My French Master

Elizabeth Gaskell

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CHAPTER I

My father's house was in the country, seven miles away from the nearest town. He had been an officer in the navy; but as he had met with some accident that would disable him from ever serving again, he gave up his commission, and his half−pay. He had a small private fortune, and my mother had not been penniless; so he purchased a house, and ten or twelve acres of land, and set himself up as an amateur farmer on a very small scale. My mother rejoiced over the very small scale of his operations; and when my father regretted, as he did very often, that no more land was to be purchased in the neighbourhood, I could see her setting herself a sum in her head, 'If on twelve acres he manages to lose a hundred pounds a year, what would be our loss on a hundred and fifty?' But when my father was pushed hard on the subject of the money he spent in his sailor−like farming, he had one constant retreat:

'Think of the health, and the pleasure we all of us take in the cultivation of the fields around us! It is something for us to do, and to look forward to every day.' And this was so true that, as long as my father confined himself to these arguments, my mother left him unmolested: but to strangers he was still apt to enlarge on the returns his farm brought him in; and he had often to pull up in his statements when he caught the warning glance of my mother's eye, showing him that she was not so much absorbed in her own conversation as to be deaf to his voice. But as for the happiness that arose out of our mode of life, that was not to be calculated by tens or hundreds of pounds. There were only two of us, my sister and myself; and my mother undertook the greater part of our education. We helped her in her household cares during part of the morning; then came an old−fashioned routine of lessons, such as she herself had learnt when a girl Goldsmith's History of England, Rollins's Ancient History, Lindley Murray's Grammar, and plenty of sewing, and stitching.

My mother used sometimes to sigh, and wish that she could buy us a piano, and teach us what little music she knew; but many of my dear father's habits were expensive; at least, for a person possessed of no larger an income than he had. Besides the quiet and unsuspected drain of his agricultural pursuits, he was of a social turn; enjoying the dinners to which he was invited by his more affluent neighbours; and especially delighted in returning them the compliment, and giving them choice little entertainments, which would have been yet more frequent in their recurrence than they were, if it had not been for my mother's prudence. But we never were able to purchase the piano; it required a greater outlay of ready money than we ever possessed. I daresay we should have grown up ignorant of any language but our own if it had not been for my father's social habits, which led to our learning French in a very unexpected manner. He and my mother went to dine with General Ashburton, one of the forest rangers; and there they met with an emigrant gentleman, a Monsieur de Chalabre, who had escaped in a wonderful manner, and at terrible peril to his life; and was, consequently, in our small forest−circle, a great lion, and a worthy cause of a series of dinner parties. His first entertainer, General Ashburton, had known him in France, under very different circumstances; and he was not prepared for the quiet and dignified request made by his guest, one afternoon after M. de Chalabre had been about a fortnight in the forest, that the general would recommend him as a French teacher, if he could conscientiously do so.

To the general's remonstrances, M. de Chalabre smilingly replied, by an assurance that his assumption of his new occupation could only be for a short time; that the good cause would must triumph. It was before the fatal 21st of January, 1793; and then, still smiling, he strengthened his position by quoting innumerable instances out of the classics, of heroes and patriots, generals and commanders, who had been reduced by Fortune's frolics to adopt some occupation far below their original one. He closed his speech with informing the general that, relying upon his kindness in acting as referee, he had taken lodgings for a few months at a small farm which was in the centre of our forest circle of acquaintances. The general was too thoroughly a gentleman to say anything more than that he should be most happy to do whatever he could to forward M. de Chalabre's plans, and as my father was the first person whom he met with after this conversation, it was announced to us, on the very evening of the day on which it had taken place, that we were forthwith to learn French; and I verily believe that, if my father could have persuaded my mother to join him, we should have formed a French class of father, mother, and two head of daughters, so touched had my father been by the general's account of M. de Chalabre's present desires, as compared with the high estate from which he had fallen. Accordingly, we were installed in the dignity of his first French pupils. My father was anxious that we should have a lesson every other day, ostensibly that we might get on all the more speedily, but really that he might have a larger quarterly bill to pay; at any rate, until M. de Chalabre had more of his time occupied with instruction. But my mother gently interfered, and calmed her husband down into two lessons a week, which was, she said, as much as we could manage. Those happy lessons! I remember them now, at the distance of more than fifty years. Our house was situated on the edge of the forest; our fields were, in fact, cleared out of it. It was not good land for clover; but my father would always sow one particular field with clover seed, because my mother was so fond of the fragrant scent in her evening walks, and through this a footpath ran which led into the forest.

A quarter of a mile beyond a walk on the soft, fine, springy turf, and under the long, low branches of the beech−trees and we arrived at the old red−brick farm where M. de Chalabre was lodging. Not that we went there to take our lessons; that would have been an offence to his spirit of politeness; but as my father and mother were his nearest neighbours, there was a constant interchange of small messages and notes, which we little girls were only too happy to take to our dear M. de Chalabre. Moreover, if our lessons with my mother were ended pretty early, she would say 'You have been good girls; now you may run to the high point in the clover−field, and see if M. de Chalabre is coming; and if he is, you may walk with him; but take care and give him the cleanest part of the path, for you know he does not like to dirty his boots.'

This was all very well in theory; but, like many theories, the difficulty was to put it in practice. If we slipped to the side of the path where the water lay longest, he bowed and retreated behind us to a still wetter place, leaving the clean part for us; yet when we got home, his polished boots would be without a speck, while our shoes were covered with mud.

Another little ceremony which we had to get accustomed to, was his habit of taking off his hat as we approached, and walking by us holding it in his hand. To be sure, he wore a wig, delicately powdered, frizzed, and tied in a queue behind; but we had always a feeling that he would catch cold, and that he was doing us too great an honour, and that he did not know how old or rather how young we were, until one day we saw him (far away from our house) hand a countrywoman over a stile with the same kind of dainty, courteous politeness, lifting her basket of eggs over first; and then, taking up the silk−lined lapel of his coat, he spread it on the palm of his hand for her to rest her fingers upon; instead of which, she took his small white hand in her plump, vigorous gripe, and leant her full weight upon him. He carried her basket for her as far as their roads lay together; and from that time we were less shy in receiving his courtesies, perceiving that he considered them as deference due to our sex, however old or young, or rich or poor. So, as I said, we came down from the clover−field in rather a stately manner, and through the wicket−gate that opened into our garden, which was as rich in its scents of varied kinds as the clover−field had been in its one pure fragrance. My mother would meet us here; and somehow our life was passed as much out of doors as in−doors, both winter and summer we seemed to have our French lessons more frequently in the garden than in the house; for there was a sort of arbour on the lawn near the drawing−room window, to which we always found it easy to carry a table and chairs, and all the rest of the lesson paraphernalia,

if my mother did not prohibit a lesson al fresco.

M. de Chalabre wore, as a sort of morning costume, a coat, waistcoat, and breeches, all made of a kind of coarse grey cloth, which he had bought in the neighbourhood. His three−cornered hat was brushed to a nicety, his wig sat as no one else's did. (My father's was always awry.) And the only thing wanting to his costume when he came was a flower. Sometimes I fancied he purposely omitted gathering one of the roses that clustered up the farm−house in which he lodged, in order to afford my mother the pleasure of culling her choicest carnations and roses to make him up his nosegay, or 'posy,' as he liked to call it. He had picked up that pretty country word, and adopted it as an especial favourite, dwelling on the first syllable with all the languid softness of an Italian accent. Many a time have Mary and I tried to say it like him, we did so admire his way of speaking.

Once seated round the table, whether in the house or out of it, we were bound to attend to our lessons; and somehow he made us perceive that it was a part of the same chivalrous code that made him so helpful to the helpless, to enforce the slightest claim of duty, to the full. No half−prepared lessons for him! The patience, and the resource with which he illustrated and enforced every precept; the untiring− gentleness with which he made our stubborn English tongues pronounce, and mispronounce, and re−pronounce certain words; above all, the sweetness of temper which never varied, were such as I have never seen equalled. If we wondered at these qualities when we were children, how much greater has been our surprise at their existence since we have been grown up, and have learnt that, until his emigration, he was a man of rapid and impulsive action, with the imperfect education implied in the circumstance, that at fifteen he was a sous−lieutenant in the Queen's regiment, and must, consequently, have had to apply himself hard and conscientiously to master the language which he had in after−life to teach.

Twice we had holidays to suit his sad convenience. Holidays with us were not at Christmas, and Midsummer, Easter, and Michaelmas. If my mother was unusually busy, we had what we called a holiday, though, in reality, it involved harder work than our regular lessons; but we fetched, and carried, and ran errands, and became rosy, and dusty, and sang merry songs in the gaiety of our hearts. If the day was remarkably fine, my dear father whose spirits were rather apt to vary with the weather would come bursting in with his bright, kind, bronzed face, and carry the day by storm with my mother. 'It was a shame to coop such young things up in a house,' he would say, 'when every other young animal was frolicking in the air and sunshine. Grammar! what was that but the art of arranging words? and he never knew a woman but could do that fast enough. Geography! he would undertake to teach us more geography in one winter evening, telling us of the countries where he had been, with just a map before him, than we could learn in ten years with that stupid book, all full of hard words. As for the French why, that must be learnt; for he should not like M. de Chalabre to think we slighted the lessons he took so much pains to give us; but surely we could get up the earlier to learn our French.' We promised by acclamation; and my mother sometimes smilingly, sometimes reluctantly was always compelled to yield. And these were the usual occasions for our holidays. But twice we had a fortnight's entire cessation of French lessons: once in January, and once in October. Nor did we even see our dear French master during those periods. We went several times to the top of the clover−field, to search the dark green outskirts of the forest with our busy eyes; and if we could have seen his figure in that shade, I am sure we should have scampered to him, forgetful of the prohibition which made the forest forbidden ground. But we did not see him.

It was the fashion in those days to keep children much less informed than they are now on the subjects which interest their parents. A sort of hieroglyphic or cypher talk was used in order to conceal the meaning of much that was said if children were present. My mother was a proficient in this way of talking, and took, we fancied, a certain pleasure in perplexing my father by inventing a new cypher, as it were, every day. For instance, for some time, I was called Martia, because I was very tall of my age; and, just as my father began to understand the name and, it must be owned, a good while after I had learnt to prick up my ears whenever Martia was named my mother suddenly changed me into the 'buttress, from the habit I had acquired of leaning my languid length against a wall. I saw my father's perplexity about this 'buttress' for some days, and could have helped him out of it, but I durst not. And so, when the unfortunate Louis the Sixteenth was executed, the news was too terrible to be put into

plain English, and too terrible also to be made known to us children, nor could we at once find the clue to the cypher in which it was spoken about. We heard about 'the Iris being blown down;' and saw my father's honest loyal excitement about it, and the quiet reserve which always betokened some secret grief on my mother's part.

We had no French lessons; and somehow the poor, battered, storm−torn Iris was to blame for this. It was many weeks after this before we knew the full reason of M. de Chalabre's deep depression when he again came amongst us; why he shook his head when my mother timidly offered him some snowdrops on that first morning on which we began lessons again; why he wore the deep mourning of that day, when all of the dress that could be black was black, and the white muslin frills and ruffles were unstarched and limp, as if to bespeak the very abandonment of grief. We knew well enough the meaning of the next hieroglyphic announcement 'The wicked, cruel boys had broken off the White Lily's head!' That beautiful queen, whose portrait once had been shown to us, with her blue eyes, and her fair resolute look, her profusion of lightly−powdered hair, her white neck adorned with strings of pearls. We could have cried, if we had dared, when we heard the transparent mysterious words. We did cry at night, sitting up in bed, with our arms round each other's necks, and vowing, in our weak, passionate, childish way, that if we lived long enough, that lady's death avenged should be. No one who cannot remember that time can tell the shudder of horror that thrilled through the country at hearing of this last execution. At the moment, there was no time for any consideration of the silent horrors endured for centuries by the people, who at length rose in their madness against their rulers. This last blow changed our dear M. de Chalabre. I never saw him again in quite the same gaiety of heart as before this time. There seemed to be tears very close behind his smiles for ever after. My father went to see him when he had been about a week absent from us no reason given, for did not we, did not every one, know the horror the sun had looked upon! As soon as my father had gone, my mother gave it in charge to us to make the dressing−room belonging to our guest−chamber as much like a sitting−room as possible. My father hoped to bring back M. de Chalabre for a visit to us; but he would probably like to be a good deal alone; and we might move any article of furniture we liked, if we only thought it would make him comfortable.

I believe General Ashburton had been on a somewhat similar errand to my father's before; but he had failed. My father gained his point, as I afterwards learnt, in a very unconscious and characteristic manner. He had urged his invitation on M. de Chalabre, and received such a decided negative that he was hopeless, and quitted the subject. Then M. de Chalabre began to relieve his heart by telling him all the details; my father held his breath to listen at last, his honest heart could contain itself no longer, and the tears ran down his face. His unaffected sympathy touched M. de Chalabre inexpressibly; and in an hour after we saw our dear French master coming down the clover−field slope, leaning on my father's arm, which he had involuntarily offered as a support to one in trouble although he was slightly lame, and ten or fifteen years older than M. de Chalabre.

For a year after that time, M. de Chalabre never wore any flowers; and after that, to the day of his death, no gay or coloured rose or carnation could tempt him. We secretly observed his taste, and always took care to bring him white flowers for his posy. I noticed, too, that on his left arm, under his coat sleeve (sleeves were made very open then), he always wore a small band of black crape. He lived to be eighty−one, but he had the black crape band on when he died.

M. de Chalabre was a favourite in all the forest circle. He was a great acquisition to the sociable dinner parties that were perpetually going on; and though some of the families piqued themselves on being aristocratic, and turned up their noses at any one who had been engaged in trade, however largely, M. de Chalabre, in right of his good blood, his loyalty, his daring preux chevalier actions, was ever an honoured guest. He took his poverty, and the simple habits it enforced, so naturally and gaily, as a mere trifling accident of his life, about which neither concealment nor shame could be necessary, that the very servants often so much more pseudo−aristocratic than their masters loved and respected the French gentleman, who, perhaps, came to teach in the mornings, and in the evenings made his appearance dressed with dainty neatness as a dinner guest. He came lightly prancing through the forest mire; and, in our little hall, at any rate, he would pull out a neat minute case containing a blacking−brush and blacking, and repolish his boots, speaking gaily, in his broken English, to the footman all the time. That blacking−case was his own making; he had a genius for using his fingers. After our lessons were over,

he relaxed into the familiar house friend, the merry play−fellow. We lived far from any carpenter or joiner; if a lock was out of order, M. de Chalabre made it right for us. If any box was wanted, his ingenious fingers had made it before our lesson day. He turned silk−winders for my mother, made a set of chessmen for my father, carved an elegant watch−case out of a rough beef−bone, dressed up little cork dolls for us in short, as he said, his heart would have been broken but for his joiner's tools. Nor were his ingenious gifts employed for us alone. The farmer's wife where he lodged had numerous contrivances in her house which he had made. One particularly which I remember was a paste−board, made after a French pattern, which would not slip about on a dresser, as he had observed her English paste−board do. Susan, the farmer's ruddy daughter, had her work−box, too, to show us; and her cousin−lover had a wonderful stick, with an extraordinary demon head carved upon it; all by M. de Chalabre. Farmer, farmer's wife, Susan, Robert, and all were full of his praises.

We grew from children into girls from girls into women; and still M. de Chalabre taught on in the forest; still he was beloved and honoured; still no dinner−party within five miles was thought complete without him, and ten miles' distance strove to offer him a bed sooner than miss his company. The pretty, merry Susan of sixteen had been jilted by the faithless Robert, and was now a comely, demure damsel of thirty−one or two; still waiting upon M. de Chalabre, and still constant in respectfully singing his praises. My own poor mother was dead; my sister was engaged to be married to a young lieutenant, who was with his ship in the Mediterranean. My father was as youthful as ever in heart, and, indeed, in many of his ways; only his hair was quite white, and the old lameness was more frequently troublesome than it had been. An uncle of his had left him a considerable fortune, so he farmed away to his heart's content, and lost an annual sum of money with the best grace and the lightest heart in the world. There were not even the gentle reproaches of my mother's eyes to be dreaded now.

Things were in this state when the peace of 1814 was declared. We had heard so many and such contradictory rumours that we were inclined to doubt even the Gazette at last, and were discussing probabilities with some vehemence, when M. de Chalabre entered the room unannounced and breathless:

'My friends, give me joy!' he said. 'The Bourbons' he could not go on; his features, nay, his very fingers, worked with agitation, but he could not speak. My father hastened to relieve him.

'We have heard the good news (you see, girls, it is quite true this time). I do congratulate you, my dear friend. I am glad.' And he seized M. de Chalabre's hand in his own hearty gripe, and brought the nervous agitation of the latter to a close by unconsciously administering a pretty severe dose of wholesome pain.

'I go to London. I go straight this afternoon to see my sovereign. My sovereign holds a court to−morrow at Grillon's Hotel; I go to pay him my devoirs. I put on my uniform of Gardes du Corps, which have lain by these many years; a little old, a little worm−eaten, but never mind; they have been seen by Marie Antoinette, which gives them a grace for ever.' He walked about the room in a nervous, hurried way. There was something on his mind, and we signed to my father to be silent for a moment or two, and let it come out. 'No!' said M. de Chalabre, after a moment's pause. 'I cannot say adieu; for I shall return to say, dear friends, my adieux. I did come a poor emigrant; noble Englishmen took me for their friend, and welcomed me to their houses. Chalabre is one large mansion, and my English friends will not forsake me; they will come and see me in my own country; and, for their sakes, not an English beggar shall pass the doors of Chalabre without being warmed and clothed and fed. I will not say adieu. I go now but for two days."

CHAPTER II

My father insisted upon driving M. de Chalabre in his gig to the nearest town through which the London mail passed; and, during the short time that elapsed before my father was ready, he told us something more about Chalabre. He had never spoken of his ancestral home to any of us before; we knew little of his station in his own country. General Ashburton had met with him in Paris, in a set where a man was judged of by his wit and talent

for society, and general brilliance of character, rather than by his wealth and hereditary position. Now we learned for the first time that he was heir to considerable estates in Normandy; to an old Ch?teau Chalabre; all of which he had forfeited by his emigration, it was true, but that was under another regime.

'Ah! if my dear friend, your poor mother, were alive now, I could send her such slips of rare and splendid roses from Chalabre. Often when I did see her nursing up some poor little specimen, I longed in secret for my rose garden at Chalabre. And the orangerie! Ah! Miss Fanny, the bride must come to Chalabre who wishes for a beautiful wreath.' This was an allusion to my sister's engagement; a fact well known to him, as the faithful family friend.

My father came back in high spirits; and began to plan that very evening how to arrange his crops for the ensuing year, so as best to spare time for a visit to Ch?teau Chalabre; and as for us, I think we believed that there was no need to delay our French journey beyond the autumn of the present year.

M. de Chalabre came back in a couple of days; a little damped, we girls fancied, though we hardly liked to speak about it to my father. However, M. de Chalabre explained it to us by saying that he had found London more crowded and busy than he had expected; that it was smoky and dismal after leaving the country, where the trees were already coming into leaf; and, when we pressed him a little more respecting the reception at Grillon's, he laughed at himself for having forgotten the tendency of the Count de Provence in former days to become stout, and so being dismayed at the mass of corpulence which Louis the Eighteenth presented, as he toiled up the long drawing−room of the hotel.

'But what did he say to you?' Fanny asked. 'How did he receive you when you were presented?'

A flash of pain passed over his face; but it was gone directly.

'Oh! his majesty did not recognize my name. It was hardly to be expected he would; though it is a name of note in Normandy; and I have well! that is worth nothing. The Duc de Duras reminded him of a circumstance or two, which I had almost hoped his majesty would not have forgotten; but I myself forgot the pressure of long years of exile; it was no wonder he did not remember me. He said he hoped to see me at the Tuileries. His hopes are my laws. I go to prepare for my departure. If his majesty does not need my sword, I turn it into a ploughshare at Chalabre. Ah! my friend, I will not forget there all the agricultural science I have learned from you.

A gift of a hundred pounds would not have pleased my father so much as this last speech. He began forthwith to inquire about the nature of the soil, in a way which made our poor M. de Chalabre shrug his shoulders in despairing ignorance.

'Never mind!' said my father. 'Rome was not built in a day. It was a long time before I learnt all that I know now. I was afraid I could not leave home this autumn, but I perceive you'll need some one to advise you about laying out the ground for next year's crops.'

So M. de Chalabre left our neighbourhood, with the full understanding that we were to pay him a visit in his Norman chateau in the following September; nor was he content until he had persuaded every one who had shown him kind said he hoped to see me at the Tuileries. His hopes are my laws. I go to prepare for my departure. If his majesty does not need my sword, I turn it into a ploughshare at Chalabre. Ah! my friend, I will not forget there all the agricultural science I have learned from you.

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So M. de Chalabre left our neighbourhood, with the full understanding that we were to pay him a visit in his Norman chateau in the following September; nor was he content until he had persuaded every one who had shown him kindness to promise him a visit at some appointed time. As for his old landlord at the farm, the comely dame and buxom Susan — they, we found, were to be franked there and back, under the pretence that the French dairy−maids had no notion of cleanliness, any more than that the French farming men were judges of stock; so it was absolutely necessary to bring over some one from England to put the affairs of the Ch?teau Chalabre in order; and Farmer Dobson and his wife considered the favour quite reciprocal.

For some time we did not hear from our friend. The war had made the post between France and England very uncertain; so we were obliged to wait, and we tried to be patient; but, somehow, our autumn visit to France was silently given up; and my father gave us long expositions of the disordered state of affairs in a country which had suffered so much as France, and lectured us severely on the folly of having expected to hear so soon. We knew, all the while, that the exposition was repeated to soothe his own impatience, and that the admonition to patience was what he felt that he himself was needing.

At last the letter came. There was a brave attempt at cheerfulness in it, which nearly made me cry, more than any complaints would have done. M. de Chalabre had hoped to retain his commission as sous−lieutenant in the Gardes du Corps — a commission signed by Louis the Sixteenth himself, in 1791. But the regiment was to be remodelled, or re−formed, I forget which; and M. de Chalabre assured us that his was not the only case where applicants had been refused. He had then tried for a commission in the Cent Suisses, the Gardes du Porte, the Mousquetaires — but all were full. 'Was it not a glorious thing for France to have so many brave sons ready to fight on the side of honour and loyalty?' To which question Fanny replied 'that it was a shame;' and my father, after a grunt or two, comforted himself by saying, 'that M. de Chalabre would have the more time to attend to his neglected estate.'

That winter was full of incidents in our home. As it often happens when a family has seemed stationary, and secure from change for years, and then at last one important event happens, another is sure to follow. Fanny's lover returned, and they were married, and left us alone — my father and I. Her husband's ship was stationed in the Mediterranean, and she was to go and live at Malta, with some of his relations there. I know not if it was the agitation of parting with her, but my father was stricken down from health into confirmed invalidism, by a paralytic stroke, soon after her departure, and my interests were confined to the fluctuating reports of a sick room. I did not care for the foreign intelligence which was shaking Europe with an universal tremor. My hopes, my fears were centred in one frail human body — my dearly beloved, my most loving father. I kept a letter in my pocket for days from M. de Chalabre, unable to find the time to decipher his French hieroglyphics; at last I read it aloud to my poor father, rather as a test of his power of enduring interest, than because I was impatient to know what it contained. The news in it was depressing enough, as everything else seemed to be that gloomy winter. A rich manufacturer of Rouen had bought the Ch?teau Chalabre; forfeited to the nation by its former possessor's emigration. His son, M. du Fay, was well−affected towards Louis the Eighteenth — at least as long as his government was secure and promised to be stable, so as not to affect the dyeing and selling of Turkey−red wools; and so the natural legal consequence was, that M. du Fay, Fils, was not to be disturbed in his purchased and paid−for property. My father cared to hear of this disappointment to our poor friend — cared just for one day, and forgot all about it the next. Then came the return from Elba — the hurrying events of that spring — the battle of Waterloo; and to my poor father, in his second childhood, the choice of a daily pudding was far more important than all.

One Sunday, in that August of 1815, I went to church. It was many weeks since I had been able to leave my father for so long a time before. Since I had been last there to worship, it seemed as if my youth had passed away — gone without a warning — leaving no trace behind. After service, I went through the long grass to the unfrequented part of the churchyard where my dear mother lay buried. A garland of brilliant yellow immortelles lay on her grave; and the unwonted offering took me by surprise. I knew of the foreign custom, although I had never seen the kind of wreath before. I took it up, and read one word in the black floral letters; it was simply 'Adieu.' I knew, from the first moment I saw it, that M. de Chalabre must have returned to England. Such a token

of regard was like him, and could spring from no one else. But I wondered a little that we had never heard or seen anything of him; nothing, in fact, since Lady Ashburton had told me that her husband had met with him in Belgium, hurrying to offer himself as a volunteer to one of the eleven generals appointed by the Duc de Feltre to receive such applications. General Ashburton himself had since this died at Brussels, in consequence of wounds received at Waterloo. As the recollection of all these circumstances gathered in my mind, I found I was drawing near the field−path which led out of the direct road home, to farmer Dobson's; and thither I suddenly determined to go, and hear if they had learnt anything respecting their former lodger. As I went up the garden−walk leading to the house, I caught M. de Chalabre's eye; he was gazing abstractedly out of the window of what used to be his sitting−room. In an instant he had joined me in the garden. If my youth had flown, his youth, and middle−age as well, had vanished altogether. He looked older by at least twenty years than when he had left us twelve months ago. How much of this was owing to the change in the arrangement of his dress, I cannot tell. He had formerly been remarkably dainty in all these things; now he was careless, even to the verge of slovenliness. He asked after my sister, after my father, in a manner which evinced the deepest, most respectful interest; but, somehow, it appeared to me as if he hurried question after question, rather to stop any inquiries which I, in my turn, might wish to make.

'I return here to my duties; to my only duties. The good God has not seen me fit to undertake any higher. Henceforth I am the faithful French teacher; the diligent, punctual French teacher: nothing more. But I do hope to teach the French language as becomes a gentleman and a Christian; to do my best. Henceforth the grammar and the syntax are my estate, my coat of arms.' He said this with a proud humility which prevented any reply. I could only change the subject, and urge him to come and see my poor sick father. He replied, —

'To visit the sick, that is my duty as well as my pleasure. For the mere society — I renounce all that. That is now beyond my position, to which I accommodate myself with all my strength.'

Accordingly, when he came to spend an hour with my father, he brought a small bundle of printed papers, announcing the terms on which M. Chalabre (the 'de' was dropped now and for evermore) was desirous of teaching French, and a little paragraph at the bottom of the page solicited the patronage of schools. Now this was a great coming−down. In former days, non−teaching at schools had been the line which marked that M. de Chalabre had taken up teaching rather as an amateur profession, than with any intention of devoting his life to it. He respectfully asked me to distribute these papers where I thought fit. I say 'respectfully' advisedly; there was none of the old deferential gallantry, as offered by a gentleman to a lady, his equal in birth and fortune — instead, there was the matter−of−fact request and statement which a workman offers to his employer. Only in my father's room, he was the former M. de Chalabre; he seemed to understand how vain would be all attempts to recount or explain the circumstances which had led him so decidedly to take a lower level in society. To my father, to the day of his death, M. de Chalabre maintained the old easy footing; assumed a gaiety which he never even pretended to feel anywhere else; listened to my father's childish interests with a true and kindly sympathy for which I ever felt grateful, although he purposely put a deferential reserve between him and me, as a barrier to any expression of such feeling on my part.

His former lessons had been held in such high esteem by those who were privileged to receive them, that he was soon sought after on all sides. The schools of the two principal county towns put forward their claims, and considered it a favour to receive his instructions. Morning, noon, and night he was engaged; even if he had not proudly withdrawn himself from all merely society engagements, he would have had no leisure for them. His only visits were paid to my father, who looked for them with a kind of childish longing. One day, to my surprise, he asked to be allowed to speak to me for an instant alone. He stood silent for a moment, turning his hat in his hand.

'You have a right to know — you, my first pupil; next Tuesday, I marry myself to Miss Susan Dobson, good, respectable woman, to whose happiness I mean to devote my life, or as much of it as is not occupied with the duties of instruction.' He looked up at me, expecting congratulations, perhaps; but I was too much stunned with my surprise: the buxom, red−armed, apple−cheeked Susan, who, when she blushed, blushed the colour of beet−root; who did not know a word of French; who regarded the nation (always excepting the gentleman before me) as frog−eating Mounseers, the national enemies of England! I afterwards thought that perhaps this very ignorance constituted one of her charms. No word, nor allusion, nor expressive silence, nor regretful sympathetic sighs, could remind M. de Chalabre of the bitter past, which he was evidently striving to forget. And, most assuredly, never man had a more devoted and admiring wife than poor Susan made M. de Chalabre. She was a

little awed by him, to be sure; never quite at her ease before him; but I imagine husbands do not dislike such a tribute to their Jupiter−ship. Madame Chalabre received my call, after their marriage, with a degree of sober, rustic, happy dignity, which I could not have foreseen in Susan Dobson. They had taken a small cottage on the borders of the forest; it had a garden round it; and the cow, pigs, and poultry, which were to be her charge, found their keep in the forest. She had a rough country servant to assist her in looking after them; and in what scanty leisure he had, her husband attended to the garden and the bees. Madame Chalabre took me over the neatly furnished cottage with evident pride. 'Moussire,' as she called him, had done this; Moussire had fitted up that. Moussire was evidently a man of resource. In a little closet of a dressing−room belonging to Moussire, there hung a pencil drawing, elaborately finished to the condition of a bad pocket−book engraving. It caught my eye, and I lingered to look at it. It represented a high, narrow house, of considerable size, with four pepper−box turrets at each corner; and a stiff avenue formed the foreground.

'Ch?teau Chalabre?' said I, inquisitively.

'I never asked,' my companion replied. 'Moussire does not always like to be asked questions. It is the picture of some place he is very fond of, for he won't let me dust it for fear I should smear it.'

M. de Chalabre's marriage did not diminish the number of his visits to my father. Until that beloved parent's death, he was faithful in doing all he could to lighten the gloom of the sickroom. But a chasm, which he had opened, separated any present intercourse with him from the free, unreserved friendship that had existed formerly. And yet for his sake I used to go and see his wife. I could not forget early days, nor the walks to the top of the clover−field, nor the daily posies, nor my mother's dear regard for the emigrant gentleman; nor a thousand little kindnesses which he had shown to my absent sister and myself. He did not forget either in the closed and sealed chambers of his heart. So, for his sake, I tried to become a friend to his wife; and she learned to look upon me as such. It was my employment in the sick chamber to make clothes for the little expected Chalabre baby; and its mother would fain (as she told me) have asked me to carry the little infant to the font, but that her husband somewhat austerely reminded her that they ought to seek a marraine among those of their own station in society. But I regarded the pretty little Susan as my god−child nevertheless in my heart; and secretly pledged myself always to take an interest in her. Not two months after my father's death, a sister was born; and the human heart in M. de Chalabre subdued his pride; the child was to bear the pretty name of his French mother, although France could find no place for him, and had cast him out. That youngest little girl was called Aimee.

When my lather died, Fanny and her husband urged me to leave Brookfield, and come and live with them at Valetta. The estate was left to us; but an eligible tenant offered himself; and my health, which had suffered materially during my long nursing, did render it desirable for me to seek some change to a warmer climate. So I went abroad, ostensibly for a year's residence only; but, somehow, that year has grown into a lifetime. Malta and Genoa have been my dwelling−places ever since. Occasionally, it is true, I have paid visits to England, but I have never looked upon it as my home since I left it thirty years ago. During these visits I have seen the Chalabres. He had become more absorbed in his occupation than ever; had published a French grammar on some new principle, of which he presented me with a copy, taking some pains to explain how it was to be used. Madame looked plump and prosperous; the farm, which was under her management, had thriven; and as for the two daughters, behind their English shyness, they had a good deal of French piquancy and esprit. I induced them to take some walks with me, with a view of asking them some questions which should make our friendship an individual reality, not merely an hereditary feeling; but the little monkeys put me through my catechism, and asked me innumerable questions about France, which they evidently regarded as their country. 'How do you know all about French habits and customs?' asked I. 'Does Monsieur de — does your father talk to you much about France?'

'Sometimes, when we are alone with him — never when any one is by,' answered Susan, the elder, a grave, noble−looking girl, of twenty or thereabouts. 'I think he does not speak about France before my mother, for fear of hurting her.'

'And I think,' said little Aimee, 'that he does not speak at all, when he can help it; it is only when his heart gets too full with recollections, that he is obliged to talk to us, because many of the thoughts could not be said in English.'

'Then, I suppose, you are two famous French scholars?'

'Oh, yes! Papa always speaks to us in French; it is our own language.'

But with all their devotion to their father and to his country, they were most affectionate, dutiful daughters to

their mother. They were her companions, her comforts in the pleasant household labours; most practical, useful young women. But in a privacy not the less sacred, because it was understood rather than prescribed, they kept all the enthusiasm, all the romance of their nature, for their father. They were the confidantes of that poor exile's yearnings for France; the eager listeners for what he chose to tell them of his early days. His words wrought up Susan to make the resolution that, if ever she felt herself free from home duties and responsibilities, she would become a Sister of Charity, like Anne−Marguerite de Chalabre, her father's great−aunt, and model of woman's sanctity. As for Aimee, come what might, she never would leave her father; and that was all she was clear about in picturing her future.

Three years ago I was in Paris. An English friend of mine who lives there — English by birth, but married to a German professor, and very French in manners and ways — asked me to come to her house one evening. I was far from well and disinclined to stir out.

'Oh, but come!' said she. 'I have a good reason; really a tempting reason. Perhaps this very evening a piece of poetical justice will be done in my salon. A living romance! Now, can you resist?'

'What is it?' said I; for she was rather in the habit of exaggerating trifles into romances.

'A young lady is coming; not in the first youth, but still young, very pretty; daughter of a French emigre, whom my husband knew in Belgium, and who has lived in England ever since.'

'I beg your pardon, but what is her name?' interrupted I, roused to interest.

'De Chalabre. Do you know her?'

'Yes; I am much interested in her. I will gladly come to meet her. How long has she been in Paris? Is it Susan or Aimee?'

'Now I am not to be baulked of the pleasure of telling you my romance; my hoped−for bit of poetical justice. You must be patient, and you will have answers to all your questions.'

I sank back in my easy chair. Some of my friends are rather long−winded, and it is as well to be settled in a comfortable position before they begin to talk.

'I told you a minute ago, that my husband had become acquainted with M. de Chalabre in Belgium, in 1815. They have kept up a correspondence ever since; not a very brisk one, it is true, for M. de Chalabre was a French master in England, and my husband a professor in Paris; but still they managed to let each other know how they were going on, and what they were doing, once, if not twice every year. For myself; I never saw M. de Chalabre.'

'I know him well,' said I. 'I have known him all my life.'

'A year ago his wife died (she was an English−woman); she had had a long and suffering illness; and his eldest daughter had devoted herself to her with the patient sweetness of an angel, as he told us, and I can well believe. But after her mother's death, the world, it seems, became distasteful to her: she had been inured to the half−lights, the hushed voices, the constant thought for others required in a sick−room, and the noise and rough bustle of healthy people jarred upon her. So she pleaded with her father to allow her to become a Sister of Charity. She told him that he would have given a welcome to any suitor who came to offer to marry her, and bear her away from her home, and her father and sister; and now, when she was called by religion, would he grudge to part with her? He gave his consent, if not his full approbation; and he wrote to my husband to beg me to receive her here, while we sought out a convent into which she could be received. She has been with me two months, and endeared herself to me unspeakably; she goes home next week unless — '

'But, I beg your pardon; did you not say she wished to become a Sister of Charity?'

'It is true; but she was too old to be admitted into their order. She is eight−and−twenty. It has been a grievous disappointment to her; she has borne it very patiently and meekly, but I can see how deeply she has felt it. And now for my romance. My husband had a pupil some ten years ago, a M. du Fay, a clever, scientific young man, one of the first merchants of Rouen. His grandfather purchased M. de Chalabre's ancestral estate. The present M. du Fay came on business to Paris two or three days ago, and invited my husband to a little dinner; and somehow this story of Suzette Chalabre came out, in consequence of inquiries my husband was making for an escort to take her to England. M. du Fay seemed interested with the story; and asked my husband if he might pay his respects to me, some evening when Suzette should be in, and so is coming to−night, he, and a friend of his, who was at the dinner party the other day; will you come?'

I went, more in the hope of seeing Susan Chalabre, and hearing some news about my early home, than with any expectation of poetical justice. And in that I was right; and yet I was wrong. Susan Chalabre was a grave,

gentle woman, of an enthusiastic and devoted appearance, not unlike that portrait of his daughter which arrests every eye in Ary Scheffer's sacred pictures. She was silent and sad; her cherished plan of life was uprooted. She talked to me a little in a soft and friendly manner, answering any questions I asked; but, as for gentlemen, her indifference and reserve made it impossible for them to enter into any conversation with her; and the meeting was indisputably 'flat.'

'Oh! my romance! my poetical justice! Before the evening was half over, I would have given up all my castles in the air for one well−sustained conversation of ten minutes long. Now don't laugh at me, for I can't bear it to−night.' Such was my friend's parting speech. I did not see her again for two days. The third she came in glowing with excitement.

'You may congratulate me after all; if it was not poetical justice, it is prosaic justice; and, except for the empty romance, that is a better thing!'

'What do you mean?' said I. 'Surely M. du Fay has not proposed for Susan?'

'No! but that charming M. de Frez, his friend, has; that is to say, not proposed but spoken; no, not spoken, but it seems he asked M. du Fay — whose confidant he was — if he was intending to proceed in his idea of marrying Suzette; and on hearing that he was not, M. de Frez said that he should come to us, and ask us to put him in the way of prosecuting the acquaintance, for that he had been charmed with her; looks, voice, silence, he admires them all; and we have arranged that he is to be the escort to England; he has business there, he says; and as for Suzette (she knows nothing of all this, of course, for who dared tell her?), all her anxiety is to return home, and the first person travelling to England will satisfy her, if it does us. And, after all, M. de Frez lives within five leagues of the Chateau Chalabre, so she can go and see the old place whenever she will.'

When I went to bid Susan good−by, she looked as unconscious and dignified as ever. No idea of a lover had ever crossed her mind. She considered M. de Frez as a kind of necessary incumbrance for the journey. I had not much hopes for him; and yet he was an agreeable man enough, and my friends told me that his character stood firm and high.

In three months, I was settled for the winter in Rome. In four, I heard that the marriage of Susan Chalabre had taken place. What were the intermediate steps between the cold, civil indifference with which I had last seen her regarding her travelling companion, and the full love with which such a woman as Suzette Chalabre must love a man before she could call him husband, I never learnt. I wrote to my old French master to congratulate him, as I believed I honestly might, on his daughter's marriage. It was some months before I received his answer. It was —

'Dear friend, dear old pupil, dear child of the beloved dead, I am an old man of eighty, and I tremble towards the grave. I cannot write many words; but my own hand shall bid you come to the home of Aimee and her husband. They tell me to ask you to come and see the old father's birth−place, while he is yet alive to show it to you. I have the very apartment in Chateau Chalabre that was mine when I was a boy, and my mother came in to bless me every night. Susan lives near us. The good God bless my sons−in−law, Bertrand de Frez and Alphonse du Fay, as He has blessed me all my life long. I think of your father and mother, my dear; and you must think no harm when I tell you I have had masses said for the repose of their souls. If I make a mistake, God will forgive.'

My heart could have interpreted this letter, even without the pretty letter of Aimee and her husband which accompanied it; and which told how, when M. du Fay came over to his friend's wedding, he had seen the younger sister, and in her seen his fate. The soft caressing, timid Aimee was more to his taste than the grave and stately Susan. Yet little Aimee managed to rule imperiously at Chateau Chalabre; or, rather, her husband was delighted to indulge her every wish; while Susan, in her grand way, made rather a pomp of her conjugal obedience. But they were both good wives, good daughters.

This last summer, you might have seen an old, old man, dressed in grey, with white flowers in his button−hole (gathered by a grand−child as fair as they), leading an elderly lady about the grounds of Chateau Chalabre, with tottering, unsteady eagerness of gait.

'Here!' said he to me, 'just here my mother bade me adieu when first I went to join my regiment. I was impatient to go. I mounted — I rode to yonder great chestnut, and then, looking back, I saw my mother's sorrowful countenance. I sprang off; threw the reins to the groom, and ran back for one more embrace. "My brave boy!" she said; "my own! Be faithful to God and your king!" I never saw her more; but I shall see her soon; and I think I may tell her I have been faithful both to my God and my king.'

Before now, he has told his mother all.