on the point—I determined, *COUTE QUI COUTE*, to break the ice of this silly reserve. I selected Sylvie as my informant, because from her I knew that I should at least get a sensible answer, unaccompanied by wriggle, titter, or other flourish of folly.

“Ou donc est Mdlle. Henri?” I said one day as I returned an exercise-book I had been examining.

“Elle est partie, monsieur.”

“Partie? et pour combien de temps? Quand reviendra-t-elle?”

“Elle est partie pour toujours, monsieur; elle ne reviendra plus.”

“Ah!” was my involuntary exclamation; then after a pause:—

“En etes-vous bien sure, Sylvie?”

“Oui, oui, monsieur, mademoiselle la directrice nous l’a dit elle-meme il y a deux ou trois jours.”

And I could pursue my inquiries no further; time, place, and circumstances forbade my adding another word. I could neither comment on what had been said, nor demand further particulars. A question as to the reason of the teacher’s departure, as to whether it had been voluntary or otherwise, was indeed on my lips, but I suppressed it—there were listeners all round. An hour after, in passing Sylvie in the corridor as she was putting on her bonnet, I stopped short and asked:—



“Sylvie, do you know Mdlle. Henri’s address? I have some books of hers,” I added carelessly, “and I should wish to send them to her.”

“No, monsieur,” replied Sylvie; “but perhaps Rosalie, the portress, will be able to give it you.”

Rosalie’s cabinet was just at hand; I stepped in and repeated the inquiry. Rosalie—a smart French grisette—looked up from her work with a knowing smile, precisely the sort of smile I had been so desirous to avoid exciting. Her answer was prepared; she knew nothing whatever of Mdlle. Henri’s address—had never known it. Turning from her with impatience—for I believed she lied and was hired to lie—I almost knocked down some one who had been standing at my back; it was the directress. My abrupt movement made her recoil two or three steps. I was obliged to apologize, which I did more concisely than politely. No man likes to be dogged, and in the very irritable mood in which I then was the sight of Mdlle. Reuter thoroughly incensed me. At the moment I turned her countenance looked hard, dark, and inquisitive; her eyes were bent upon me with an expression of almost hungry curiosity. I had scarcely caught this phase of physiognomy ere it had vanished; a bland smile played on her features; my harsh apology was received with good-humoured facility.

“Oh, don’t mention it, monsieur; you only touched my hair with your elbow; it is no worse, only a little dishevelled.” She shook it back, and passing her fingers through her curls, loosened them into more numerous and flowing ringlets. Then she went on with vivacity :-

Rosalie, I was coming to tell you to go instantly and close the windows of the salon; the wind is rising, and the muslin curtains will be covered with dust.”

Rosalie departed. “Now,” thought I, “this will not do; Mdlle. Reuter thinks her meanness in eaves-dropping is screened by her art in devising a pretext, whereas the muslin curtains she speaks of are not more transparent than this same pretext.” An impulse came over me to thrust the flimsy screen aside, and confront her craft boldly with a word or two of plain truth. “The rough-shod foot treads most firmly on slippery ground,” thought I; so I began:-

“Mademoiselle Henri has left your establishment—been dismissed, I presume?”

“Ah, I wished to have a little conversation with you, monsieur,” replied the directress with the most natural and affable air in the world; “but we cannot talk quietly here; will Monsieur step into the garden a minute?” And she preceded me, stepping out through the glass-door I have before mentioned.



“There,” said she, when we had reached the centre of the middle alley, and when the foliage of shrubs and trees, now in their summer pride, closing behind end around us, shut out the view of the house, and thus imparted a sense of seclusion even to this little plot of ground in the very core of a capital.

“There, one feels quiet and free when there are only pear-trees and rose-bushes about one; I dare say you, like me, monsieur, are sometimes tired of being eternally in the midst of life; of having human faces always round you, human eyes always upon you, human voices always in your ear. I am sure I often wish intensely for liberty to spend a whole month in the country at some little farm-house, bien gentille, bien propre, tout entouree de champs et de bois; quelle vie charmante que la vie champetre! N’est-ce pas, monsieur?”

“Cela depend, mademoiselle.”

“Que le vent est bon et frais!” continued the directress; and she was right there, for it was a south wind, soft and sweet. I carried my hat in my hand, and this gentle breeze, passing through my hair, soothed my temples like balm. Its refreshing effect, however, penetrated no deeper than the mere surface of the frame; for as I walked by the side of Mdlle. Reuter, my heart was still hot within me, and while I was musing the fire burned; then spake I with my tongue:—

“I understand Mdlle. Henri is gone from hence, and will not return?”

“Ah, true! I meant to have named the subject to you some days ago, but my time is so completely taken up, I cannot do half the things I wish: have you never experienced what it is, monsieur, to find the day too short by twelve hours for your numerous duties?”

“Not often. Mdlle. Henri’s departure was not voluntary, I presume? If it had been, she would certainly have given me some intimation of it, being my pupil.”

“Oh, did she not tell you? that was strange; for my part, I never thought of adverting to the subject; when one has so many things to attend to, one is apt to forget little incidents that are not of primary importance.”

“You consider Mdlle. Henri’s dismissal, then, as a very insignificant event?”

“Dismission? Ah! she was not dismissed; I can say with truth, monsieur, that since I became the head of this establishment no master or teacher has ever been dismissed from it.”

“Yet some have left it, mademoiselle?”

“Many; I have found it necessary to change frequently—a change of instructors is often beneficial to the interests of a school; it gives life and variety to the



proceedings; it amuses the pupils, and suggests to the parents the idea of exertion and progress.”

“Yet when you are tired of a professor or maitresse, you scruple to dismiss them?”

“No need to have recourse to such extreme measures, I assure you. Allons, monsieur le professeur—*asseyons-nous*; je vais vous donner une petite leçon dans votre état d’instituteur.” (I wish I might write all she said to me in French—it loses sadly by being translated into English.) We had now reached THE garden-chair; the directress sat down, and signed to me to sit by her, but I only rested my knee on the seat, and stood leaning my head and arm against the embowering branch of a huge laburnum, whose golden flowers, blent with the dusky green leaves of a lilac-bush, formed a mixed arch of shade and sunshine over the retreat. Mdlle. Reuter sat silent a moment; some novel movements were evidently working in her mind, and they showed their nature on her astute brow; she was meditating some CHEF D’OEUVRE of policy. Convinced by several months’ experience that the affectation of virtues she did not possess was unavailing to ensnare me—aware that I had read her real nature, and would believe nothing of the character she gave out as being hers—she had determined, at last, to try a new key, and see if the lock of my heart would yield to that; a little audacity, a word of truth, a glimpse of the real. “Yes, I will try,” was her inward resolve; and then her blue eye glittered upon me—it did not flash—nothing of flame ever kindled in its temperate gleam.

“Monsieur fears to sit by me?” she inquired playfully.

“I have no wish to usurp Pelet’s place,” I answered, for I had got the habit of speaking to her bluntly—a habit begun in anger, but continued because I saw that, instead of offending, it fascinated her. She cast down her eyes, and drooped her eyelids; she sighed uneasily; she turned with an anxious gesture, as if she would give me the idea of a bird that flutters in its cage, and would fain fly from its jail and jailer, and seek its natural mate and pleasant nest.

“Well—and your lesson?” I demanded briefly.

“Ah!” she exclaimed, recovering herself, “you are so young, so frank and fearless, so talented, so impatient of imbecility, so disdainful of vulgarity, you need a lesson; here it is then: far more is to be done in this world by dexterity than by strength; but, perhaps, you knew that before, for there is delicacy as well as power in your character—policy, as well as pride?”



“Go on.” said I; and I could hardly help smiling, the flattery was so piquant, so finely seasoned. She caught the prohibited smile, though I passed my hand over my mouth to conceal it; and again she made room for me to sit beside her. I shook my head, though temptation penetrated to my senses at the moment, and once more I told her to go on.

“Well, then, if ever you are at the head of a large establishment, dismiss nobody. To speak truth, monsieur (and to you I will speak truth), I despise people who are always making rows, blustering, sending off one to the right, and another to the left, urging and hurrying circumstances. I’ll tell you what I like best to do, monsieur, shall I?” She looked up again; she had compounded her glance well this time—much archness, more deference, a spicy dash of coquetry, an unveiled consciousness of capacity. I nodded; she treated me like the great Mogul; so I became the great Mogul as far as she was concerned.

“I like, monsieur, to take my knitting in my hands, and to sit quietly down in my chair; circumstances defile past me; I watch their march; so long as they follow the course I wish, I say nothing, and do nothing; I don’t clap my hands, and cry out ‘Bravo! How lucky I am!’ to attract the attention and envy of my neighbours—I am merely passive; but when events fall out ill—when circumstances become adverse—I watch very vigilantly; I knit on still, and still I hold my tongue; but every now and then, monsieur, I just put my toe out—so—and give the rebellious circumstance a little secret push, without noise, which sends it the way I wish, and I am successful after all, and nobody has seen my expedient. So, when teachers or masters become troublesome and inefficient—when, in short, the interests of the school would suffer from their retaining their places—I mind my knitting, events progress, circumstances glide past; I see one which, if pushed ever so little awry, will render untenable the post I wish to have vacated—the deed is done—the stumbling-block removed—and no one saw me: I have not made an enemy, I am rid of an incumbrance.”

A moment since, and I thought her alluring; this speech concluded, I looked on her with distaste. “Just like you,” was my cold answer. “And in this way you have ousted Mdlle. Henri? You wanted her office, therefore you rendered it intolerable to her?”

“Not at all, monsieur, I was merely anxious about Mdlle. Henri’s health; no, your moral sight is clear and piercing, but there you have failed to discover the truth. I took—I have always taken a real interest in Mdlle. Henri’s welfare; I did not like her going out in all weathers; I thought it would be more advantageous for her to



obtain a permanent situation; besides, I considered her now qualified to do something more than teach sewing. I reasoned with her; left the decision to herself; she saw the correctness of my views, and adopted them.”

“Excellent! and now, mademoiselle, you will have the goodness to give me her address.”

“Her address!” and a sombre and stony change came over the mien of the directress. “Her address? Ah?—well—I wish I could oblige you, monsieur, but I cannot, and I will tell you why; whenever I myself asked her for her address, she always evaded the inquiry. I thought—I may be wrong—but I THOUGHT her motive for doing so, was a natural, though mistaken reluctance to introduce me to some, probably, very poor abode; her means were narrow, her origin obscure; she lives somewhere, doubtless, in the ‘basse ville.’”

“I’ll not lose sight of my best pupil yet,” said I, “though she were born of beggars and lodged in a cellar; for the rest, it is absurd to make a bugbear of her origin to me—I happen to know that she was a Swiss pastor’s daughter, neither more nor less; and, as to her narrow means, I care nothing for the poverty of her purse so long as her heart overflows with affluence.”

“Your sentiments are perfectly noble, monsieur,” said the directress, affecting to suppress a yawn; her sprightliness was now extinct, her temporary candour shut up; the little, red-coloured, piratical-looking pennon of audacity she had allowed to float a minute in the air, was furled, and the broad, sober-hued flag of dissimulation again hung low over the citadel. I did not like her thus, so I cut short the TETE-A-TETE and departed.