The Importance of Being Marius

by StarshipRangerBoyWonder

Summary

So Marius is Jehan, but he doesn’t want to be Jehan anymore, because Cosette likes Marius not Jehan, but Eponine also likes Marius, but not Jehan as Marius, but Combeferre as Marius, who wants to be Marius, too. Based off of Oscar Wilde's genious play The Importance of Being Earnest. Unlike The Sound of Miserables, this fic sticks rather strictly to the story and dialogue. Also, the relationships here make no sense. Enjoy!

Notes

Here she is! Bah bah bah bahhhhhhh!
A Jolyist

Combeferre Laine, a dashing young man with delightful tastes for the finer things in life, nay, the more expensive things in life, sat in his study, tapping gracefully on old piano keys to create a rowdy melody. Combeferre was a different lad, and he occupied Paris with a love for the beautiful city. Monsieur Laine loved Paris more than he loved himself (and that was a lot). But, again, Combeferre was a different lad. He wore circular glasses that hung upon his nose in the funniest fashion, and hair that clouded around his face in a charming mop. His jaw crooked when he spoke, and his nose and ears often moved when he was unaware of his next thought. Combeferre was tall and average. He appeared just as a respectable gentleman should; however, this didn’t mean he acted like such.

The oak door at the side of the room opened and his server, Plutarch, entered with a tray. Upon the tray was a stack of cucumber sandwiches, which he placed on the coffee table. Combeferre waved his hand before returning to his piano. Plutarch turned to leave, but then turned back around when Combeferre called for his attention.

“Plutarch!” he hollered, smashing his piano keys. “Did you hear what I was playing?”

“I didn’t think it polite to listen,” answered Plutarch sarcastically.

“I’m sorry for that, for your sake,” Combeferre said, smashing the keys again with nimble fingers. “I don’t play accurately – anyone can play accurately – but I play with wonderful expression. It’s a good thing I do, for the world would be dreary and uniform if I didn’t burst rays of change upon it. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.”

“Yes, sir,” spoke the server, again, trying to make his departure.

Combeferre became, as many gentlemen often do, even when they are making simple show of it, pensive, and he rose from his piano. “Speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Madame Valjean?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ahem!” Combeferre coughed, stuffing his thin fingers into his suit pockets as if it initiated instant power. “Where are they?”

“Here, sir,” Plutarch sighed, waving his hand and pointing out the plate that sat upon the coffee table. Combeferre marched over with long steps, inspected the plate, took two sandwiches, and flopped down upon his sofa, feet dangling over the arm.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, delighted, as he swallowed the first sandwich. “Absolutely delightful, Plutarch, you’ve splendidly outdone yourself now, my good man! Ah… by the way, Plutarch, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Grantaire and Monsieur Pontmercy were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.”

The server nodded solemnly, abandoning the idea of leaving the room, and turned to face his employer with judgmental eyes and a lifted brow. “Yes, sir, eight bottles and a pint.”

“Why is it?” Combeferre questioned no one in particular, angrily shoving the second sandwich into his mouth and chewing the snack with aggravation that can only be expressed so much through the chomping of finger foods. “Why is it, I ask, that at a bachelor’s establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.”
Plutarch shrugged his shoulders. “I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.”

“Good Heavens!” gasped Combeferre. “Is marriage really as demoralising as that?”

“I don’t know, sir,” answered the server. “I believe it to be a rather pleasant state, sir. I’m afraid I have very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person…”

Combeferre had attempted to stop listening, but that task can be found quite hard when only one is speaking to you, and the grown man found himself despairing as if he were yet again a small child being lectured by his parents. “I fear I do not find myself particularly interested in your family life, Plutarch,” he said languidly.

“No, sir. It is not an interesting subject. I rarely think of it myself.”

“Very natural. I think I will sit beside you in that action of avoiding family life, Plutarch. That will be all! You may leave now!” said Combeferre, straining his arms to reach for another cucumber sandwich.

“Yes, sir.” Plutarch bid, turning and leaving before he could be ensnared in more conversation with his employer.

Combeferre, now alone, was left to reflect. He slowly bit his sandwich, speaking while he chewed, of Plutarch’s opinions: “His views on marriage seem rather lax. Really, if the lower orders don’t set us any example, then what good is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.”

The door creaked open once more, and Plutarch emerged. “Monsieur Marius Pontmercy.”

From the oak doors came Marius Pontmercy. Marius was a sorry lad with his head a twist or two from falling off and rolling across the floor. He was a romantic lunatic who didn’t know a thing about women. It made Combeferre laugh to think about the poor boy sometimes. However, it wasn’t like Marius didn’t stand a chance with a maiden, because he was quite the good-looking fellow, but red hair and freckles aren’t exactly a turn on to all people, so he was attractive in a silly schoolboy sort of way. Monsieur was very gangly with limbs that seemed to bounce whenever he took a step, icy blue eyes that searched your soul, and lips that blended in with the rest of his skin, they were so thin. He was attractive, yes, but mentally lost in a forest of confusion. This, of course, wouldn’t have been an issue had women not become so remarkable all of a sudden and began caring about intelligence, too. Again, this, of course, wasn’t to say that Monsieur Pontmercy wasn’t intelligent. Oh, no! He had brains to spare! Marius was a lawyer, and no one knew more about Waterloo and Napoleon Bonaparte than he.

“Good evening, Combeferre,” he said cheerfully, reaching for a cucumber sandwich.

“My dear Marius, how are you?” Combeferre greeted happily. “What brings you to town?”

“Oh, pleasure, pleasure!” replied Marius. “What else should bring one anywhere? Ah, eating as usually, I see, ‘Ferre.”

Combeferre rolled his eyes and scoffed. “I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o’clock. Where have you been since last Thursday?”

Marius sat down on the sofa and instantly relaxed, crossing his legs and leaning against the arm. “In the country,” he answered plainly.
“What on earth do you do there?” questioned Combeferre.

On the couch, Marius busied himself with pulling off his gloves. “When one is in town one
amuses oneself,” he said. “When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively
boring.”

“And who are the people you amuse?” Combeferre continued.

Marius waved his hand as if he were swatting the question away. “Oh, neighbours, neighbours,”
he said airily.

“Got nice neighbours in your part of Toulouse?”

“Perfectly horrid! Never speak to one of them!”

“How immensely you must amuse them!” Combeferre chuckled. He then grasped at the tray for
another sandwich, with what he ate rather quickly. “By the way, Toulouse is your country, is it
not?”

“Eh? Toulouse?” Marius drew his eyebrows together, as if he were in thought. “Yes, of course.”
He noticed the spread upon his friend’s coffee-turned-tea table, and exclaimed, “Hallo! Why all
these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young? Who
is coming to tea?”


“How perfectly delightful!” replied Marius, who, after hearing Cosette’s name, perked up rather
noticeably.

“Mmm, yes,” Combeferre said. “Yes, that is all very well; but I am afraid Aunt Jeanne won’t quite
approve of your being here.”

“May I ask why?” came Marius, looking exceptionally shot down.

Combeferre laughed, throwing his head back. “My dear fellow, the way you flirt with Cosette is
perfectly disgraceful. It is almost as bad as the way Cosette flirts with you.”

Marius’s ears turned pink, and his chest swelled with a dreamy sigh. “I am in love with Cosette. I
have come up to town expressly to propose to her,” he swooned.

“I thought you came up here for pleasure?” said the other. “That sounds an awful lot like business
to me. I call that business.”

“How utterly unromantic you are!” gasped Marius.

Combeferre seemed entirely unaffected, and the man rolled his eyes and allowed a chuckle to slip
over his teeth. “I really don’t see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love.
But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually
is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I
get married, I’ll certainly try to forget that fact.”

“I have no doubt about that, dear ‘Ferre,” chuckled Marius. “The Divorce Court was specially
invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted.”

“Oh, this is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in Heaven!”
Smiling dumbly, Marius put his hand out to take a sandwich from the plate, when Combeferre immediately swatted his hand away.

Combeferre moved the plate away and sneered. “We mustn’t eat the sandwiches. They’re for my dear aunt, and you do know how much she loves cucumber and scares me. When things like that mesh, you do your best to please.”

Marius looked purely confused. “You’ve been eating them this entire conversation!”

“That is quite a different matter. He is my aunt,” he said. “There’s another plate there. Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for Cosette. Cosette is devoted to bread and butter.”

The freckled gentleman took up the offer, advancing to the table and helping himself. “And very good bread and butter it is too.”

“Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat as if you were going to eat it all. You behave as if you are already married to her already. You are not married to her already, and I don’t think you ever will be.”

Marius gasped and turned to his friend, insulted. “Why on earth do you say that?”

“Well, firstly, women don’t marry the men they flirt with,” told Combeferre. “They don’t think it proper.”

“Oh, that is nonsense!”

“It isn’t. It is a great truth. It accounts for the extraordinary number of bachelors that one sees all over the place,” he said. “In the second place, I don’t give you my consent.”

“Your consent!” sputtered Marius, turning red.

Combeferre pressed his lips together in silent reflection. “My dear fellow, Cosette is my first cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Éponine.” He took the server’s bell from the tray and rang it thrice.

“Éponine!” exclaimed Marius. “What on earth do you mean? What do you mean, ‘Ferre, by Éponine! I don’t know anyone by the name of Éponine.”

Plutarch had entered the room, his face sullen and bored. Combeferre noticed his presence and demanded, loudly, “Bring me the cigarette case Monsieur Pontmercy left in the smoking-room the last time he dined here.”

“Yes, sir,” answered Plutarch.

Marius looked utterly bewildered. “Do you mean to say you have had my cigarette case all this time? I wish to goodness you had left me know. I have been writing frantic letters to the police about it. I was very nearly offering a large reward.”

“Well, I wish you would offer one,” said Combeferre. “I am more than unusually hard up.”

“There is no food offering a large reward now that the thing is found.”

Plutarch entered. Atop his palm was a salver, upon which a sterling silver cigarette case sat. Combeferre immediately snatched it up, and Plutarch once again left. He opened the case, his eyes darting left to right, making it appear he was reading.
“I think that is rather mean of you, Marius, I must say,” said he. “However, it makes no matter, for, now that I look at the inscription inside, I find that the thing isn’t yours after all.”

“Of course it’s mine!” declared the lawyer, standing and moving towards the other man. “You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case.”

The other man laughed, his ears twitching with each giggle. “Oh, it is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn’t. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn’t read,” said he.

“I am quite aware of the fact,” said Marius, growing impatient, and anxious, by the second. “And I don’t wish to discuss modern culture. It isn’t the sort of thing one should talk of in private. I simply want my cigarette case back.”

“Yes; but this isn’t your cigarette case,” Combeferre retorted. “This cigarette case is a present from come one of the name of Éponine, and you said you didn’t know any one of that name.”

“Well, if you want to know, Éponine is my aunt,” Marius told him, his eyes darting about nervously.

“Your aunt!” parroted Combeferre, his tone teasing.

“Yes. Charming old lady she is, too,” said Marius. “Lives at the Latin Quarter. Just give it back to me, ‘Ferre.”

Combeferre shook his head and retreated behind the sofa. “But why does she call herself little Éponine if she is your aunt and lives at the Latin Quarter?” he asked. He began to read: “‘From little Éponine, with her fondest love.’”

Marius chased the other to the sofa. He found himself in an odd position, what with his right leg splayed over the arm and breast pressed against the back. “My dear fellow, what on earth is there in that?” said he. “Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself. You seem to think that every aunt should be exactly like your aunt! That is absurd! For Heaven’s sake give me back my cigarette case!”

These two grown men began what resembled a game of tag. Combeferre’s feet bounced over the floor as Marius chased him. The gangly gentleman, with his bad coordination and anger, was tripping about on his own feet and ankles.

“Yes! But why does you aunt call you her uncle?” Combeferre inquired further. “‘From little Éponine, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jehan.’ There is no objection, I admit, to an aunt being a small aunt, but why an aunt, no matter what her size may be, should call her own nephew her uncle, I can’t quite make out. Besides, your name isn’t Jehan at all, it is Marius.”

“It isn’t Marius,” the freckled man admitted, hanging his head. “It’s Jehan.”

Combeferre had taken his turn to be taken aback and confused. “You have always told me it was Marius. I have introduced you to every one as Marius. You answer to the name of Marius. You look as if your name was Marius. You are the most Marius-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn’t Marius. It’s on your cards. Here is one of them” – Combeferre pulled a card from the case – “‘Monsieur Marius Pontmercy, B. 4, 50-52 Tenement.’ I’ll keep this as a proof that your name is Marius if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or Cosette, or to anyone else.”

“Well, my name is Marius in the town and Jehan in the country, and I received the cigarette case
in the country,” said Marius, who, upon obvious request, and for the simplicity of this story, and for the understanding of the readers, we shall continue to call him such.

“Yes, but that does not account for the fact that your small Aunt Éponine, who lives at the Latin Quarter, calls you her dear uncle,” said Combeferre. “Come, old boy, you had much better have the thing out for once.”

“My dear ‘Ferre, you talk as if you were a dentist,” chuckled Marius. “It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one isn’t a dentist. It produces a false impression.”

“Well, that is exactly what dentists always do,” continued Combeferre. “Go on, now! Tell me the whole thing! I may mention that I have always suspected you of being a confirmed ad secret Jolyist; and I am quite sure of it now.”

“Jolyist?” puzzled Marius. “What on earth do you mean by Jolyist?”

“I’ll reveal to you the meaning of that incomparable expression as soon as you are kind enough to inform me why you are Marius in the town and Jehan in the country.”

Marius pursed his lips, a sign of a gentleman thinking, and extended his hand. “Produce my cigarette case first.”

Combeferre deposited the case in the other man’s hands, then let his fingers return to his suit pockets. “There. Now kindly produce your explanation, and pray make it improbable. Also, I’m going to sit. All this standing his becoming rather silly. But I’m judging you, so you stand.”

Marius rolled his eyes as his friend took a seat and grabbed one of the last cucumber sandwiches from the tray. He took an intake of breath, then started, “My dear fellow, there is nothing improbably about my explanation at all. In fact it’s perfectly ordinary. Old Monsieur Theodule Gillenormand, who adopted me when I was a little boy, made me in his will guardian to his grand-daughter, Mademoiselle Éponine Thénardier. Éponine, who addresses me as uncle from motives of respect that you could not possibly appreciate, lives at my place in the country under the charge of her admirable governess, Madame Toussaint.”

“Where is this place in the country, by the way?” inquired Combeferre.

“That is nothing to you, dear boy,” said Marius. “You are not going to be invited… I may tell you candidly that the place is not in Toulouse.”

“I suspected that, my dear fellow!” erupted the other. “I have Jolyed all over Toulouse on two separate occasions. Now, go on. Why are you Marius in town and Jehan in the country?”

Marius huffed again. “My dear ‘Ferre, I don’t know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It’s one’s duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health or one’s happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Marius, who lives in the 50-52 Tenement, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear ‘Ferre, is the whole truth pure and simple.”

Combeferre chuckled and ate another sandwich, paying no mind to the dwindling amount. “The truth is rarely pure and never simple,” he said thoughtfully. “Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!”

“That wouldn’t at all be a bad thing,” Marius suggested.
“Literary criticism is not your forte, my dear fellow. Don’t try it. You should leave that to people who haven’t been at a University. They do it so well in the daily papers,” he told, smiling devilishly. “What you really are is a Jolyist. I was quite right in saying you were a Jolyist. You are one of the most advanced Jolyists I know!”

“What on earth do you mean?” he questioned, brow raising.

“You have invented a very useful younger brother called Marius, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like,” Combeferre explained simply. “I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Joly, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose. Joly is perfectly invaluable. If it wasn’t for Joly’s extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn’t be able to dine with you at Willis’s to-night, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Auriville for more than a week.”

Marius shook his head at the last statement. “I haven’t asked you to dine anywhere,” he announced.

“I know,” agreed Combeferre. “You are absurdly careless about sending out invitations. It is very foolish of you. Nothing annoys people so much as not receiving invitations.”

“You had much better dine with your Aunt Jeanne,” said Marius, shaking his head.

“I haven’t the smallest intention of doing anything of the kind. To begin with, I dined there on Monday, and once a week is quite enough to dine with one’s own relations,” Combeferre whined, eating a third sandwich. “In the second place, whenever I do dine there I am always treated as a member of the family, and sent down with either no woman at all, or two. In the third place, I know perfectly well whom she will place me next to, to-night. She will place me next Emile Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner-table. That is not very pleasant. Indeed, it is not even decent… and that sort of thing is enormously on the increase. The amount of women in Paris who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one’s clean linen in public. Besides, now that I know you to be a confirmed Jolyist I naturally want to talk to you about Jolying. I want to tell you the rules.”

The freckled one scoffed and shook his head again. “I’m not a Jolyist at all. If Cosette accepts me, I am going to kill my brother, indeed I think I’ll kill him in any case. Éponine is a little too much interested in him. It is rather a bore. So I am going to get rid of Marius. And I strongly advise you to do the same with Monsieur… with your invalid friend who has the absurd name.”

Combeferre pressed a hand to his heart and mocked insult. “Nothing will induce me to part with Joly,” he declared, pumping his fist in the air. “If you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Joly. A man who marries without knowing Joly has a very tedious time of it.”

“That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Cosette, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won’t want to know Joly,” protested Marius.

“Then your wife will,” Combeferre laughed. “You don’t seem to realise, that in married life three is company and two is none.”

“That, my dear young friend, is the theory that the French Drama has been propounding for the last fifty years,” Marius spoke sententiously.

“Yes; and that the happy English home has proved in half the time.”

“For heaven’s sake, don’t try to be cynical. It’s perfectly easy to be cynical,” he coughed.
Combeferre let a breath of a laugh escape him. “I will try, dear friend. Besides, being cynical is Lord Grantaire’s thing, and only Enjolras, his surprising sufferer of a lover, has to deal with that. In the second place, it isn’t easy to be anything nowadays. There’s such a lot of beastly competition about.”

The bell was heard, long and electric. “Ah! That must be Aunt Auriville! Only relatives, or creditors, ever ring in that Wagnerian manner. Now if I get her out of the way for ten minutes, so that you can have an opportunity for proposing to Cosette, may I dine with you tonight at Willis’s?”

“I suppose so, if you want to,” Marius replied with a lazy shrug.

“Yes, but you must be serious about it,” warned Combeferre, eating the last sandwich. “I hate people who are not serious about meals.”
Act I Part II

Chapter Summary

Marius (who is actually... we already went over this) proposes to his love, Cosette!

Chapter Notes

This takes so long to write. It's nuts. The Sound of Miserables will also be updated tonight, and I'm thinking about adding another chapter to Ballerinas and Barricades, so look out for that. Thank you all so much for being patient. Uhm, if you have the time to, I've made a YouTube channel. My first video will be up on Monday (or this Wednesday, depending on what I decide to do) but if you could give that subscribe button a little click that would be lovely. Thank you much! Also, visit this amazing ask blog! It's all the Les Miserables characters! www.askstheangrymen.tumblr.com

Plutarch entered once more, heaving a mighty sigh before speaking, “Madame Valjean and Mademoiselle Fauchelevent.”

Combeferre smiled devilishly, then went forward to greet them. Marius trailed behind like a lovesick puppy, fixing his hair and straightening his necktie.

Madame Valjean was a tall woman with noble features and white hair. She did not stand or sit erect, because she found it absolutely pointless after all her years of discovering. The woman cared for her daughter immensely, and wished nothing but the best for the girl. The two of them hardly clashed. Cosette obeyed her mother without the fear that thrills respect in other daughters, but with love. With a love so grand that Cosette listened to her mother’s every order with a smile on her face and a swelled heart.

It was obvious as to why Valjean protected Cosette to such an extreme as she did. Cosette was a gorgeous young woman with clear blue eyes and a pair of thin, pink lips. Her hair fell down her pack in a loose, yet elegant, braid. Her dresses were of the finest designs and complimented her figure in the greatest way possible. Though it was not just her looks that possessed a man. No, it was her gratefulness, her intelligence, her loving heart, and her strength. Cosette had big dreams and an even bigger sense of right. Cosette gave all and took little, despite her mother giving her anything she may want even though Cosette hardly asked. She was very smart. She was an independent young woman, and that is more attractive than anything.

“Good afternoon, dear Combeferre,” said Valjean. “I hope you are behaving very well.”

“I’m feeling very well, Aunt Jeanne,” he answered.

“That’s not quite the same thing,” she replied, raising an eyebrow. “In fact the two things rarely go together.” She noticed Marius and bowed with coldness. Cosette followed behind her.

“Dear me, you are smart!” said Combeferre, looking his cousin over with amused eyes.
“I am always smart!” Cosette giggled, smiling brightly and revealing a set of pearly white teeth. “Am I not, Monsieur Pontmercy?”

Marius, who looked somewhat like a freckled tomato, felt his breath leave him. “Oh!” he exclaimed with perhaps far too much enthusiasm. “You’re quite perfect, Mademoiselle Fauchelevent.”

“Oh! I hope I am not that. It would leave no room for developments,” said she, a coy smile placing itself upon her lips. “And I intend to develop in many directions…” At this last statement, Cosette gave Marius a look that, to the naked eye, seems just as normal as any other look. However, to the one with their soul lost and wandering in the abyss we call love, it speaks a million words of delightful affection. This look had Marius practically glowing red.

Cosette and Marius sat beside one another on the sofa but with more than enough space left between them. Aunt Jeanne took her seat beside Combeferre in one of the arm chairs, and immediately began speaking, “I’m sorry if we are a little late, Combeferre, but I was obliged to call on dear Lady Hucheloup. I hadn’t been there since her poor husband’s death. I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger. And now I’ll have a cup of tea, and one of those nice cucumber sandwiches you promised me.”

Combeferre grinned cheekily and pressed a kiss to his aunt’s cheek. “Certainly, Aunt Jeanne.”

While Combeferre busied himself with crossing to the tea-table, Valjean looked at her daughter in confusion. “Won’t you come and sit here, Cosette?” she asked.

“Thanks, mamma,” Cosette replied, giving Marius a dreamy look. “I’m quite comfortable where I am.”

Back to Combeferre, who had just picked up an empty plate in pure horror. “Good heavens!” he crowed. “Plutarch! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them specially!”

“There were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir,” said Plutarch gravely. “I went down twice.”

“No cucumbers!” Combeferre gasped. He slapped a hand to his heart, making the overall blow seem horridly more severe than it was.

“No sir. Not even for ready money,” declared Plutarch, letting a small grin spread over his lips.

“That will do Plutarch!” blurted Combeferre, whose ears had turned a shade of red more violent and romantic than the highlights of Marius’s hair. “Thank you…”

“I am greatly distressed, Aunt Jeanne,” hummed Combeferre, “about there being no cucumbers, not even… for ready money.”

With a slight grin, Valjean waved it off. “It really makes no matter, Combeferre. I had some crumpets with Lady Hucheloup, who seems to me to be living entirely for pleasure now.”

“I hear her hair has turned gold from grief,” he replied.

“It certainly has changed its colour,” she told him. “From what cause I, of course, cannot say.”

Combeferre handed her a cup of tea, and the Lady took it with eagerness.

“Thank you. I’ve quite a treat for you to-night, Combeferre. I am going to send you down with Emilee Farquhar. She is such a nice woman, and so attentive to her husband. It’s delightful to
watch them.”

“I am afraid, Aunt Jeanne, I shall have to give up the pleasure of dining with you to-night after
all.”

“I hope not, Combeferre,” Valjean said with a frown. “It would put my table completely out. Your
uncle would have to dine upstairs. Fortunately he is accustomed to that.”

“It is a great bore, and, I need hardly say, a terrible disappointment to me, but the fact is I have just
had a telegram to say that my poor friend Joly is very ill again,” said Combeferre, lying through
his teeth and glancing at Marius. “They seem to think I should be with him.”

“It is very strange,” Aunt Jeanne sighed. “This Monsieur Joly seems to suffer from curiously bad
health.”

Combeferre chuckled and patted his aunt’s hand. “Yes; poor Joly is a dreadful invalid.”

“Well, I must say, Algernon, that I think it is high time that Monsieur Joly made up his mind
whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd. Nor do I
in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. Illness of any
kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life. I am always
telling that to your poor uncle, but he never seems to take much notice… as far as any
improvement in his ailment goes. I should be much obliged if you would ask Monsieur Joly, from
me, to be kind enough not to have a relapse on Saturday, for I rely on you to arrange my music for
me. It is my last reception, and one wants something that will encourage conversation, particularly
at the end of the season when everyone has practically said whatever they had to say, which, in
most cases, was probably not much.”

“I’ll speak to Joly, Aunt Jeanne, if he is still conscious, and I think I can promise you he’ll be all
right by Saturday,” Combeferre told her. “Of course the music is a great difficulty. You see, if one
plays good music, people don’t listen, and if one plays bad music people don’t talk. But I’ll run
over the programme I’ve drawn out, if you will kindly come into the next room for a moment.”

“Thank you, Algernon. It is very thoughtful of you,” she said, rising and following Combeferre.
“I’m sure the programme will be delightful, after a few expurgations. French songs I cannot
possibly allow. People always seem to think that they are improper, and either look shocked,
which is vulgar, or laugh, which is worse. But German sounds a thoroughly respectable language,
and indeed, I believe is so. Cosette, you will accompany me.”

Cosette looked up at her mother and nodded slowly. “Certainly, mamma,” she said softly.

However, when Aunt Jeanne left with Combeferre to the other room, Cosette stayed behind.
Marius looked at her with shyness in his eyes. His lips parted but no words came out despite the
alphabet soup that was his brain at the moment.

“Charming day it is, Mademoiselle Fauchelevent,” he forced out.

“Pray don’t talk to me about the weather, Monsieur Pontmercy,” whined Cosette in the most
dignified of ways. “Whenever people talk to me about the weather, I always feel quite certain that
they mean something else. And that makes me so nervous.”

“I do mean something else,” Marius sputtered.

“I thought so,” replied Cosette, the grin on her face spoken more than seen. “In fact, I am never
wrong.”
“And I would like to be allowed to take advantage of Madame Valjean’s temporary absence…”

“I would certainly advise you to do so,” said Cosette. “Mamma has a way of coming back into a room that I have often had to speak to her about.”

His voice an octave higher than normal, he spoke nervously, “Mademoiselle Fauchelevent, ever since I met you I have admired you more than any girl… I have ever met since… I met you…”

“Yes, I am quite well aware of the fact,” Cosette replied happily. “And I often wish that in public, at any rate, you had been more demonstrative. For me you have always had an irresistible fascination. Even before I met you I was far from indifferent to you. We live, as I hope you know, Monsieur Pontmercy, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits, I am told; and my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Marius. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Combeferre first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Marius, I knew I was destined to love you.”

“You really love me, Cosette?” Marius gasped in amazement.

Cosette threw herself into her arms and blinked at the man with innocent affection. “Passionately!” she exclaimed.

Breath barely passing his lips, Marius said, “Amour! You don’t know how happy you’ve made me.”

“My own Marius!”

Cosette openly allowed Marius to kiss her, and the man was about to take full advantage of his privilege when a single thought occurred to him. “But you don’t really mean to say that you couldn’t love me if my name wasn’t Marius?”

She shook her head, face parroting that of Combeferre’s earlier. “But your name is Marius.”

“Yes, I know it is,” said Marius. “But supposing it was something else? Do you mean to say you couldn’t love me then?”

“Ah! That is clearly a metaphysical speculation, and like most metaphysical speculations has very little reference at all to the actual facts of real life, as we know them,” giggled Cosette glibly.

“Personally, darling, to speak quite candidly,” said Marius, growing nervous for a completely different reason, “I don’t much care about the name of Marius… I don’t think the name suits me at all.”

“It suits you perfectly!” Cosette insisted. “It is a divine name. It has a music of its own. It produces vibrations.”

“Well, really, Cosette, I must say that I think there are lots of other much nicer names,” persisted Marius. “I think Jehan, for instance, a charming name.”

“Jehan?” parroted Cosette, smacking her lips as if she were tasting the name. “No, there is very little music in the name Jehan, if any at all, indeed. It does not thrill. It produces absolutely no vibrations… I have known several Jehans, and they all, without exception, were more than usually plain. Besides, Jehan is a notorious domesticity for Jean! And I pity any woman who is married to a man called Jean. She would probably never be allowed to know the entrancing pleasure of a single moment’s solitude. The only really safe name is Marius.”
Marius’s eyes widened as he became aware of how grim his situation was. “Cosette, I must be christened at once!” he blurted. “I mean we must get married at once. There is no time to be lost.”

“Married, Monsieur Pontmercy?”

“Well… surely!” said Marius. “You know that I love you, and you led me to believe, Mademoiselle Fauchelevent, that you were not absolutely indifferent to me.”

“I adore you,” Cosette said, touching his shoulder. “But you haven’t proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage. The subject has not even been touched on.”

“Well… may I propose to you now?” asked Marius, who was becoming emotionally exhausted from all this.

“I think it would be an admirable opportunity,” she answered. “And to spare you any possible disappointment, Monsieur Pontmercy, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly before-hand that I am fully determined to accept you.”

“Cosette!” he hiccupped in pure joy.

“Yes, Monsieur Pontmercy,” replied Cosette, “what have you got to say to me?”

“You know what I have to say to you…” Marius said.

“Yes, but you don’t say it,” scolded Cosette, looking very fed up with her lover’s antics.

Nodding his head slowly, Marius lowered himself to his knee before Cosette and took her hands in his. “Cosette, will you marry me?”

“Of course I will, darling!” she gasped, exploding with excitement and adoration. “How long you have been about it! I am afraid you have had very little experience in how to propose.”

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