

Chapter XIV

I will not clothe myself in wreck - wear gems
Sawed from cramped finger-bones of women drowned;
Feel chilly vaporous hands of ireful ghosts
Clutching my necklace: trick my maiden breast
With orphans' heritage. Let your dead love Marry it's dead.

Gwendolen looked lovely and vigorous as a tall, newly-opened lily the next morning: there was a reaction of young energy in her, and yesterday's self-distrust seemed no more than the transient shiver on the surface of a full stream. The roving archery match in Cardell Chase was a delightful prospect for the sport's sake: she felt herself beforehand moving about like a wood-nymph under the beeches (in appreciative company), and the imagined scene lent a charm to further advances on the part of Grandcourt - not an impassioned lyrical Daphnis for the wood-nymph, certainly: but so much the better. To-day Gwendolen foresaw him making slow conversational approaches to a declaration, and foresaw herself awaiting and encouraging it according to the rational conclusion which she had expressed to her uncle.

When she came down to breakfast (after every one had left the table except Mrs. Davilow) there were letters on her plate. One of them she read with a gathering smile, and then handed it to her mamma, who, on returning it, smiled also, finding new cheerfulness in the good spirits her daughter had shown ever since waking, and said -

'You don't feel inclined to go a thousand miles away?'

'Not exactly so far.'

'It was a sad omission not to have written again before this. Can't you write how - before we set out this morning?'

'It is not so pressing. To-morrow will do. You see they leave town to-day. I must write to Dover. They will be there till Monday.'

'Shall I write for you, dear - if it teases you?'

Gwendolen did not speak immediately, but after sipping her coffee, answered brusquely, 'Oh no, let it be; I will write to-morrow.' Then, feeling a touch of compunction, she looked up and said with playful tenderness, 'Dear, old, beautiful mamma!'

'Old, child, truly.'

'Please don't, mamma! I meant old for darling. You are hardly twenty-five years older than I am. When you talk in that way my life shrivels up before me.'

'One can have a great deal of happiness in twenty-five years, my dear.'

'I must lose no time in beginning,' said Gwendolen, merrily. 'The sooner I get my palaces and coaches the better.'

'And a good husband who adores you, Gwen,' said Mrs. Davilow, encouragingly.

Gwendolen put out her lips saucily and said nothing.

It was a slight drawback on her pleasure in starting that the rector was detained by magistrate's business, and would probably not be able to get to Cardell Chase at all that day. She cared little that Mrs. Gascoigne and Anna chose not to go without him, but her uncle's presence would have seemed to make it a matter of course that the decision taken would be acted on. For decision in itself began to be formidable. Having come close to accepting Grandcourt, Gwendolen felt this lot of unhopd-for fullness rounding itself too definitely. When we take to wishing a great deal for ourselves, whatever we get soon turns into mere limitation and exclusion. Still there was the reassuring thought that marriage would be the gate into a larger freedom.

The place of meeting was a grassy spot called Green Arbor, where a bit of hanging wood made a sheltering amphitheatre. It was here that the coachful of servants with provisions had to prepare the picnic meal; and the warden of the Chase was to guide the roving archers so as to keep them within the due distance from this centre, and hinder them from wandering beyond the limit which had been fixed on - a curve that might be drawn through certain well-known points, such as the double Oak, the Whispering Stones, and the High Cross. The plan was to take only a preliminary stroll before luncheon, keeping the main roving expedition for the more exquisite lights of the afternoon. The muster was rapid enough to save every one from dull moments of waiting, and when the groups began to scatter themselves through the light and shadow made here by closely neighboring beeches and thereby rarer oaks, one may suppose that a painter would have been glad to look on. This roving archery was far prettier than the stationary game, but success in shooting at variable marks were less favored by practice, and the hits were distributed among the volunteer archers otherwise than they would have been in target-shooting. From this cause, perhaps, as well as from the twofold distraction of being preoccupied and wishing not to betray her preoccupation, Gwendolen did not greatly distinguish herself in these first experiments, unless it

were by the lively grace with which she took her comparative failure. She was in white and green as on the day of the former meeting, when it made an epoch for her that she was introduced to Grandcourt; he was continually by her side now, yet it would have been hard to tell from mere looks and manners that their relation to each other had at all changed since their first conversation. Still there were other grounds that made most persons conclude them to be, if not engaged already, on the eve of being so. And she believed this herself. As they were all returning toward Green Arbor in divergent groups, not thinking at all of taking aim but merely chattering, words passed which seemed really the beginning of that end - the beginning of her acceptance. Grandcourt said, 'Do you know how long it is since I first saw you in this dress?'

'The archery meeting was on the 25th, and this is the 13th,' said Gwendolen, laughingly. 'I am not good at calculating, but I will venture to say that it must be nearly three weeks.'

A little pause, and then he said, 'That is a great loss of time.'

'That your knowing me has caused you? Pray don't be uncomplimentary; I don't like it.'

Pause again. 'It is because of the gain that I feel the loss.'

Here Gwendolen herself let a pause. She was thinking, 'He is really very ingenious. He never speaks stupidly.' Her silence was so unusual that it seemed the strongest of favorable answers, and he continued:

'The gain of knowing you makes me feel the time I lose in uncertainty. Do *you* like uncertainty?'

'I think I do, rather,' said Gwendolen, suddenly beaming on him with a playful smile. 'There is more in it.'

Grandcourt met her laughing eyes with a slow, steady look right into them, which seemed like vision in the abstract, and then said, 'Do you mean more torment for me?'

There was something so strange to Gwendolen in this moment that she was quite shaken out of her usual self-consciousness. Blushing and turning away her eyes, she said, 'No, that would make me sorry.'

Grandcourt would have followed up this answer, which the change in her manner made apparently decisive of her favorable intention; but he was not in any way overcome so as to be unaware that they were now, within sight of everybody, descending the space into Green Arbor, and descending it at an ill-chosen point where it began to be

inconveniently steep. This was a reason for offering his hand in the literal sense to help her; she took it, and they came down in silence, much observed by those already on the level - among others by Mrs. Arrowpoint, who happened to be standing with Mrs. Davilow. That lady had now made up her mind that Grandcourt's merits were not such as would have induced Catherine to accept him, Catherine having so high a standard as to have refused Lord Slogan. Hence she looked at the tenant of Diplo with dispassionate eyes.

'Mr Grandcourt is not equal as a man to his uncle, Sir Hugo Mallinger - too languid. To be sure, Mr Grandcourt is a much younger man, but I shouldn't wonder if Sir Hugo were to outlive him, notwithstanding the difference of years. It is ill calculating on successions,' concluded Mrs. Arrowpoint, rather too loudly.

'It is indeed,' said Mrs. Davilow, able to assent with quiet cheerfulness, for she was so well satisfied with the actual situation of affairs that her habitual melancholy in their general unsatisfactoriness was altogether in abeyance.

I am not concerned to tell of the food that was eaten in that green refectory, or even to dwell on the stories of the forest scenery that spread themselves out beyond the level front of the hollow; being just now bound to tell a story of life at a stage when the blissful beauty of earth and sky entered only by narrow and oblique inlets into the consciousness, which was busy with a small social drama almost as little penetrated by a feeling of wider relations as if it had been a puppet-show. It will be understood that the food and champagne were of the best - the talk and laughter too, in the sense of belonging to the best society, where no one makes an invidious display of anything in particular, and the advantages of the world are taken with that high-bred depreciation which follows from being accustomed to them. Some of the gentlemen strolled a little and indulged in a cigar, there being a sufficient interval before, four o'clock - the time for beginning to rove again. Among these, strange to say, was Grandcourt; but not Mr Lush, who seemed to be taking his pleasure quite generously to-day by making himself particularly serviceable, ordering everything for everybody, and by this activity becoming more than ever a blot on the scene to Gwendolen, though he kept himself amiably aloof from her, and never even looked at her obviously. When there was a general move to prepare for starting, it appeared that the bows had all been put under the charge of Lord Brackenshaw's valet, and Mr Lush was concerned to save ladies the trouble of fetching theirs from the carriage where they were propped. He did not intend to bring Gwendolen's, but she, fearful lest he should do so, hurried to fetch it herself. The valet, seeing her approach, met her with it, and in giving it into her hand gave also a letter addressed to her. She asked no question about it, perceived at a glance that the address was in a

lady's handwriting (of the delicate kind which used to be esteemed feminine before the present uncial period), and moving away with her bow in her hand, saw Mr Lush coming to fetch other bows. To avoid meeting him she turned aside and walked with her back toward the stand of carriages, opening the letter. It contained these words -

If Miss Harleth is in doubt whether she should accept Mr Grandcourt, let her break from her party after they have passed the Whispering Stones and return to that spot. She will then hear something to decide her; but she can only hear it by keeping this letter a strict secret from every one. If she does not act according to this letter, she will repent, as the woman who writes it has repented. The secrecy Miss Harleth will feel herself bound in honor to guard.

Gwendolen felt an inward shock, but her immediate thought was, 'It is come in time.' It lay in her youthfulness that she was absorbed by the idea of the revelation to be made, and had not even a momentary suspicion of contrivance that could justify her in showing the letter. Her mind gathered itself up at once into the resolution, that she would manage to go unobserved to the Whispering Stones; and thrusting the letter into her pocket she turned back to rejoin the company, with that sense of having something to conceal which to her nature had a bracing quality and helped her to be mistress of herself.

It was a surprise to every one that Grandcourt was not, like the other smokers, on the spot in time to set out roving with the rest. 'We shall alight on him by-and-by,' said Lord Brackenshaw; 'he can't be gone far.' At any rate, no man could be waited for. This apparent forgetfulness might be taken for the distraction of a lover so absorbed in thinking of the beloved object as to forget an appointment which would bring him into her actual presence. And the good-natured Earl gave Gwendolen a distant jocose hint to that effect, which she took with suitable quietude. But the thought in her mind was 'Can he too be starting away from a decision?' It was not exactly a pleasant thought to her; but it was near the truth. 'Starting away,' however, was not the right expression for the languor of intention that came over Grandcourt, like a fit of diseased numbness, when an end seemed within easy reach: to desist then, when all expectation was to the contrary, became another gratification of mere will, sublimely independent of definite motive. At that moment he had begun a second large cigar in a vague, hazy obstinacy which, if Lush or any other mortal who might be insulted with impunity had interrupted by overtaking him with a request for his return, would have expressed itself by a slow removal of his cigar, to say in an undertone, 'You'll be kind enough to go to the devil, will you?'

But he was not interrupted, and the rovers set off without any visible depression of spirits, leaving behind only a few of the less vigorous

ladies, including Mrs. Davilow, who preferred a quiet stroll free from obligation to keep up with others. The enjoyment of the day was soon at its highest pitch, the archery getting more spirited and the changing scenes of the forest from roofed grove to open glade growing lovelier with the lengthening shadows, and the deeply-felt but undefinable gradations of the mellowing afternoon. It was agreed that they were playing an extemporized 'As you like it;' and when a pretty compliment had been turned to Gwendolen about her having the part of Rosalind, she felt the more compelled to be surpassing in loveliness. This was not very difficult to her, for the effect of what had happened to-day was an excitement which needed a vent - a sense of adventure rather than alarm, and a straining toward the management of her retreat, so as not to be impeded.

The roving had been lasting nearly an hour before the arrival at the Whispering Stones, two tall conical blocks that leaned toward each other like gigantic gray-mantled figures. They were soon surveyed and passed by with the remark that they would be good ghosts on a starlit night. But a soft sunlight was on them now, and Gwendolen felt daring. The stones were near a fine grove of beeches, where the archers found plenty of marks.

'How far are we from Green Arbor now?' said Gwendolen, having got in front by the side of the warden.

'Oh, not more than half a mile, taking along the avenue we're going to cross up there: but I shall take round a Couple of miles, by the High Cross.'

She was falling back among the rest, when suddenly they seemed all to be hurrying obliquely forward under the guidance of Mr Lush, and lingering a little where she was, she perceived her opportunity of slipping away. Soon she was out of sight, and without running she seemed to herself to fly along the ground and count the moments nothing till she found herself back again at the Whispering Stones. They turned their blank gray sides to her: what was there on the other side? If there were nothing after all? That was her only dread now - to have to turn back again in mystification; and walking round the right-hand stone without pause, she found herself in front of some one whose large dark eyes met hers at a foot's distance. In spite of expectation, she was startled and shrank back, but in doing so she could take in the whole figure of this stranger and perceive that she was unmistakably a lady, and one who must have been exceedingly handsome. She perceived, also, that a few yards from her were two children seated on the grass.

'Miss Harleth?' said the lady.

'Yes.' All Gwendolen's consciousness was wonder.

'Have you accepted Mr Grandcourt?'

'No.'

'I have promised to tell you something. And you will promise to keep my secret. However you may decide you will not tell Mr Grandcourt, or any one else, that you have seen me?'

'I promise.'

'My name is Lydia Glasher. Mr Grandcourt ought not to marry any one but me. I left my husband and child for him nine years ago. Those two children are his, and we have two others - girls - who are older. My husband is dead now, and Mr Grandcourt ought to marry me. He ought to make that boy his heir.'

She looked at the boy as she spoke, and Gwendolen's eyes followed hers. The handsome little fellow was puffing out his cheeks in trying to blow a tiny trumpet which remained dumb. His hat hung backward by a string, and his brown curls caught the sun-rays. He was a cherub.

The two women's eyes met again, and Gwendolen said proudly, 'I will not interfere with your wishes.' She looked as if she were shivering, and her lips were pale.

'You are very attractive, Miss Harleth. But when he first knew me, I too was young. Since then my life has been broken up and embittered. It is not fair that he should be happy and I miserable, and my boy thrust out of sight for another.'

These words were uttered with a biting accent, but with a determined abstinence from anything violent in tone or manner. Gwendolen, watching Mrs. Glasher's face while she spoke, felt a sort of terror: it was as if some ghastly vision had come to her in a dream and said, 'I am a woman's life.'

'Have you anything more to say to me?' she asked in a low tone, but still proud and coldly. The revulsion within her was not tending to soften her. Everyone seemed hateful.

'Nothing. You know what I wished you to know. You can inquire about me if you like. My husband was Colonel Glasher.'

'Then I will go,' said Gwendolen, moving away with a ceremonious inclination, which was returned with equal grace.

In a few minutes Gwendolen was in the beech grove again but her party had gone out of sight and apparently had not sent in search of her, for all was solitude till she had reached the avenue pointed out by the warden. She determined to take this way back to Green Arbor, which she reached quickly; rapid movements seeming to her just now a means of suspending the thoughts which might prevent her from behaving with due calm. She had already made up her mind what step she would take.

Mrs. Davilow was of course astonished to see Gwendolen returning alone, and was not without some uneasiness which the presence of other ladies hindered her from showing. In answer to her words of surprise Gwendolen said -

'Oh, I have been rather silly. I lingered behind to look at the Whispering Stones, and the rest hurried on after something, so I lost sight of them. I thought it best to come home by the short way - the avenue that the warden had told me of. I'm not sorry after all. I had had enough walking.'

'Your party did not meet Mr Grandcourt, I presume,' said Mrs. Arrowpoint, not without intention.

'No,' said Gwendolen, with a little flash of defiance, and a light laugh. 'And we didn't see any carvings on the trees, either. Where can he be? I should think he has fallen into the pool or had an apoplectic fit.'

With all Gwendolen's resolve not to betray any agitation, she could not help it that her tone was unusually high and hard, and her mother felt sure that something unpropitious had happened.

Mrs. Arrowpoint thought that the self-confident young lady was much piqued, and that Mr Grandcourt was probably seeing reason to change his mind.

'If you have no objection, mamma, I will order the carriage,' said Gwendolen. 'I am tired. And every one will be going soon.'

Mrs. Davilow assented; but by the time the carriage was announced as, ready - the horses having to be fetched from the stables on the warden's premises - the roving party reappeared, and with them Mr Grandcourt.

'Ah, there you are!' said Lord Brackenshaw, going up to Gwendolen, who was arranging her mamma's shawl for the drive. 'We thought at first you had alighted on Grandcourt and he had taken you home. Lush said so. But after that we met Grandcourt. However, we didn't

suppose you could be in any danger. The warden said he had told you a near way back.'

'You are going?' said Grandcourt, coming up with his usual air, as if he did not conceive that there had been any omission on his part. Lord Brackenshaw gave place to him and moved away.

'Yes, we are going,' said Gwendolen, looking busily at her scarf, which she was arranging across her shoulders Scotch fashion.

'May I call at Offendene to-morrow?'

'Oh yes, if you like,' said Gwendolen, sweeping him from a distance with her eyelashes. Her voice was light and sharp as the first touch of frost.

Mrs. Davilow accepted his arm to lead her to the carriage; but while that was happening, Gwendolen with incredible swiftness had got in advance of them, and had sprung into the carriage.

'I got in, mamma, because I wished to be on this side,' she said, apologetically. But she had avoided Grandcourt's touch: he only lifted his hat and walked away - with the not unsatisfactory impression that she meant to show herself offended by his neglect.

The mother and daughter drove for five minutes in silence. Then Gwendolen said, 'I intend to join the Langens at Dover, mamma. I shall pack up immediately on getting home, and set off by the early train. I shall be at Dover almost as soon as they are; we can let them know by telegraph.'

'Good heavens, child! what can be your reason for saying so?'

'My reason for saying it, mamma, is that I mean to do it.'

'But why do you mean to do it?'

'I wish to go away.'

'Is it because you are offended with Mr Grandcourt's odd behavior in walking off to-day?'

'It is useless to enter into such questions. I am not going in any case to marry Mr Grandcourt. Don't interest yourself further about it.'

'What can I say to your uncle, Gwendolen? Consider the position you place me in. You led him to believe only last night that you had made up your mind in favor of Mr Grandcourt.'

'I am very sorry to cause you annoyance, mamma, dear, but I can't help it,' said Gwendolen, with still harder resistance in her tone. 'Whatever you or my uncle may think or do, I shall not alter my resolve, and I shall not tell my reason. I don't care what comes of it. I don't care if I never marry any one. There is nothing worth caring for. I believe all men are bad, and I hate them.'

'But need you set off in this way, Gwendolen,' said Mrs. Davilow, miserable and helpless.

'Now mamma, don't interfere with me. If you have ever had any trouble in your own life, remember it and don't interfere with me. If I am to be miserable, let it be by my own choice.'

The mother was reduced to trembling silence. She began to see that the difficulty would be lessened if Gwendolen went away.

And she did go. The packing was all carefully done that evening, and not long after dawn the next day Mrs. Davilow accompanied her daughter to the railway station. The sweet dews of morning, the cows and horses looking over the hedges without any particular reason, the early travelers on foot with their bundles, seemed all very melancholy and purposeless to them both. The dingy torpor of the railway station, before the ticket could be taken, was still worse. Gwendolen had certainly hardened in the last twenty-four hours: her mother's trouble evidently counted for little in her present state of mind, which did not essentially differ from the mood that makes men take to worse conduct when their belief in persons or things is upset. Gwendolen's uncontrolled reading, though consisting chiefly in what are called pictures of life, had somehow not prepared her for this encounter with reality. Is that surprising? It is to be believed that attendance at the *opera bouffe* in the present day would not leave men's minds entirely without shock, if the manners observed there with some applause were suddenly to start up in their own families. Perspective, as its inventor remarked, is a beautiful thing. What horrors of damp huts, where human beings languish, may not become picturesque through aerial distance! What hymning of cancerous vices may we not languish over as sublimest art in the safe remoteness of a strange language and artificial phrase! Yet we keep a repugnance to rheumatism and other painful effects when presented incur personal experience.

Mrs. Davilow felt Gwendolen's new phase of indifference keenly, and as she drove back alone, the brightening morning was sadder to her than before.

Mr Grandcourt called that day at Offendene, but nobody was at home.