

# The Professor Charlotte Brontë

## Chapter 24

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ONE fine, frosty Sunday in November, Frances and I took a long walk; we made the tour of the city by the Boulevards; and, afterwards, Frances being a little tired, we sat down on one of those wayside seats placed under the trees, at intervals, for the accommodation of the weary. Frances was telling me about Switzerland; the subject animated her; and I was just thinking that her eyes spoke full as eloquently as her tongue, when she stopped and remarked—

“Monsieur, there is a gentleman who knows you.”

I looked up; three fashionably dressed men were just then passing—Englishmen, I knew by their air and gait as well as by their features; in the tallest of the trio I at once recognized Mr. Hunsden; he was in the act of lifting his hat to Frances; afterwards, he made a grimace at me, and passed on.

“Who is he?”

“A person I knew in England.”

“Why did he bow to me? He does not know me.”

“Yes, he does know you, in his way.”

“How, monsieur?” (She still called me “monsieur”; I could not persuade her to adopt any more familiar term.)

“Did you not read the expression of his eyes?”

“Of his eyes? No. What did they say?”

“To you they said, ‘How do you do, Wilhelmina, Crimsworth?’ To me, ‘So you have found your counterpart at last; there she sits, the female of your kind!’”

“Monsieur, you could not read all that in his eyes; He was so soon gone.”

“I read that and more, Frances; I read that he will probably call on me this evening, or on some future occasion shortly; and I have no doubt he will insist on being introduced to you; shall I bring him to your rooms?”



“If you please, monsieur—I have no objection; I think, indeed, I should rather like to see him nearer; he looks so original.”

As I had anticipated, Mr. Hunsden came that evening. The first thing he said was:—

“You need not begin boasting, Monsieur le Professeur; I know about your appointment to — College, and all that; Brown has told me.” Then he intimated that he had returned from Germany but a day or two since; afterwards, he abruptly demanded whether that was Madame Pelet-Reuter with whom he had seen me on the Boulevards. I was going to utter a rather emphatic negative, but on second thoughts I checked myself, and, seeming to assent, asked what he thought of her?

“As to her, I’ll come to that directly; but first I’ve a word for you. I see you are a scoundrel; you’ve no business to be promenading about with another man’s wife. I thought you had sounder sense than to get mixed up in foreign hodge-podge of this sort.”

“But the lady?”

“She’s too good for you evidently; she is like you, but something better than you—no beauty, though; yet when she rose (for I looked back to see you both walk away) I thought her figure and carriage good. These foreigners understand grace. What the devil has she done with Pelet? She has not been married to him three months—he must be a spoon!”

I would not let the mistake go too far; I did not like it much.

“Pelet? How your head runs on Mons. and Madame Pelet! You are always talking about them. I wish to the gods you had wed Mdlle. Zoraide yourself!”

“Was that young gentlewoman not Mdlle. Zoraide?”

“No; nor Madame Zoraide either.”

“Why did you tell a lie, then?”

“I told no lie; but you are in such a hurry. She is a pupil of mine—a Swiss girl.”

“And of course you are going to be married to her? Don’t deny that.”

“Married! I think I shall—if Fate spares us both ten weeks longer. That is my little wild strawberry, Hunsden, whose sweetness made me careless of your hothouse grapes.”

“Stop! No boasting—no heroics; I won’t hear them. What is she? To what caste does she belong?”

I smiled. Hunsden unconsciously laid stress on the word caste, and, in fact, republican, lordhater as he was, Hunsden was as proud of his old —shire blood, of



his descent and family standing, respectable and respected through long generations back, as any peer in the realm of his Norman race and Conquest-dated title. Hunsden would as little have thought of taking a wife from a caste inferior to his own, as a Stanley would think of mating with a Cobden. I enjoyed the surprise I should give; I enjoyed the triumph of my practice over his theory; and leaning over the table, and uttering the words slowly but with repressed glee, I said concisely—

“She is a lace-mender.”

Hunsden examined me. He did not SAY he was surprised, but surprised he was; he had his own notions of good breeding. I saw he suspected I was going to take some very rash step; but repressing declamation or remonstrance, he only answered—

“Well, you are the best; judge of your own affairs. A lace-mender may make a good wife as well as a lady; but of course you have taken care to ascertain thoroughly that since she has not education, fortune or station, she is well furnished with such natural qualities as you think most likely to conduce to your happiness. Has she many relations?”

“None in Brussels.”

“That is better. Relations are often the real evil in such cases. I cannot but think that a train of inferior connections would have been a bore to you to your life’s end.”

After sitting in silence a little while longer, Hunsden rose, and was quietly bidding me good evening; the polite, considerate manner in which he offered me his hand (a thing he had never done before), convinced me that he thought I had made a terrible fool of myself; and that, ruined and thrown away as I was, it was no time for sarcasm or cynicism, or indeed for anything but indulgence and forbearance.

“Good night, William,” he said, in a really soft voice, while his face looked benevolently compassionate. “Good night, lad. I wish you and your future wife much prosperity; and I hope she will satisfy your fastidious soul.”

I had much ado to refrain from laughing as I beheld the magnanimous pity of his mien; maintaining, however, a grave air, I said:—

“I thought you would have liked to have seen Mdlle. Henri?”

“Oh, that is the name! Yes—if it would be convenient, I should like to see her—but——.” He hesitated.

“Well?”

“I should on no account wish to intrude.”



“Come, then,” said I. We set out. Hunsden no doubt regarded me as a rash, imprudent man, thus to show my poor little grisette sweetheart, in her poor little unfurnished grenier; but he prepared to act the real gentleman, having, in fact, the kernel of that character, under the harsh husk it pleased him to wear by way of mental mackintosh. He talked affably, and even gently, as we went along the street; he had never been so civil to me in his life. We reached the house, entered, ascended the stair; on gaining the lobby, Hunsden turned to mount a narrower stair which led to a higher story; I saw his mind was bent on the attics.

“Here, Mr. Hunsden,” said I quietly, tapping at Frances’ door. He turned; in his genuine politeness he was a little disconcerted at having made the mistake; his eye reverted to the green mat, but he said nothing.

We walked in, and Frances rose from her seat near the table to receive us; her mourning attire gave her a recluse, rather conventual, but withal very distinguished look; its grave simplicity added nothing to beauty, but much to dignity; the finish of the white collar and manchettes sufficed for a relief to the merino gown of solemn black; ornament was forsworn. Frances curtsied with sedate grace, looking, as she always did, when one first accosted her, more a woman to respect than to love; I introduced Mr. Hunsden, and she expressed her happiness at making his acquaintance in French. The pure and polished accent, the low yet sweet and rather full voice, produced their effect immediately; Hunsden spoke French in reply; I had not heard him speak that language before; he managed it very well. I retired to the window-seat; Mr. Hunsden, at his hostess’s invitation, occupied a chair near the hearth; from my position I could see them both, and the room too, at a glance. The room was so clean and bright, it looked like a little polished cabinet; a glass filled with flowers in the centre of the table, a fresh rose in each china cup on the mantelpiece gave it an air of FETE, Frances was serious, and Mr. Hunsden subdued, but both mutually polite; they got on at the French swimmingly: ordinary topics were discussed with great state and decorum; I thought I had never seen two such models of propriety, for Hunsden (thanks to the constraint of the foreign tongue) was obliged to shape his phrases, and measure his sentences, with a care that forbade any eccentricity. At last England was mentioned, and Frances proceeded to ask questions. Animated by degrees, she began to change, just as a grave night-sky changes at the approach of sunrise: first it seemed as if her forehead cleared, then her eyes glittered, her features relaxed, and became quite mobile; her subdued complexion grew warm and transparent; to me, she now looked pretty; before, she had only looked ladylike.



She had many things to say to the Englishman just fresh from his island-country, and she urged him with an enthusiasm of curiosity, which ere long thawed Hunsden's reserve as fire thaws a congealed viper. I use this not very flattering comparison because he vividly reminded me of a snake waking from torpor, as he erected his tall form, reared his head, before a little declined, and putting back his hair from his broad Saxon forehead, showed unshaded the gleam of almost savage satire which his interlocutor's tone of eagerness and look of ardour had sufficed at once to kindle in his soul and elicit from his eyes: he was himself; as Frances was herself, and in none but his own language would he now address her.

"You understand English?" was the prefatory question.

"A little."

"Well, then, you shall have plenty of it; and first, I see you've not much more sense than some others of my acquaintance" (indicating me with his thumb), "or else you'd never turn rabid about that dirty little country called England; for rabid, I see you are; I read Anglophobia in your looks, and hear it in your words. Why, mademoiselle, is it possible that anybody with a grain of rationality should feel enthusiasm about a mere name, and that name England? I thought you were a lady-abbess five minutes ago, and respected you accordingly; and now I see you are a sort of Swiss sibyl, with high Tory and high Church principles!"

"England is your country?" asked Frances.

"Yes."

"And you don't like it?"

"I'd be sorry to like it! A little corrupt, venal, lord-and-king-cursed nation, full or mucky pride (as they say in —shire), and helpless pauperism; rotten with abuses, worm-eaten with prejudices!"

"You might say so of almost every state; there are abuses and prejudices everywhere, and I thought fewer in England than in other countries."

"Come to England and see. Come to Birmingham and Manchester; come to St. Giles' in London, and get a practical notion of how our system works. Examine the footprints of our august aristocracy; see how they walk in blood, crushing hearts as they go. Just put your head in at English cottage doors; get a glimpse of Famine crouched torpid on black hearthstones; of Disease lying bare on beds without coverlets, of Infamy wantoning viciously with Ignorance, though indeed Luxury is her favourite paramour, and princely halls are dearer to her than thatched hovels—"



“I was not thinking of the wretchedness and vice in England; I was thinking of the good side—of what is elevated in your character as a nation.”

“There is no good side—none at least of which you can have any knowledge; for you cannot appreciate the efforts of industry, the achievements of enterprise, or the discoveries of science: narrowness of education and obscurity of position quite incapacitate you from understanding these points; and as to historical and poetical associations, I will not insult you, mademoiselle, by supposing that you alluded to such humbug.”

“But I did partly.”

Hunsden laughed—his laugh of unmitigated scorn.

“I did, Mr. Hunsden. Are you of the number of those to whom such associations give no pleasure?”

“Mademoiselle, what is an association? I never saw one. What is its length, breadth, weight, value—ay, VALUE? What price will it bring in the market?”

“Your portrait, to any one who loved you, would, for the sake of association, be without price.”

That inscrutable Hunsden heard this remark and felt it rather acutely, too, somewhere; for he coloured—a thing not unusual with him, when hit unawares on a tender point. A sort of trouble momentarily darkened his eye, and I believe he filled up the transient pause succeeding his antagonist’s home-thrust, by a wish that some one did love him as he would like to be loved —some one whose love he could unreservedly return.

The lady pursued her temporary advantage.

“If your world is a world without associations, Mr. Hunsden, I no longer wonder that you hate England so. I don’t clearly know what Paradise is, and what angels are; yet taking it to be the most glorious region I can conceive, and angels the most elevated existences—if one of them—if Abdiel the Faithful himself” (she was thinking of Milton) “were suddenly stripped of the faculty of association, I think he would soon rush forth from ‘the ever-during gates,’ leave heaven, and seek what he had lost in hell. Yes, in the very hell from which he turned ‘with retorted scorn.’”

Frances’ tone in saying this was as marked as her language, and it was when the word “hell” twanged off from her lips, with a somewhat startling emphasis, that Hunsden deigned to bestow one slight glance of admiration. He liked something strong, whether in man or woman; he liked whatever dared to clear conventional limits. He had never before heard a lady say “hell” with that uncompromising sort





of accent, and the sound pleased him from a lady's lips; he would fain have had Frances to strike the string again, but it was not in her way. The display of eccentric vigour never gave her pleasure, and it only sounded in her voice or flashed in her countenance when extraordinary circumstances —and those generally painful— forced it out of the depths where it burned latent. To me, once or twice, she had in intimate conversation, uttered venturous thoughts in nervous language; but when the hour of such manifestation was past, I could not recall it; it came of itself and of itself departed. Hunsden's excitations she put by soon with a smile, and recurring to the theme of disputation, said—

“Since England is nothing, why do the continental nations respect her so?”

“I should have thought no child would have asked that question,” replied Hunsden, who never at any time gave information without reproving for stupidity those who asked it of him. “If you had been my pupil, as I suppose you once had the misfortune to be that of a deplorable character not a hundred miles off, I would have put you in the corner for such a confession of ignorance. Why, mademoiselle, can't you see that it is our GOLD which buys us French politeness, German good-will, and Swiss servility?” And he sneered diabolically.

“Swiss?” said Frances, catching the word “servility.” “Do you call my countrymen servile?” and she started up. I could not suppress a low laugh; there was ire in her glance and defiance in her attitude. “Do you abuse Switzerland to me, Mr. Hunsden? Do you think I have no associations? Do you calculate that I am prepared to dwell only on what vice and degradation may be found in Alpine villages, and to leave quite out of my heart the social greatness of my countrymen, and our blood-earned freedom, and the natural glories of our mountains? You're mistaken—you're mistaken.”

“Social greatness? Call it what you will, your countrymen are sensible fellows; they make a marketable article of what to you is an abstract idea; they have, ere this, sold their social greatness and also their blood-earned freedom to be the servants of foreign kings.”

“You never were in Switzerland?”

“Yes—I have been there twice.”

“You know nothing of it.”

“I do.”



“And you say the Swiss are mercenary, as a parrot says ‘Poor Poll,’ or as the Belgians here say the English are not brave, or as the French accuse them of being perfidious: there is no justice in your dictums.”

“There is truth.”

“I tell you, Mr. Hunsden, you are a more unpractical man than I am an unpractical woman, for you don’t acknowledge what really exists; you want to annihilate individual patriotism and national greatness as an atheist would annihilate God and his own soul, by denying their existence.”

“Where are you flying to? You are off at a tangent—I thought we were talking about the mercenary nature of the Swiss.”

“We were—and if you proved to me that the Swiss are mercenary to-morrow (which you cannot do) I should love Switzerland still.”

“You would be mad, then—mad as a March hare—to indulge in a passion for millions of shiploads of soil, timber, snow, and ice.”

“Not so mad as you who love nothing.”

“There’s a method in my madness; there’s none in yours.”

“Your method is to squeeze the sap out of creation and make manure of the refuse, by way of turning it to what you call use.”

“You cannot reason at all,” said Hunsden; “there is no logic in you.”

“Better to be without logic than without feeling,” retorted Frances, who was now passing backwards and forwards from her cupboard to the table, intent, if not on hospitable thoughts, at least on hospitable deeds, for she was laying the cloth, and putting plates, knives and forks thereon.

“Is that a hit at me, mademoiselle? Do you suppose I am without feeling?”

“I suppose you are always interfering with your own feelings, and those of other people, and dogmatizing about the irrationality of this, that, and the other sentiment, and then ordering it to be suppressed because you imagine it to be inconsistent with logic.”

“I do right.”

Frances had stepped out of sight into a sort of little pantry; she soon reappeared.

“You do right? Indeed, no! You are much mistaken if you think so. Just be so good as to let me get to the fire, Mr. Hunsden; I have something to cook.” (An interval occupied in settling a casserole on the fire; then, while she stirred its contents:) “Right! as if it were right to crush any pleasurable sentiment that God has





given to man, especially any sentiment that, like patriotism, spreads man's selfishness in wider circles" (fire stirred, dish put down before it).

"Were you born in Switzerland?"

"I should think so, or else why should I call it my country?"

"And where did you get your English features and figure?"

"I am English, too; half the blood in my veins is English; thus I have a right to a double power of patriotism, possessing an interest in two noble, free, and fortunate countries."

"You had an English mother?"

"Yes, yes; and you, I suppose, had a mother from the moon or from Utopia, since not a nation in Europe has a claim on your interest?"

"On the contrary, I'm a universal patriot, if you could understand me rightly: my country is the world."

"Sympathies so widely diffused must be very shallow: will you have the goodness to come to table. Monsieur" (to me who appeared to be now absorbed in reading by moonlight)—"Monsieur, supper is served."

This was said in quite a different voice to that in which she had been bandying phrases with Mr. Hunsden—not so short, graver and softer.

"Frances, what do you mean by preparing, supper? we had no intention of staying."

"Ah, monsieur, but you have stayed, and supper is prepared; you have only the alternative of eating it."

The meal was a foreign one, of course; it consisted in two small but tasty dishes of meat prepared with skill and served with nicety; a salad and "fromage francais," completed it. The business of eating interposed a brief truce between the belligerents, but no sooner was supper disposed of than they were at it again. The fresh subject of dispute ran on the spirit of religious intolerance which Mr. Hunsden affirmed to exist strongly in Switzerland, notwithstanding the professed attachment of the Swiss to freedom. Here Frances had greatly the worst of it, not only because she was unskilled to argue, but because her own real opinions on the point in question happened to coincide pretty nearly with Mr. Hunsden's, and she only contradicted him out of opposition. At last she gave in, confessing that she thought as he thought, but bidding him take notice that she did not consider herself beaten.

"No more did the French at Waterloo," said Hunsden.



“There is no comparison between the cases,” rejoined Frances; “mine was a sham fight.”

“Sham or real, it’s up with you.”

“No; though I have neither logic nor wealth of words, yet in a case where my opinion really differed from yours, I would adhere to it when I had not another word to say in its defence; you should be baffled by dumb determination. You speak of Waterloo; your Wellington ought to have been conquered there, according to Napoleon; but he persevered in spite of the laws of war, and was victorious in defiance of military tactics. I would do as he did.”

“I’ll be bound for it you would; probably you have some of the same sort of stubborn stuff in you.

“I should be sorry if I had not; he and Tell were brothers, and I’d scorn the Swiss, man or woman, who had none of the much-enduring nature of our heroic William in his soul.”

“If Tell was like Wellington, he was an ass.”

“Does not ASS mean BAUDET?” asked Frances, turning to me.

“No, no,” replied I, “it means an ESPRIT-FORT; and now,” I continued, as I saw that fresh occasion of strife was brewing between these two, “it is high time to go.”

Hunsden rose. “Good bye,” said he to Frances; “I shall be off for this glorious England to-morrow, and it may be twelve months or more before I come to Brussels again; whenever I do come I’ll seek you out, and you shall see if I don’t find means to make you fiercer than a dragon. You’ve done pretty well this evening, but next interview you shall challenge me outright. Meantime you’re doomed to become Mrs. William Crimsworth, I suppose; poor young lady? but you have a spark of spirit; cherish it, and give the Professor the full benefit thereof.”

“Are you married. Mr. Hunsden?” asked Frances, suddenly.

“No. I should have thought you might have guessed I was a Benedict by my look.”

“Well, whenever you marry don’t take a wife out of Switzerland; for if you begin blaspheming Helvetia, and cursing the cantons —above all, if you mention the word ASS in the same breath with the name Tell (for ass IS baudet, I know; though Monsieur is pleased to translate it ESPRIT-FORT) your mountain maid will some night smother her Breton-bretonnant, even as your own Shakspeare’s Othello smothered Desdemona.”

“I am warned,” said Hunsden; “and so are you, lad,” (nodding to me). “I hope yet to hear of a travesty of the Moor and his gentle lady, in which the parts shall be reversed according to the plan just sketched—you, however, being in my nightcap. Farewell, mademoiselle!” He bowed on her hand, absolutely like Sir Charles Grandison on that of Harriet Byron; adding—“Death from such fingers would not be without charms.”

“Mon Dieu!” murmured Frances, opening her large eyes and lifting her distinctly arched brows; “c’est qu’il fait des compliments! je ne m’y suis pas attendu.” She smiled, half in ire, half in mirth, curtsied with foreign grace, and so they parted.

No sooner had we got into the street than Hunsden collared me.

“And that is your lace-mender?” said he; “and you reckon you have done a fine, magnanimous thing in offering to marry her? You, a scion of Seacombe, have proved your disdain of social distinctions by taking up with an ouvriere! And I pitied the fellow, thinking his feelings had misled him, and that he had hurt himself by contracting a low match!”

“Just let go my collar, Hunsden.”

“On the contrary, he swayed me to and fro; so I grappled him round the waist. It was dark; the street lonely and lampless. We had then a tug for it; and after we had both rolled on the pavement, and with difficulty picked ourselves up, we agreed to walk on more soberly.

“Yes, that’s my lace-mender,” said I; “and she is to be mine for life—God willing.”

“God is not willing—you can’t suppose it; what business have you to be suited so well with a partner? And she treats you with a sort of respect, too, and says, ‘Monsieur’ and modulates her tone in addressing you, actually, as if you were something superior! She could not evince more deference to such a one as I, were she favoured by fortune to the supreme extent of being my choice instead of yours.”

“Hunsden, you’re a puppy. But you’ve only seen the title-page of my happiness; you don’t know the tale that follows; you cannot conceive the interest and sweet variety and thrilling excitement of the narrative.”

Hunsden—speaking low and deep, for we had now entered a busier street—desired me to hold my peace, threatening to do something dreadful if I stimulated his wrath further by boasting. I laughed till my sides ached. We soon reached his hotel; before he entered it, he said—

“Don’t be vainglorious. Your lace-mender is too good for you, but not good enough for me; neither physically nor morally does she come up to my ideal of a woman. No; I dream of something far beyond that pale-faced, excitable little Helvetian (by-the-by she has infinitely more of the nervous, mobile Parisienne in her than of the the robust ‘jungfrau’). Your Mdlle. Henri is in person “chétive”, in mind “sans caractere”, compared with the queen of my visions. You, indeed, may put up with that “minois chiffone”; but when I marry I must have straighter and more harmonious features, to say nothing of a nobler and better developed shape than that perverse, ill-thriven child can boast.”

“Bribe a seraph to fetch you a coal of fire from heaven, if you will,” said I, “and with it kindle life in the tallest, fattest, most boneless, fullest-blooded of Ruben’s painted women—leave me only my Alpine peri, and I’ll not envy you.”

With a simultaneous movement, each turned his back on the other. Neither said “God bless you;” yet on the morrow the sea was to roll between us.

