Chapter VI

'Croyez-vous m'avoir humiliee pour m'avoir appris que la terre tourne autour du soleil? Je vous jure que je ne m'en estime pas moins.' - FONTENELLE: *Pluralite des Mondes*.

That lofty criticism had caused Gwendolen a new sort of pain. She would not have chosen to confess how unfortunate she thought herself in not having had Miss Arrowpoint's musical advantages, so as to be able to question Herr Klesmer's taste with the confidence of thorough knowledge; still less, to admit even to herself that Miss Arrowpoint each time they met raised an unwonted feeling of jealousy in her: not in the least because she was an heiress, but because it was really provoking that a girl whose appearance you could not characterize except by saying that her figure was slight and of middle stature, her features small, her eyes tolerable, and her complexion sallow, had nevertheless a certain mental superiority which could not be explained away - an exasperating thoroughness in her musical accomplishment, a fastidious discrimination in her general tastes, which made it impossible to force her admiration and kept you in awe of her standard. This insignificant-looking young lady of four-and-twenty, whom any one's eyes would have passed over negligently if she had not been Miss Arrowpoint, might be suspected of a secret opinion that Miss Harleth's acquirements were rather of a common order, and such an opinion was not made agreeable to think of by being always veiled under a perfect kindness of manner.

But Gwendolen did not like to dwell on facts which threw an unfavorable light on itself. The musical Magus who had so suddenly widened her horizon was not always on the scene; and his being constantly backward and forward between London and Quetcham soon began to be thought of as offering opportunities for converting him to a more admiring state of mind. Meanwhile, in the manifest pleasure her singing gave at Brackenshaw Castle, the Firs, and elsewhere, she recovered her equanimity, being disposed to think approval more trustworthy than objection, and not being one of the exceptional persons who have a parching thirst for a perfection undemanded by their neighbors. Perhaps it would have been rash to say then that she was at all exceptional inwardly, or that the unusual in her was more than her rare grace of movement and bearing, and a certain daring which gave piquancy to a very common egoistic ambition, such as exists under many clumsy exteriors and is taken no notice of. For I suppose that the set of the head does not really determine the hunger of the inner self for supremacy: it only makes a difference sometimes as to the way in which the supremacy is held attainable, and a little also to the degree in which it can be attained; especially when the hungry one is a girl, whose passion for doing what is remarkable has an ideal limit in consistency with the highest

breeding and perfect freedom from the sordid need of income. Gwendolen was as inwardly rebellious against the restraints of family conditions, and as ready to look through obligations into her own fundamental want of feeling for them, as if she had been sustained by the boldest speculations; but she really had no such speculations, and would at once have marked herself off from any sort of theoretical or practically reforming women by satirizing them. She rejoiced to feel herself exceptional; but her horizon was that of the genteel romance where the heroine's soul poured out in her journal is full of vague power, originality, and general rebellion, while her life moves strictly in the sphere of fashion; and if she wanders into a swamp, the pathos lies partly, so to speak, in her having on her satin shoes. Here is a restraint which nature and society have provided on the pursuit of striking adventure; so that a soul burning with a sense of what the universe is not, and ready to take all existence as fuel, is nevertheless held captive by the ordinary wirework of social forms and does nothing particular.

This commonplace result was what Gwendolen found herself threatened with even in the novelty of the first winter at Offendene. What she was clear upon was, that she did not wish to lead the same sort of life as ordinary young ladies did; but what she was not clear upon was, how she should set about leading any other, and what were the particular acts which she would assert her freedom by doing. Offendene remained a good background, if anything would happen there; but on the whole the neighborhood was in fault.

Beyond the effect of her beauty on a first presentation, there was not much excitement to be got out of her earliest invitations, and she came home after little sallies of satire and knowingness, such as had offended Mrs. Arrowpoint, to fill the intervening days with the most girlish devices. The strongest assertion she was able to make of her individual claims was to leave out Alice's lessons (on the principle that Alice was more likely to excel in ignorance), and to employ her with Miss Merry, and the maid who was understood to wait on all the ladies, in helping to arrange various dramatic costumes which Gwendolen pleased herself with having in readiness for some future occasions of acting in charades or theatrical pieces, occasions which she meant to bring about by force of will or contrivance. She had never acted - only made a figure in *tableaux vivans* at school; but she felt assured that she could act well, and having been once or twice to the Theatre Francais, and also heard her mamma speak of Rachel, her waking dreams and cogitations as to how she would manage her destiny sometimes turned on the question whether she would become an actress like Rachel, since she was more beautiful than that thin Jewess. Meanwhile the wet days before Christmas were passed pleasantly in the preparation of costumes, Greek, Oriental, and Composite, in which Gwendolen attitudinized and speechified before a

domestic audience, including even the housekeeper, who was once pressed into it that she might swell the notes of applause; but having shown herself unworthy by observing that Miss Harleth looked far more like a queen in her own dress than in that baggy thing with her arms all bare, she was not invited a second time.

'Do I look as well as Rachel, mamma?' said Gwendolen, one day when she had been showing herself in her Greek dress to Anna, and going through scraps of scenes with much tragic intention.

'You have better arms than Rachel,' said Mrs. Davilow, 'your arms would do for anything, Gwen. But your voice is not so tragic as hers; it is not so deep.'

'I can make it deeper, if I like,' said Gwendolen, provisionally; then she added, with decision, 'I think a higher voice is more tragic: it is more feminine; and the more feminine a woman is, the more tragic it seems when she does desperate actions.'

'There may be something in that,' said Mrs. Davilow, languidly. 'But I don't know what good there is in making one's blood creep. And if there is anything horrible to be done, I should like it to be left to the men.'

'Oh, mamma, you are so dreadfully prosaic! As if all the great poetic criminals were not women! I think the men are poor cautious creatures.'

'Well, dear, and you - who are afraid to be alone in the night - I don't think you would be very bold in crime, thank God.'

'I am not talking about reality, mamma,' said Gwendolen, impatiently. Then her mamma being called out of the room, she turned quickly to her cousin, as if taking an opportunity, and said, 'Anna, do ask my uncle to let us get up some charades at the rectory. Mr Middleton and Warham could act with us - just for practice. Mamma says it will not do to have Mr Middleton consulting and rehearsing here. He is a stick, but we could give him suitable parts. Do ask, or else I will.'

'Oh, not till Rex comes. He is so clever, and such a dear old thing, and he will act Napoleon looking over the sea. He looks just like Napoleon. Rex can do anything.'

'I don't in the least believe in your Rex, Anna,' said Gwendolen, laughing at her. 'He will turn out to be like those wretched blue and yellow water- colors of his which you hang up in your bedroom and worship.'

'Very well, you will see,' said Anna. 'It is not that I know what is clever, but he has got a scholarship already, and papa says he will get a fellowship, and nobody is better at games. He is cleverer than Mr Middleton, and everybody but you call Mr Middleton clever.'

'So he may be in a dark-lantern sort of way. But he *is* a stick. If he had to say, 'Perdition catch my soul, but I do love her,' he would say it in just the same tone as, 'Here endeth the second lesson.''

'Oh, Gwendolen!' said Anna, shocked at these promiscuous allusions. 'And it is very unkind of you to speak so of him, for he admires you very much. I heard Warham say one day to mamma, 'Middleton is regularly spooney upon Gwendolen.' She was very angry with him; but I know what it means. It is what they say at college for being in love.'

'How can I help it?' said Gwendolen, rather contemptuously. 'Perdition catch my soul if I love *him*.'

'No, of course; papa, I think, would not wish it. And he is to go away soon. But it makes me sorry when you ridicule him.'

'What shall you do to me when I ridicule Rex?' said Gwendolen, wickedly.

'Now, Gwendolen, dear, you *will not*?' said Anna, her eyes filling with tears. 'I could not bear it. But there really is nothing in him to ridicule. Only you may find out things. For no one ever thought of laughing at Mr Middleton before you. Every one said he was nice-looking, and his manners perfect. I am sure I have always been frightened at him because of his learning and his square-cut coat, and his being a nephew of the bishop's, and all that. But you will not ridicule Rex - promise me.' Anna ended with a beseeching look which touched Gwendolen.

'You are a dear little coz,' she said, just touching the tip of Anna's chin with her thumb and forefinger. 'I don't ever want to do anything that will vex you. Especially if Rex is to make everything come off - charades and everything.'

And when at last Rex was there, the animation he brought into the life of Offendene and the rectory, and his ready partnership in Gwendolen's plans, left her no inclination for any ridicule that was not of an open and flattering kind, such as he himself enjoyed. He was a fine open-hearted youth, with a handsome face strongly resembling his father's and Anna's, but softer in expression than the one, and larger in scale than the other: a bright, healthy, loving nature, enjoying ordinary innocent things so much that vice had no temptation for him, and what he knew of it lay too entirely in the outer

courts and little-visited chambers of his mind for him to think of it with great repulsion. Vicious habits were with him 'what some fellows did' - 'stupid stuff' which he liked to keep aloof from. He returned Anna's affection as fully as could be expected of a brother whose pleasures apart from her were more than the sum total of hers; and he had never known a stronger love.

The cousins were continually together at the one house or the other - chiefly at Offendene, where there was more freedom, or rather where there was a more complete sway for Gwendolen; and whatever she wished became a ruling purpose for Rex. The charades came off according to her plans; and also some other little scenes not contemplated by her in which her acting was more impromptu. It was at Offendene that the charades and *tableaux* were rehearsed and presented, Mrs. Davilow seeing no objection even to Mr Middleton's being invited to share in them, now that Rex too was there - especially as his services were indispensable: Warham, who was studying for India with a Wanchester 'coach,' having no time to spare, and being generally dismal under a cram of everything except the answers needed at the forthcoming examination, which might disclose the welfare of our Indian Empire to be somehow connected with a quotable knowledge of Browne's Pastorals.

Mr Middleton was persuaded to play various grave parts, Gwendolen having flattered him on his enviable immobility of countenance; and at first a little pained and jealous at her comradeship with Rex, he presently drew encouragement from the thought that this sort of cousinly familiarity excluded any serious passion. Indeed, he occasionally felt that her more formal treatment of himself was such a sign of favor as to warrant his making advances before he left Pennicote, though he had intended to keep his feelings in reserve until his position should be more assured. Miss Gwendolen, quite aware that she was adored by this unexceptionable young clergyman with pale whiskers and square-cut collar, felt nothing more on the subject than that she had no objection to being adored: she turned her eyes on him with calm mercilessness and caused him many mildly agitating hopes by seeming always to avoid dramatic contact with him - for all meanings, we know, depend on the key of interpretation.

Some persons might have thought beforehand that a young man of Anglican leanings, having a sense of sacredness much exercised on small things as well as great, rarely laughing save from politeness, and in general regarding the mention of spades by their naked names as rather coarse, would not have seen a fitting bride for himself in a girl who was daring in ridicule, and showed none of the special grace required in the clergyman's wife; or, that a young man informed by theological reading would have reflected that he was not likely to meet the taste of a lively, restless young lady like Miss Harleth. But are we

always obliged to explain why the facts are not what some persons thought beforehand? The apology lies on their side, who had that erroneous way of thinking.

As for Rex, who would possibly have been sorry for poor Middleton if he had been aware of the excellent curate's inward conflict, he was too completely absorbed in a first passion to have observation for any person or thing. He did not observe Gwendolen; he only felt what she said or did, and the back of his head seemed to be a good organ of information as to whether she was in the room or out. Before the end of the first fortnight he was so deeply in love that it was impossible for him to think of his life except as bound up with Gwendolen's. He could see no obstacles, poor boy; his own love seemed a guarantee of hers, since it was one with the unperturbed delight in her image, so that he could no more dream of her giving him pain than an Egyptian could dream of snow. She sang and played to him whenever he liked, was always glad of his companionship in riding, though his borrowed steeds were often comic, was ready to join in any fun of his, and showed a right appreciation of Anna. No mark of sympathy seemed absent. That because Gwendolen was the most perfect creature in the world she was to make a grand match, had not occurred to him. He had no conceit - at least not more than goes to make up the necessary gum and consistence of a substantial personality: it was only that in the young bliss of loving he took Gwendolen's perfection as part of that good which had seemed one with life to him, being the outcome of a happy, well- embodied nature.

One incident which happened in the course of their dramatic attempts impressed Rex as a sign of her unusual sensibility. It showed an aspect of her nature which could not have been preconceived by any one who, like him, had only seen her habitual fearlessness in active exercises and her high spirits in society.

After a good deal of rehearsing it was resolved that a select party should be invited to Offendene to witness the performances which went with so much satisfaction to the actors. Anna had caused a pleasant surprise; nothing could be neater than the way in which she played her little parts; one would even have suspected her of hiding much sly observation under her simplicity. And Mr Middleton answered very well by not trying to be comic. The main source of doubt and retardation had been Gwendolen's desire to appear in her Greek dress. No word for a charade would occur to her either waking or dreaming that suited her purpose of getting a statuesque pose in this favorite costume. To choose a motive from Racine was of no use, since Rex and the others could not declaim French verse, and improvised speeches would turn the scene into burlesque. Besides, Mr Gascoigne prohibited the acting of scenes from plays: he usually protested against the notion that an amusement which was fitting for

every one else was unfitting for a clergyman; but he would not in this matter overstep the line of decorum as drawn in that part of Wessex, which did not exclude his sanction of the young people's acting charades in his sister-in-law's house - a very different affair from private theatricals in the full sense of the word.

Everybody of course was concerned to satisfy this wish of Gwendolen's, and Rex proposed that they should wind up with a tableau in which the effect of her majesty would not be marred by any one's speech. This pleased her thoroughly, and the only question was the choice of the tableau.

'Something pleasant, children, I beseech you,' said Mrs. Davilow; 'I can't have any Greek wickedness.'

'It is no worse than Christian wickedness, mamma,' said Gwendolen, whose mention of Rachelesque heroines had called forth that remark.

'And less scandalous,' said Rex. 'Besides, one thinks of it as all gone by and done with. What do you say to Briseis being led away? I would be Achilles, and you would be looking round at me - after the print we have at the rectory.'

'That would be a good attitude for me,' said Gwendolen, in a tone of acceptance. But afterward she said with decision, 'No. It will not do. There must be three men in proper costume, else it will be ridiculous.'

'I have it,' said Rex, after a little reflection. 'Hermione as the statue in Winter's Tale? I will be Leontes, and Miss Merry, Paulina, one on each side. Our dress won't signify,' he went on laughingly; 'it will be more Shakespearian and romantic if Leontes looks like Napoleon, and Paulina like a modern spinster.'

And Hermione was chosen; all agreeing that age was of no consequence, but Gwendolen urged that instead of the mere tableau there should be just enough acting of the scene to introduce the striking up of the music as a signal for her to step down and advance; when Leontes, instead of embracing her, was to kneel and kiss the hem of her garment, and so the curtain was to fall. The antechamber with folding doors lent itself admirably to the purpose of a stage, and the whole of the establishment, with the addition of Jarrett the village carpenter, was absorbed in the preparations for an entertainment, which, considering that it was an imitation of acting, was likely to be successful, since we know from ancient fable that an imitation may have more chance of success than the original.

Gwendolen was not without a special exultation in the prospect of this occasion, for she knew that Herr Klesmer was again at Quetcham, and she had taken care to include him among the invited.

Klesmer came. He was in one of his placid, silent moods, and sat in serene contemplation, replying to all appeals in benignant-sounding syllables more or less articulate - as taking up his cross meekly in a world overgrown with amateurs, or as careful how he moved his lion paws lest he should crush a rampant and vociferous mouse.

Everything indeed went off smoothly and according to expectation - all that was improvised and accidental being of a probable sort - until the incident occurred which showed Gwendolen in an unforeseen phase of emotion. How it came about was at first a mystery.

The tableau of Hermione was doubly striking from its dissimilarity with what had gone before: it was answering perfectly, and a murmur of applause had been gradually suppressed while Leontes gave his permission that Paulina should exercise her utmost art and make the statue move.

Hermione, her arm resting on a pillar, was elevated by about six inches, which she counted on as a means of showing her pretty foot and instep, when at the given signal she should advance and descend.

'Music, awake her, strike!' said Paulina (Mrs. Davilow, who, by special entreaty, had consented to take the part in a white burnous and hood).

Herr Klesmer, who had been good-natured enough to seat himself at the piano, struck a thunderous chord - but in the same instant, and before Hermione had put forth her foot, the movable panel, which was on a line with the piano, flew open on the right opposite the stage and disclosed the picture of the dead face and the fleeing figure, brought out in pale definiteness by the position of the wax-lights. Everyone was startled, but all eyes in the act of turning toward the open panel were recalled by a piercing cry from Gwendolen, who stood without change of attitude, but with a change of expression that was terrifying in its terror. She looked like a statue into which a soul of Fear had entered: her pallid lips were parted; her eyes, usually narrowed under their long lashes, were dilated and fixed. Her mother, less surprised than alarmed, rushed toward her, and Rex, too, could not help going to her side. But the touch of her mother's arm had the effect of an electric charge; Gwendolen fell on her knees and put her hands before her face. She was still trembling, but mute, and it seemed that she had self-consciousness enough to aim at controlling her signs of terror, for she presently allowed herself to be raised from her kneeling

posture and led away, while the company were relieving their minds by explanation.

'A magnificent bit of *plastik* that!' said Klesmer to Miss Arrowpoint. And a quick fire of undertoned question and answer went round.

'Was it part of the play?'

'Oh, no, surely not. Miss Harleth was too much affected. A sensitive creature!'

'Dear me! I was not aware that there was a painting behind that panel; were you?'

'No; how should I? Some eccentricity in one of the Earl's family long ago, I suppose.'

'How very painful! Pray shut it up.'

'Was the door locked? It is very mysterious. It must be the spirits.'

'But there is no medium present.'

'How do you know that? We must conclude that there is, when such things happen.'

'Oh, the door was not locked; it was probably the sudden vibration from the piano that sent it open.'

This conclusion came from Mr Gascoigne, who begged Miss Merry if possible to get the key. But this readiness to explain the mystery was thought by Mrs. Vulcany unbecoming in a clergyman, and she observed in an undertone that Mr Gascoigne was always a little too worldly for her taste. However, the key was produced, and the rector turned it in the lock with an emphasis rather offensively rationalizing - as who should say, 'it will not start open again' - putting the key in his pocket as a security.

However, Gwendolen soon reappeared, showing her usual spirits, and evidently determined to ignore as far as she could the striking change she had made in the part of Hermione.

But when Klesmer said to her, 'We have to thank you for devising a perfect climax: you could not have chosen a finer bit of *plastik*,' there was a flush of pleasure in her face. She liked to accept as a belief what was really no more than delicate feigning. He divined that the betrayal into a passion of fear had been mortifying to her, and wished her to understand that he took it for good acting. Gwendolen cherished the

idea that now he was struck with her talent as well as her beauty, and her uneasiness about his opinion was half turned to complacency.

But too many were in the secret of what had been included in the rehearsals, and what had not, and no one besides Klesmer took the trouble to soothe Gwendolen's imagined mortification. The general sentiment was that the incident should be let drop.

There had really been a medium concerned in the starting open of the panel: one who had quitted the room in haste and crept to bed in much alarm of conscience. It was the small Isabel, whose intense curiosity, unsatisfied by the brief glimpse she had had of the strange picture on the day of arrival at Offendene, had kept her on the watch for an opportunity of finding out where Gwendolen had put the key, of stealing it from the discovered drawer when the rest of the family were out, and getting on a stool to unlock the panel. While she was indulging her thirst for knowledge in this way, a noise which she feared was an approaching footstep alarmed her: she closed the door and attempted hurriedly to lock it, but failing and not daring to linger, she withdrew the key and trusted that the panel would stick, as it seemed well inclined to do. In this confidence she had returned the key to its former place, stilling any anxiety by the thought that if the door were discovered to be unlocked nobody would know how the unlocking came about. The inconvenient Isabel, like other offenders, did not foresee her own impulse to confession, a fatality which came upon her the morning after the party, when Gwendolen said at the breakfast-table, 'I know the door was locked before the housekeeper gave me the key, for I tried it myself afterward. Some one must have been to my drawer and taken the key.'

It seemed to Isabel that Gwendolen's awful eyes had rested on her more than on the other sisters, and without any time for resolve, she said, with a trembling lip:

'Please forgive me, Gwendolen.'

The forgiveness was sooner bestowed than it would have been if Gwendolen had not desired to dismiss from her own and every one else's memory any case in which she had shown her susceptibility to terror. She wondered at herself in these occasional experiences, which seemed like a brief remembered madness, an unexplained exception from her normal life; and in this instance she felt a peculiar vexation that her helpless fear had shown itself, not, as usual, in solitude, but in well-lit company. Her ideal was to be daring in speech and reckless in braving dangers, both moral and physical; and though her practice fell far behind her ideal, this shortcoming seemed to be due to the pettiness of circumstances, the narrow theatre which life offers to a girl of twenty, who cannot conceive herself as anything else than a

lady, or as in any position which would lack the tribute of respect. She had no permanent consciousness of other fetters, or of more spiritual restraints, having always disliked whatever was presented to her under the name of religion, in the same way that some people dislike arithmetic and accounts: it had raised no other emotion in her, no alarm, no longing; so that the question whether she believed it had not occurred to her any more than it had occurred to her to inquire into the conditions of colonial property and banking, on which, as she had had many opportunities of knowing, the family fortune was dependent. All these facts about herself she would have been ready to admit, and even, more or less indirectly, to state. What she unwillingly recognized, and would have been glad for others to be unaware of, was that liability of hers to fits of spiritual dread, though this fountain of awe within her had not found its way into connection with the religion taught her or with any human relations. She was ashamed and frightened, as at what might happen again, in remembering her tremor on suddenly feeling herself alone, when, for example, she was walking without companionship and there came some rapid change in the light. Solitude in any wide scene impressed her with an undefined feeling of immeasurable existence aloof from her, in the midst of which she was helplessly incapable of asserting herself. The little astronomy taught her at school used sometimes to set her imagination at work in a way that made her tremble: but always when some one joined her she recovered her indifference to the vastness in which she seemed an exile; she found again her usual world in which her will was of some avail, and the religious nomenclature belonging to this world was no more identified for her with those uneasy impressions of awe than her uncle's surplices seen out of use at the rectory. With human ears and eyes about her, she had always hitherto recovered her confidence, and felt the possibility of winning empire.

To her mamma and others her fits of timidity or terror were sufficiently accounted for by her ‘sensitiveness’ or the ‘excitability of her nature’; but these explanatory phrases required conciliation with much that seemed to be blank indifference or rare self-mastery. Heat is a great agent and a useful word, but considered as a means of explaining the universe it requires an extensive knowledge of differences; and as a means of explaining character ‘sensitiveness’ is in much the same predicament. But who, loving a creature like Gwendolen, would not be inclined to regard every peculiarity in her as a mark of preeminence? That was what Rex did. After the Hermione scene he was more persuaded than ever that she must be instinct with all feeling, and not only readier to respond to a worshipful love, but able to love better than other girls. Rex felt the summer on his young wings and soared happily.