

## FRENCH WITH A MISTRESS.

“ I DID *not* swear, madam.”

“ You did, sir, and it is disgraceful. A man of your years—a father of a family—a respectable ratepayer and householder, and to stoop to make use of language that would disgrace the *canaille* of our streets !”

“ I repeat, madam, that I did not swear.”

“ I repeat that you did, sir, and in the hearing of our sweet, innocent girl. I’m sure if papa knew, he would——”

“ Oh, hang it all ! don’t drag papa in over this ! I tell you I did not swear. I only said——”

“ Alfred, I forbid you to repeat those revolting words. I will not have my ears polluted by language that the *canaille*——”

“ Hang the *canaille* ! polluted ! revolting ! Nice language that, madam, to apply to your husband’s remarks when he only said——”

“ *Alfred* !” in a loud, protesting scream.

—“ Only said, ‘ what’s the matter with that cursed Frenchwoman, now ?’ ”

“ And I repeat, sir, that it is language of a revolting and polluting character to use before your children.”

“ Then Jehu, the son of Nimshi, ought to have been ashamed of himself.”

“ I don’t know what you mean : but such language——”

“ Oh, bother ! He said, ‘ cursed woman,’ when he spoke of Jezebel.”

“ Alfred, don’t, pray, add insult to injury. Made-moiselle is a lady, and of noble descent. Jezebel ! Oh, it is outrageous ! What would she say ?”

“ I don’t know, and I did not call her a Jezebel. I only called her a cursed woman, and I want to see her get into a cab and go. Once more I say, what is the matter with that cursed Frenchwoman now ?”

My answer was a bang of the door.

I was alone.

I am a mild man, and, when nothing puts me out, one of the most amiable beings under the sun. I only want my meals regularly, and well cooked ; my boots nicely blacked ; my clothes brushed ; and my linen nicely aired and laid ready at proper times.

I hate hunting socks. I hate to find that someone has taken away the soap ; and if someone has borrowed my glycerine I am annoyed. My wants are very simple, and I have a very strong objection to children, or people staying in the house, being ill.

My wife is the most loveable and amiable of women. We always agree. She smiles at me, and I never come down to breakfast without going straight to her chair at the head of the table and kissing her. It looks well before the children, and I like it. It is nice.

So long as Mrs. Forbes—my wife, you know. Allow me to introduce you—“ My dear, this is my friend, Mr. Gentle Reader. Reader, Mrs. Alfred Forbes, my wife.” A digression. I begin again.

So long as Mrs. Forbes does not drag in her papa, Major Porter, we are happy. Adam and Eve in Paradise ? Pooh ! rubbish ! they weren’t in the race with us. With the exceptions of servant troubles, colds, measles, an unpleasant neighbour, Johnson’s dog in the garden at the bottom of ours, and the cats, our home left Paradise nowhere.

That is, when Mrs. Forbes did not bring in the major, who, I must say, has a most unpleasant hectoring way, that I do not like. He never comes to see us without looking from one to the other suspiciously, and his face says as it were, “ You scoundrel ! I know you’ve been illusing my daughter.”

I always used to look upon Major Porter as our serpent, but *nous avons changé tout cela*.

Now, by that last quotation, and by my wife’s use of the word *canaille*, you will have perceived that the French tongue, like so much yeast, has begun to permeate our existence.

It has ; and, leaven-like, it has turned our natures into a spongy, gaseous, lava-like state. We are not the people we were. Our home is revolutionary, volcanic, explosive. My children strum, and sing the *Marseillaise* and airs from *Madame Angot*, and Porter Villa is no longer the English home it was.

By-the-way, I detest that name, Porter Villa ; but the old gentleman bought the house, and gave it to us—christening it himself, so there I was in clover.

Bliss reigned, when, one day, I made a mistake.

We were at breakfast with our five sweet girls, my wife presiding over the distribution of the matutinal coffee. I was skimming over the morning paper, when Epaulette, our eldest girl—so named at grandpapa's special request, in memory, he said, of two departed friends, worn near his breast—when Epaulette, I repeat, said—

“See voo play, donnez mor, doo pang hay boor.”

I am not a judge of French accent, but I felt sure my daughter was not correct, so, *à propos*—you see, French again!—*à propos* of the instruction Mrs. Forbes was giving to her children, right featilie, after ye manner of Stratteford-atte-Bowe, I said—

“My dear, how would it be to have a French lady to stay with us during the holidays? Here is one who—who—hum! hum!—‘Aux Anglais’—hum! hum!—ah, yes—I see what it means—would give her services in French conversation in return for board and residence. Then there's something about *vacances*. I don't know what that means.”

“Ah! it would be charming, dear,” said my wife. “She would perfect the children in polished French, and improve our style as well.”

We took the fatal step. Exchanged letters. Had excellent references. An interview. Found Mademoiselle Honorine Laurette Des Asnières handsome, fashionably dressed, not very young, *spirituelle*, ladylike. Everything seemed satisfactory. There was no time to lose. Mademoiselle left the family with whom she was engaged that day. What could be better than that she should come at once.

She did come.

For six weeks.

Alas!

You perceive that my style of telling this is quite French. In fact, I could have made some strong remarks in that tongue; but in spite of all temptations, to follow other nations I'll remain an Englishman.

It was the Major who swore, the first time he came, and as soon as Mademoiselle had left the room.

“Pauline,” he said to his child—my wife—“you are a sentenced fool!”

He did not say *sentenced*, but I put it that way.

A red-nosed, bald-headed old wretch! He looked at me as he said it, and his nasty little twinkling eyes, which always ran over me as if I were private Tommy Atkins, and he wanted to detect a dirty buckle or an absence of pipe-clay, seemed now to be reading divorce proceedings: Forbes *v.* Forbes. Feminine Forbes *versus* Masculine Forbes, who had eloped with a French Grammar.

There never was the slightest cause for such a suspicion, for Madame Defarge—I mean mademoiselle—came, saw, and conquered the whole family from the moment she set her foot in the house.

Flirtation? Why she treated me—me, Alfred Forbes, Esquire, of Porter Villa, aged forty-one—as if I were a little boy. The second day she was at our table, I asked her a question about Louis Philippe, and she answered it with a little French history.

After telling me about a page she stopped, and I thought we had ended. It was only to take breath.

“By-the-way,” I said, “was not the Prince de Joinville——”

“Attendez!” she exclaimed, severely, “and you shall hear.”

Snubbed, like a little boy who had ventured to ask questions, and for the next quarter of an hour she poured, in liquid English, the family of Louis Philippe over my head.

I'm afraid I was a little selfish over my proposal, for I wanted to know a little more French myself. I knew a good deal more by the time mademoiselle left.

The understanding was that she was always to speak French to us, and that we were to reply the best way we could.

I can't say much for our part, but I can say that mademoiselle never once smiled at our attempts. She received them all with a severe glare in her eye, and when we had ended our halting speech, she replied didactically with a long and exhaustive answer to what we had not said; for, poor woman, she had had to make a shot at our meaning, and had not hit the mark.

We did everything we could to be French. We had *café au lait*, French rolls, and I bought some very rare French wine of a French dealer in Soho.

Mademoiselle told me of a shop in the same district where they sold *charcuterie*. So I bought some *charcuterie*; it made us all ill except mademoiselle.

She prided herself upon her knowledge of French cooking, and, still with the laudable desire to imbibe French at every opening, she was allowed to dictate in the kitchen, with the result that we had a Fly-to-the-winds of pastry and chicken strangely flavoured with garlic. Another day we had a *pâtage*, and a *bifteck aux pommes*, the former a sort of hot solution of toast and water and glycerine, with white worms performing a migration therein. Of course vermicelli, but the dish was not conducive to appetite. As to the *bifteck aux pommes*—the Major dined with us that day, and he afterwards said that it was cruel to an ox to cook a portion of its flesh in such a way; and that if Raleigh had known what was to happen he would have confined his discovery to tobacco and left the potatoes alone.

Salad? Ah, yes, Mademoiselle loved a salad, and she made me one with her own fair hands, of endive, garlic, and beet, with oil very much *ad lib.*, and a little potato.

Well, what could I do? A French lady had made it expressly for me; and does not the French proverb say, *Il faut manger?*

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An interval of six hours.

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"Shall I call up cook, and let her fetch Doctor Barker, dear?"

"No, no," I said; "it would only be a cause of triumph. She said to-day if that Frenchwoman was coming messing in her kitchen any more, she would leave."

How do you know that?"

"Lette told me."

"Oh!"

"Ah, she has said much more furious things than that, dear. But you are better now?"

"Better!" I said, furiously. "I feel as if some one had given me a dose of arsenic."

"Oh, Alfred, love! Let me have the doctor fetched."

"No, I tell you. Here, pull those clothes up again. Oh, gracious!"

"What is it, dear?"

"What is it! Salad it is. Ah—h—h—h! Is there any prussic acid in the house?"

"No, dear, of course not. Why?"

"Get me a dose, and put me out of my misery!"

Oh, Alfred, Alfred! pray, pray, don't talk like that!"

"Um—m—m—m! What a fool I was!"

"Why, love?"

"To give away my razors. Here, what time is it?"

"Past two, dear. What can I do for you? Have some more brandy?"

"Hang the brandy! I've taken half-a-pint now. Is there any chlorodyne?"

"Yes, dear."

"Then fetch it me. Give me enough to kill the pain, or to kill *me*—I don't care which! May all the pangs of sea-sickness come upon her devoted head the next time she crosses the Channel!"

Then the room was dark, for Mrs. Forbes had gone down to fetch the medicine; and at last morning dawned, and I went to sleep—to dream that Lucrezia Borgia always gave her guests salad for a repast.

Mrs. Forbes did not like going out shopping with mademoiselle for divers reasons. Among others, the shopkeepers were all "*coquins* who tried to cheat," while Mrs. Forbes was no-one—the shop people always addressing themselves to mademoiselle.

Again, my wife did not find it pleasant to go for walks with mademoiselle, for, at her age, nature was beginning to assert itself in a manner objectionable to the lady's vanity. "I fear I shall be *trop grosse*," she would say; and, to avoid this destruction of a fairly graceful figure, she sought to keep down her superabundance by walking at a terrific rate, with Turkish-bathian efforts, that were not agreeable to her companions.

Church, too, was a sore point.

"*Certainement!*" was the reply, with an indignant look, that seemed to say, "Do you take me for a heathen?" when she was asked if she cared to go.

Elaborate dressing was gone through, with much adornment, but the seats nearest to the door were

always selected ; and at the end of a quarter of an hour Mademoiselle always felt faint, and had to be led out, the faintness going off after a long walk.

Mangnall could not possibly have asked a question in any branch of education that Mademoiselle would not have answered—I do not say correctly, but always promptly—often very wide of the mark. To attempt to correct her was high treason, and provoked such an indignant look that one's horns went in, and, snail-like, a retreat was beaten for the shell. If, however, the blunder was too flagrant, and the person who pointed out the error persisted, she would exclaim :

“Eh bien, peut-être je me suis trompée !”

At last, the day preceding that on which Mademoiselle was to leave us had arrived, and I was feeling very happy, for there was English blue sky ahead in the mental horizon.

“Thank goodness !” I said to myself for about the twentieth time. I was thinking of being able to sit at table and hear pleasant old English talked, and the cessation of that incessant dictatorial tongue, which seemed to be always scolding me in French, when, in the midst of my self-gratulation, my wife rushed in with the word *Mademoiselle* upon her lips, and I said the words that provoked our encounter.

Hardly was it over, when the lady who had provoked it rushed in, with a wild, excitable look in her eyes :

“I am ill so !” she cried. “I go to be poison, I feel ! Ou ! how I feel !”

“She has had another salad !” I said to myself, as a feeling of joy shot through me.

“She has taken poison because she is sorry to have to go,” whispered my wife. And Mademoiselle rapidly paced the room, and approached the window as if about to fly out.

“What have you been taking, Mademoiselle ?”

“I have take noting,” she said, angrily. “It was a *vilain* fly. He go round and round me—zuz, zuz ! I open my mouse, and he fly down, *dedans, dedans, dedans ! In dere !*”

She beat herself dramatically upon the chest. A sort of *pas de charge* for an attack upon the fly.

“It will not hurt you,” I said. “Why, people eat big flies—locusts—in the East.”

“Not hurt me !” she hissed through her teeth, furiously, “but you are *bête*. The *vilain mouche* has stood himself viz his feet upon someting bad, and it kill me, I feel he must kill me ! Ou, my faith, my faith ! What shall will I do ?”

All this was in so excited and high-pitched a tone, that we decided to fetch Dr. Barker, who came, saw her, told me it was nothing but nerves, prescribed, the medicine was fetched, and—Mademoiselle did not take it, for *de vilain docteur-r-r* was a *co-quin* who did not understand her case.

Mademoiselle was so poorly that she had to stay another week, and kept her room, but she took no medicine.

“She says she only wants strengthening things,” said Mrs. Forbes, with her brow wrinkled.

So Mademoiselle had her strengthening things largely in her own room, including wine and fruit.

At last, after a cascade of French affection, embraces, kisses, blessings, *au revoirs*, etc., etc., we saw the cab depart, with mademoiselle's box upon the roof, and a parasol being used semaphorically out of the window.

“She managed to stay that last week pretty well,” I said to my wife, who did not reply, only shook her head, and breathed a long and restful sigh.

“Do you think, papa,” said Epaulette, “that mademoiselle did swallow that fly ?”

“Can't say, my dear,” I reply. I could'nt.

G. MANVILLE FENN.