

Chapter II

This man contrives a secret 'twixt us two, That he may quell me with his meeting eyes Like one who quells a lioness at bay.

This was the letter Gwendolen found on her table: -

DEAREST CHILD. - I have been expecting to hear from you for a week. In your last you said the Langens thought of leaving Leubronn and going to Baden. How could you be so thoughtless as to leave me in uncertainty about your address? I am in the greatest anxiety lest this should not reach you. In any case, you were to come home at the end of September, and I must now entreat you to return as quickly as possible, for if you spent all your money it would be out of my power to send you any more, and you must not borrow of the Langens, for I could not repay them. This is the sad truth, my child - I wish I could prepare you for it better - but a dreadful calamity has befallen us all. You know nothing about business and will not understand it; but Grapnell & Co. have failed for a million, and we are totally ruined - your aunt Gascoigne as well as I, only that your uncle has his benefice, so that by putting down their carriage and getting interest for the boys, the family can go on. All the property our poor father saved for us goes to pay the liabilities. There is nothing I can call my own. It is better you should know this at once, though it rends my heart to have to tell it you. Of course we cannot help thinking what a pity it was that you went away just when you did. But I shall never reproach you, my dear child; I would save you from all trouble if I could. On your way home you will have time to prepare yourself for the change you will find. We shall perhaps leave Offendene at once, for we hope that Mr Haynes, who wanted it before, may be ready to take it off my hands. Of course we cannot go to the rectory - there is not a corner there to spare. We must get some hut or other to shelter us, and we must live on your uncle Gascoigne's charity, until I see what else can be done. I shall not be able to pay the debts to the tradesmen besides the servants' wages. Summon up your fortitude, my dear child; we must resign ourselves to God's will. But it is hard to resign one's self to Mr Lassman's wicked recklessness, which they say was the cause of the failure. Your poor sisters can only cry with me and give me no help. If you were once here, there might be a break in the cloud - I always feel it impossible that you can have been meant for poverty. If the Langens wish to remain abroad, perhaps you can put yourself under some one else's care for the journey. But come as soon as you can to your afflicted and loving mamma,

FANNY DAVILOW.

The first effect of this letter on Gwendolen was half-stupefying. The implicit confidence that her destiny must be one of luxurious ease,

where any trouble that occurred would be well clad and provided for, had been stronger in her own mind than in her mamma's, being fed there by her youthful blood and that sense of superior claims which made a large part of her consciousness. It was almost as difficult for her to believe suddenly that her position had become one of poverty and of humiliating dependence, as it would have been to get into the strong current of her blooming life the chill sense that her death would really come. She stood motionless for a few minutes, then tossed off her hat and automatically looked in the glass. The coils of her smooth light-brown hair were still in order perfect enough for a ball-room; and as on other nights, Gwendolen might have looked lingeringly at herself for pleasure (surely an allowable indulgence); but now she took no conscious note of her reflected beauty, and simply stared right before her as if she had been jarred by a hateful sound and was waiting for any sign of its cause. By-and-by she threw herself in the corner of the red velvet sofa, took up the letter again and read it twice deliberately, letting it at last fall on the ground, while she rested her clasped hands on her lap and sat perfectly still, shedding no tears. Her impulse was to survey and resist the situation rather than to wail over it. There was no inward exclamation of 'Poor mamma!' Her mamma had never seemed to get much enjoyment out of life, and if Gwendolen had been at this moment disposed to feel pity she would have bestowed it on herself - for was she not naturally and rightfully the chief object of her mamma's anxiety too? But it was anger, it was resistance that possessed her; it was bitter vexation that she had lost her gains at roulette, whereas if her luck had continued through this one day she would have had a handsome sum to carry home, or she might have gone on playing and won enough to support them all. Even now was it not possible? She had only four napoleons left in her purse, but she possessed some ornaments which she could sell: a practice so common in stylish society at German baths that there was no need to be ashamed of it; and even if she had not received her mamma's letter, she would probably have decided to get money for an Etruscan necklace which she happened not to have been wearing since her arrival; nay, she might have done so with an agreeable sense that she was living with some intensity and escaping humdrum. With ten louis at her disposal and a return of her former luck, which seemed probable, what could she do better than go on playing for a few days? If her friends at home disapproved of the way in which she got the money, as they certainly would, still the money would be there. Gwendolen's imagination dwelt on this course and created agreeable consequences, but not with unbroken confidence and rising certainty as it would have done if she had been touched with the gambler's mania. She had gone to the roulette-table not because of passion, but in search of it: her mind was still sanely capable of picturing balanced probabilities, and while the chance of winning allured her, the chance of losing thrust itself on her with alternate strength and made a vision from which her pride sank sensitively. For

she was resolved not to tell the Langens that any misfortune had befallen her family, or to make herself in any way indebted to their compassion; and if she were to part with her jewelry to any observable extent, they would interfere by inquiries and remonstrances. The course that held the least risk of intolerable annoyance was to raise money on her necklace early in the morning, tell the Langens that her mother desired her immediate return without giving a reason, and take the train for Brussels that evening. She had no maid with her, and the Langens might make difficulties about her returning home, but her will was peremptory.

Instead of going to bed she made as brilliant a light as she could and began to pack, working diligently, though all the while visited by the scenes that might take place on the coming day - now by the tiresome explanations and farewells, and the whirling journey toward a changed home, now by the alternative of staying just another day and standing again at the roulette-table. But always in this latter scene there was the presence of that Deronda, watching her with exasperating irony, and - the two keen experiences were inevitably revived together - beholding her again forsaken by luck. This importunate image certainly helped to sway her resolve on the side of immediate departure, and to urge her packing to the point which would make a change of mind inconvenient. It had struck twelve when she came into her room, and by the time she was assuring herself that she had left out only what was necessary, the faint dawn was stealing through the white blinds and dulling her candles. What was the use of going to bed? Her cold bath was refreshment enough, and she saw that a slight trace of fatigue about the eyes only made her look the more interesting. Before six o'clock she was completely equipped in her gray traveling dress even to her felt hat, for she meant to walk out as soon as she could count on seeing other ladies on their way to the springs. And happening to be seated sideways before the long strip of mirror between her two windows she turned to look at herself, leaning her elbow on the back of the chair in an attitude that might have been chosen for her portrait. It is possible to have a strong self-love without any self-satisfaction, rather with a self-discontent which is the more intense because one's own little core of egoistic sensibility is a supreme care; but Gwendolen knew nothing of such inward strife. She had a *naive* delight in her fortunate self, which any but the harshest saintliness will have some indulgence for in a girl who had every day seen a pleasant reflection of that self in her friends' flattery as well as in the looking-glass. And even in this beginning of troubles, while for lack of anything else to do she sat gazing at her image in the growing light, her face gathered a complacency gradual as the cheerfulness of the morning. Her beautiful lips curled into a more and more decided smile, till at last she took off her hat, leaned forward and kissed the cold glass which had looked so warm. How could she believe in sorrow? If it attacked her, she felt the force to crush it, to defy it, or

run away from it, as she had done already. Anything seemed more possible than that she could go on bearing miseries, great or small.

Madame von Langen never went out before breakfast, so that Gwendolen could safely end her early walk by taking her way homeward through the Obere Strasse in which was the needed shop, sure to be open after seven. At that hour any observers whom she minded would be either on their walks in the region of the springs, or would be still in their bedrooms; but certainly there was one grand hotel, the *Czarina* from which eyes might follow her up to Mr Wiener's door. This was a chance to be risked: might she not be going in to buy something which had struck her fancy? This implicit falsehood passed through her mind as she remembered that the *Czarina* was Deronda's hotel; but she was then already far up the Obere Strasse, and she walked on with her usual floating movement, every line in her figure and drapery falling in gentle curves attractive to all eyes except those which discerned in them too close a resemblance to the serpent, and objected to the revival of serpent-worship. She looked neither to the right hand nor to the left, and transacted her business in the shop with a coolness which gave little Mr Weiner nothing to remark except her proud grace of manner, and the superior size and quality of the three central turquoises in the necklace she offered him. They had belonged to a chain once her father's: but she had never known her father; and the necklace was in all respects the ornament she could most conveniently part with. Who supposes that it is an impossible contradiction to be superstitious and rationalizing at the same time? Roulette encourages a romantic superstition as to the chances of the game, and the most prosaic rationalism as to human sentiments which stand in the way of raising needful money. Gwendolen's dominant regret was that after all she had only nine louis to add to the four in her purse: these Jew dealers were so unscrupulous in taking advantage of Christians unfortunate at play! But she was the Langens' guest in their hired apartment, and had nothing to pay there: thirteen louis would do more than take her home; even if she determined on risking three, the remaining ten would more than suffice, since she meant to travel right on, day and night. As she turned homeward, nay, entered and seated herself in the *salon* to await her friends and breakfast, she still wavered as to her immediate departure, or rather she had concluded to tell the Langens simply that she had had a letter from her mamma desiring her return, and to leave it still undecided when she should start. It was already the usual breakfast-time, and hearing some one enter as she was leaning back rather tired and hungry with her eyes shut, she rose expecting to see one or other of the Langens - the words which might determine her lingering at least another day, ready-formed to pass her lips. But it was the servant bringing in a small packet for Miss Harleth, which had at that moment been left at the door. Gwendolen took it in her hand and immediately hurried into her own room. She looked paler

and more agitated than when she had first read her mamma's letter. Something - she never quite knew what - revealed to her before she opened the packet that it contained the necklace she had just parted with. Underneath the paper it was wrapped in a cambric handkerchief, and within this was a scrap of torn-off note-paper, on which was written with a pencil, in clear but rapid handwriting - '*A stranger who has found Miss Harleth's necklace returns it to her with the hope that she will not again risk the loss of it.*'

Gwendolen reddened with the vexation of wounded pride. A large corner of the handkerchief seemed to have been recklessly torn off to get rid of a mark; but she at once believed in the first image of 'the stranger' that presented itself to her mind. It was Deronda; he must have seen her go into the shop; he must have gone in immediately after and repurchased the necklace. He had taken an unpardonable liberty, and had dared to place her in a thoroughly hateful position. What could she do? - Not, assuredly, act on her conviction that it was he who had sent her the necklace and straightway send it back to him: that would be to face the possibility that she had been mistaken; nay, even if the 'stranger' were he and no other, it would be something too gross for her to let him know that she had divined this, and to meet him again with that recognition in their minds. He knew very well that he was entangling her in helpless humiliation: it was another way of smiling at her ironically, and taking the air of a supercilious mentor. Gwendolen felt the bitter tears of mortification rising and rolling down her cheeks. No one had ever before dared to treat her with irony and contempt. One thing was clear: she must carry out her resolution to quit this place at once; it was impossible for her to reappear in the public *salon*, still less stand at the gaming-table with the risk of seeing Deronda. Now came an importunate knock at the door: breakfast was ready. Gwendolen with a passionate movement thrust necklace, cambric, scrap of paper, and all into her *necessaire*, pressed her handkerchief against her face, and after pausing a minute or two to summon back her proud self-control, went to join her friends. Such signs of tears and fatigue as were left seemed accordant enough with the account she at once gave of her having sat up to do her packing, instead of waiting for help from her friend's maid. There was much protestation, as she had expected, against her traveling alone, but she persisted in refusing any arrangements for companionship. She would be put into the ladies' compartment and go right on. She could rest exceedingly well in the train, and was afraid of nothing.

In this way it happened that Gwendolen never reappeared at the roulette-table, but that Thursday evening left Leubronn for Brussels, and on Saturday morning arrived at Offendene, the home to which she and her family were soon to say a last good-bye.