

Chapter IX

I'll tell thee, Berthold, what men's hopes are like: A silly child that,
quivering with joy, Would cast its little mimic fishing-line Baited with
loadstone for a bowl of toys In the salt ocean.

Eight months after the arrival of the family at Offendene, that is to say in the end of the following June, a rumor was spread in the neighborhood which to many persons was matter of exciting interest. It had no reference to the results of the American war, but it was one which touched all classes within a certain circuit round Wanchester: the corn-factors, the brewers, the horse-dealers, and saddlers, all held it a laudable thing, and one which was to be rejoiced in on abstract grounds, as showing the value of an aristocracy in a free country like England; the blacksmith in the hamlet of Diplow felt that a good time had come round; the wives of laboring men hoped their nimble boys of ten or twelve would be taken into employ by the gentlemen in livery; and the farmers about Diplow admitted, with a tincture of bitterness and reserve that a man might now again perhaps have an easier market or exchange for a rick of old hay or a wagon-load of straw. If such were the hopes of low persons not in society, it may be easily inferred that their betters had better reasons for satisfaction, probably connected with the pleasures of life rather than its business. Marriage, however, must be considered as coming under both heads; and just as when a visit of majesty is announced, the dream of knighthood or a baronetcy is to be found under various municipal nightcaps, so the news in question raised a floating indeterminate vision of marriage in several well-bred imaginations.

The news was that Diplow Hall, Sir Hugo Mallinger's place, which had for a couple of years turned its white window-shutters in a painfully wall-eyed manner on its fine elms and beeches, its liliated pool and grassy acres specked with deer, was being prepared for a tenant, and was for the rest of the summer and through the hunting season to be inhabited in a fitting style both as to house and stable. But not by Sir Hugo himself: by his nephew, Mr Mallinger Grandcourt, who was presumptive heir to the baronetcy, his uncle's marriage having produced nothing but girls. Nor was this the only contingency with which fortune flattered young Grandcourt, as he was pleasantly called; for while the chance of the baronetcy came through his father, his mother had given a baronial streak to his blood, so that if certain intervening persons slightly painted in the middle distance died, he would become a baron and peer of this realm.

It is the uneven allotment of nature that the male bird alone has the tuft, but we have not yet followed the advice of hasty philosophers who would have us copy nature entirely in these matters; and if Mr Mallinger Grandcourt became a baronet or a peer, his wife would

share the title - which in addition to his actual fortune was certainly a reason why that wife, being at present unchosen, should be thought of by more than one person with a sympathetic interest as a woman sure to be well provided for.

Some readers of this history will doubtless regard it as incredible that people should construct matrimonial prospects on the mere report that a bachelor of good fortune and possibilities was coming within reach, and will reject the statement as a mere outflow of gall: they will aver that neither they nor their first cousins have minds so unbridled; and that in fact this is not human nature, which would know that such speculations might turn out to be fallacious, and would therefore not entertain them. But, let it be observed, nothing is here narrated of human nature generally: the history in its present stage concerns only a few people in a corner of Wessex - whose reputation, however, was unimpeached, and who, I am in the proud position of being able to state, were all on visiting terms with persons of rank.

There were the Arrowpoints, for example, in their beautiful place at Quetcham: no one could attribute sordid views in relation to their daughter's marriage to parents who could leave her at least half a million; but having affectionate anxieties about their Catherine's position (she having resolutely refused Lord Slogan, an unexceptionable Irish peer, whose estate wanted nothing but drainage and population), they wondered, perhaps from something more than a charitable impulse, whether Mr Grandcourt was good-looking, of sound constitution, virtuous, or at least reformed, and if liberal-conservative, not too liberal-conservative; and without wishing anybody to die, thought his succession to the title an event to be desired.

If the Arrowpoints had such ruminations, it is the less surprising that they were stimulated in Mr Gascoigne, who for being a clergyman was not the less subject to the anxieties of a parent and guardian; and we have seen how both he and Mrs. Gascoigne might by this time have come to feel that he was overcharged with the management of young creatures who were hardly to be held in with bit or bridle, or any sort of metaphor that would stand for judicious advice.

Naturally, people did not tell each other all they felt and thought about young Grandcourt's advent: on no subject is this openness found prudently practicable - not even on the generation of acids, or the destination of the fixed stars: for either your contemporary with a mind turned toward the same subjects may find your ideas ingenious and forestall you in applying them, or he may have other views on acids and fixed stars, and think ill of you in consequence. Mr Gascoigne did not ask Mr Arrowpoint if he had any trustworthy source of information about Grandcourt considered as a husband for

a charming girl; nor did Mrs. Arrowpoint observe to Mrs. Davilow that if the possible peer sought a wife in the neighborhood of Diplow, the only reasonable expectation was that he would offer his hand to Catherine, who, however, would not accept him unless he were in all respects fitted to secure her happiness. Indeed, even to his wife the rector was silent as to the contemplation of any matrimonial result, from the probability that Mr Grandcourt would see Gwendolen at the next Archery Meeting; though Mrs. Gascoigne's mind was very likely still more active in the same direction. She had said interjectionally to her sister, 'It would be a mercy, Fanny, if that girl were well married!' to which Mrs. Davilow discerning some criticism of her darling in the fervor of that wish, had not chosen to make any audible reply, though she had said inwardly, 'You will not get her to marry for your pleasure'; the mild mother becoming rather saucy when she identified herself with her daughter.

To her husband Mrs. Gascoigne said, 'I hear Mr Grandcourt has got two places of his own, but he comes to Diplow for the hunting. It is to be hoped he will set a good example in the neighborhood. Have you heard what sort of a young man he is, Henry?'

Mr Gascoigne had not heard; at least, if his male acquaintances had gossiped in his hearing, he was not disposed to repeat their gossip, or to give it any emphasis in his own mind. He held it futile, even if it had been becoming, to show any curiosity as to the past of a young man whose birth, wealth, and consequent leisure made many habits venial which under other circumstances would have been inexcusable. Whatever Grandcourt had done, he had not ruined himself; and it is well-known that in gambling, for example, whether of the business or holiday sort, a man who has the strength of mind to leave off when he has only ruined others, is a reformed character. This is an illustration merely: Mr Gascoigne had not heard that Grandcourt had been a gambler; and we can hardly pronounce him singular in feeling that a landed proprietor with a mixture of noble blood in his veins was not to be an object of suspicious inquiry like a reformed character who offers himself as your butler or footman. Reformation, where a man can afford to do without it, can hardly be other than genuine. Moreover, it was not certain on any other showing hitherto, that Mr Grandcourt had needed reformation more than other young men in the ripe youth of five-and-thirty; and, at any rate, the significance of what he had been must be determined by what he actually was.

Mrs. Davilow, too, although she would not respond to her sister's pregnant remark, could not be inwardly indifferent to an advent that might promise a brilliant lot for Gwendolen. A little speculation on 'what may be' comes naturally, without encouragement - comes inevitably in the form of images, when unknown persons are mentioned; and Mr Grandcourt's name raised in Mrs. Davilow's mind

first of all the picture of a handsome, accomplished, excellent young man whom she would be satisfied with as a husband for her daughter; but then came the further speculation - would Gwendolen be satisfied with him? There was no knowing what would meet that girl's taste or touch her affections - it might be something else than excellence; and thus the image of the perfect suitor gave way before a fluctuating combination of qualities that might be imagined to win Gwendolen's heart. In the difficulty of arriving at the particular combination which would insure that result, the mother even said to herself, 'It would not signify about her being in love, if she would only accept the right person.' For whatever marriage had been for herself, how could she the less desire it for her daughter? The difference her own misfortunes made was, that she never dared to dwell much to Gwendolen on the desirableness of marriage, dreading an answer something like that of the future Madame Roland, when her gentle mother urging the acceptance of a suitor, said, 'Tu seras heureuse, ma chere.' 'Oui, maman, comme toi.'

In relation to the problematic Mr Grandcourt least of all would Mrs. Davilow have willingly let fall a hint of the aerial castle-building which she had the good taste to be ashamed of; for such a hint was likely enough to give an adverse poise to Gwendolen's own thought, and make her detest the desirable husband beforehand. Since that scene after poor Rex's farewell visit, the mother had felt a new sense of peril in touching the mystery of her child's feeling, and in rashly determining what was her welfare: only she could think of welfare in no other shape than marriage.

The discussion of the dress that Gwendolen was to wear at the Archery Meeting was a relevant topic, however; and when it had been decided that as a touch of color on her white cashmere, nothing, for her complexion, was comparable to pale green - a feather which she was trying in her hat before the looking-glass having settled the question - Mrs. Davilow felt her ears tingle when Gwendolen, suddenly throwing herself into the attitude of drawing her bow, said with a look of comic enjoyment -

'How I pity all the other girls at the Archery Meeting - all thinking of Mr Grandcourt! And they have not a shadow of a chance.'

Mrs. Davilow had not the presence of mind to answer immediately, and Gwendolen turned round quickly toward her, saying, wickedly -

'Now you know they have not, mamma. You and my uncle and aunt - you all intend him to fall in love with me.'

Mrs. Davilow, piqued into a little stratagem, said, 'Oh, my, dear, that is not so certain. Miss Arrowpoint has charms which you have not.'

'I know, but they demand thought. My arrow will pierce him before he has time for thought. He will declare himself my slave - I shall send him round the world to bring me back the wedding ring of a happy woman - in the meantime all the men who are between him and the title will die of different diseases - he will come back Lord Grandcourt - but without the ring - and fall at my feet. I shall laugh at him - he will rise in resentment - I shall laugh more - he will call for his steed and ride to Quetcham, where he will find Miss Arrowpoint just married to a needy musician, Mrs. Arrowpoint tearing her cap off, and Mr Arrowpoint standing by. Exit Lord Grandcourt, who returns to Diplow, and, like M. Jabot, *change de linge*.'

Was ever any young witch like this? You thought of hiding things from her - sat upon your secret and looked innocent, and all the while she knew by the corner of your eye that it was exactly five pounds ten you were sitting on! As well turn the key to keep out the damp! It was probable that by dint of divination she already knew more than any one else did of Mr Grandcourt. That idea in Mrs. Davilow's mind prompted the sort of question which often comes without any other apparent reason than the faculty of speech and the not knowing what to do with it.

'Why, what kind of a man do you imagine him to be, Gwendolen?'

'Let me see!' said the witch, putting her forefinger to her lips, with a little frown, and then stretching out the finger with decision. 'Short - just above my shoulder - crying to make himself tall by turning up his mustache and keeping his beard long - a glass in his right eye to give him an air of distinction - a strong opinion about his waistcoat, but uncertain and trimming about the weather, on which he will try to draw me out. He will stare at me all the while, and the glass in his eye will cause him to make horrible faces, especially when he smiles in a flattering way. I shall cast down my eyes in consequence, and he will perceive that I am not indifferent to his attentions. I shall dream that night that I am looking at the extraordinary face of a magnified insect - and the next morning he will make an offer of his hand; the sequel as before.'

'That is a portrait of some one you have seen already, Gwen. Mr Grandcourt may be a delightful young man for what you know.'

'Oh, yes,' said Gwendolen, with a high note of careless admission, taking off her best hat and turning it round on her hand contemplatively. 'I wonder what sort of behavior a delightful young man would have? I know he would have hunters and racers, and a London house and two country-houses - one with battlements and another with a veranda. And I feel sure that with a little murdering he might get a title.'

The irony of this speech was of the doubtful sort that has some genuine belief mixed up with it. Poor Mrs. Davilow felt uncomfortable under it. Her own meanings being usually literal and in intention innocent; and she said with a distressed brow:

'Don't talk in that way, child, for heaven's sake! you do read such books - they give you such ideas of everything. I declare when your aunt and I were your age we knew nothing about wickedness. I think it was better so.'

'Why did you not bring me up in that way, mamma?' said Gwendolen. But immediately perceiving in the crushed look and rising sob that she had given a deep wound, she tossed down her hat and knelt at her mother's feet crying -

'Mamma, mamma! I was only speaking in fun. I meant nothing.'

'How could I, Gwendolen?' said poor Mrs. Davilow, unable to hear the retraction, and sobbing violently while she made the effort to speak. 'Your will was always too strong for me - if everything else had been different.'

This disjointed logic was intelligible enough to the daughter. 'Dear mamma, I don't find fault with you - I love you,' said Gwendolen, really compunctious. 'How can you help what I am? Besides, I am very charming. Come, now.' Here Gwendolen with her handkerchief gently rubbed away her mother's tears. 'Really - I am contented with myself. I like myself better than I should have liked my aunt and you. How dreadfully dull you must have been!'

Such tender cajolery served to quiet the mother, as it had often done before after like collisions. Not that the collisions had often been repeated at the same point; for in the memory of both they left an association of dread with the particular topics which had occasioned them: Gwendolen dreaded the unpleasant sense of compunction toward her mother, which was the nearest approach to self-condemnation and self-distrust that she had known; and Mrs. Davilow's timid maternal conscience dreaded whatever had brought on the slightest hint of reproach. Hence, after this little scene, the two concurred in excluding Mr Grandcourt from their conversation.

When Mr Gascoigne once or twice referred to him, Mrs. Davilow feared least Gwendolen should betray some of her alarming keensightedness about what was probably in her uncle's mind; but the fear was not justified. Gwendolen knew certain differences in the characters with which she was concerned as birds know climate and weather; and for the very reason that she was determined to evade her uncle's control, she was determined not to clash with him. The good

understanding between them was much fostered by their enjoyment of archery together: Mr Gascoigne, as one of the best bowmen in Wessex, was gratified to find the elements of like skill in his niece; and Gwendolen was the more careful not to lose the shelter of his fatherly indulgence, because since the trouble with Rex both Mrs. Gascoigne and Anna had been unable to hide what she felt to be a very unreasonable alienation from her. Toward Anna she took some pains to behave with a regretful affectionateness; but neither of them dared to mention Rex's name, and Anna, to whom the thought of him was part of the air she breathed, was ill at ease with the lively cousin who had ruined his happiness. She tried dutifully to repress any sign of her changed feeling; but who in pain can imitate the glance and hand-touch of pleasure.

This unfair resentment had rather a hardening effect on Gwendolen, and threw her into a more defiant temper. Her uncle too might be offended if she refused the next person who fell in love with her; and one day when that idea was in her mind she said -

'Mamma, I see now why girls are glad to be married - to escape being expected to please everybody but themselves.'

Happily, Mr Middleton was gone without having made any avowal; and notwithstanding the admiration for the handsome Miss Harleth, extending perhaps over thirty square miles in a part of Wessex well studded with families whose numbers included several disengaged young men, each glad to seat himself by the lively girl with whom it was so easy to get on in conversation, - notwithstanding these grounds for arguing that Gwendolen was likely to have other suitors more explicit than the cautious curate, the fact was not so.

Care has been taken not only that the trees should not sweep the stars down, but also that every man who admires a fair girl should not be enamored of her, and even that every man who is enamored should not necessarily declare himself. There are various refined shapes in which the price of corn, known to be potent cause in their relation, might, if inquired into, show why a young lady, perfect in person, accomplishments, and costume, has not the trouble of rejecting many offers; and nature's order is certainly benignant in not obliging us one and all to be desperately in love with the most admirable mortal we have ever seen. Gwendolen, we know, was far from holding that supremacy in the minds of all observers. Besides, it was but a poor eight months since she had come to Offendene, and some inclinations become manifest slowly, like the sunward creeping of plants.

In face of this fact that not one of the eligible young men already in the neighborhood had made Gwendolen an offer, why should Mr Grandcourt be thought of as likely to do what they had left undone?

Perhaps because he was thought of as still more eligible; since a great deal of what passes for likelihood in the world is simply the reflex of a wish. Mr and Mrs. Arrowpoint, for example, having no anxiety that Miss Harleth should make a brilliant marriage, had quite a different likelihood in their minds.