

Chapter XXIV

'I question things but do not find One that will answer to my mind:
And all the world appears unkind.' - WORDSWORTH.

Gwendolen was glad that she had got through her interview with Klesmer before meeting her uncle and aunt. She had made up her mind now that there were only disagreeables before her, and she felt able to maintain a dogged calm in the face of any humiliation that might be proposed.

The meeting did not happen until the Monday, when Gwendolen went to the rectory with her mamma. They had called at Sawyer's Cottage by the way, and had seen every cranny of the narrow rooms in a mid-day light, unsoftened by blinds and curtains; for the furnishing to be done by gleanings from the rectory had not yet begun.

'How *shall* you endure it, mamma?' said Gwendolen, as they walked away. She had not opened her lips while they were looking round at the bare walls and floors, and the little garden with the cabbage-stalks, and the yew arbor all dust and cobwebs within. 'You and the four girls all in that closet of a room, with the green and yellow paper pressing on your eyes? And without me?'

'It will be some comfort that you have not to bear it too, dear.'

'If it were not that I must get some money, I would rather be there than go to be a governess.'

'Don't set yourself against it beforehand, Gwendolen. If you go to the palace you will have every luxury about you. And you know how much you have always cared for that. You will not find it so hard as going up and down those steep narrow stairs, and hearing the crockery rattle through the house, and the dear girls talking.'

'It is like a bad dream,' said Gwendolen, impetuously. 'I cannot believe that my uncle will let you go to such a place. He ought to have taken some other steps.'

'Don't be unreasonable, dear child. What could he have done?'

'That was for him to find out. It seems to me a very extraordinary world if people in our position must sink in this way all at once,' said Gwendolen, the other worlds with which she was conversant being constructed with a sense of fitness that arranged her own future agreeably.

It was her temper that framed her sentences under this entirely new pressure of evils: she could have spoken more suitably on the vicissitudes in other people's lives, though it was never her aspiration to express herself virtuously so much as cleverly - a point to be remembered in extenuation of her words, which were usually worse than she was.

And, notwithstanding the keen sense of her own bruises, she was capable of some compunction when her uncle and aunt received her with a more affectionate kindness than they had ever shown before. She could not but be struck by the dignified cheerfulness with which they talked of the necessary economies in their way of living, and in the education of the boys. Mr Gascoigne's worth of character, a little obscured by worldly opportunities - as the poetic beauty of women is obscured by the demands of fashionable dressing - showed itself to great advantage under this sudden reduction of fortune. Prompt and methodical, he had set himself not only to put down his carriage, but to reconsider his worn suits of clothes, to leave off meat for breakfast, to do without periodicals, to get Edwy from school and arrange hours of study for all the boys under himself, and to order the whole establishment on the sparest footing possible. For all healthy people economy has its pleasures; and the rector's spirit had spread through the household. Mrs. Gascoigne and Anna, who always made papa their model, really did not miss anything they cared about for themselves, and in all sincerity felt that the saddest part of the family losses was the change for Mrs. Davilow and her children.

Anna for the first time could merge her resentment on behalf of Rex in her sympathy with Gwendolen; and Mrs. Gascoigne was disposed to hope that trouble would have a salutary effect on her niece, without thinking it her duty to add any bitters by way of increasing the salutariness. They had both been busy devising how to get blinds and curtains for the cottage out of the household stores; but with delicate feeling they left these matters in the back-ground, and talked at first of Gwendolen's journey, and the comfort it was to her mamma to have her at home again.

In fact there was nothing for Gwendolen to take as a justification for extending her discontent with events to the persons immediately around her, and she felt shaken into a more alert attention, as if by a call to drill that everybody else was obeying, when her uncle began in a voice of firm kindness to talk to her of the efforts he had been making to get her a situation which would offer her as many advantages as possible. Mr Gascoigne had not forgotten Grandcourt, but the possibility of further advances from that quarter was something too vague for a man of his good sense to be determined by it: uncertainties of that kind must not now slacken his action in doing the best he could for his niece under actual conditions.

'I felt that there was no time to be lost, Gwendolen; for a position in a good family where you will have some consideration is not to be had at a moment's notice. And however long we waited we could hardly find one where you would be better off than at Bishop Mompert's. I am known to both him and Mrs. Mompert, and that of course is an advantage to you. Our correspondence has gone on favorably; but I cannot be surprised that Mrs. Mompert wishes to see you before making an absolute engagement. She thinks of arranging for you to meet her at Wanchester when she is on her way to town. I dare say you will feel the interview rather trying for you, my dear; but you will have a little time to prepare your mind.'

'Do you know *why* she wants to see me, uncle?' said Gwendolen, whose mind had quickly gone over various reasons that an imaginary Mrs. Mompert with three daughters might be supposed to entertain, reasons all of a disagreeable kind to the person presenting herself for inspection.

The rector smiled. 'Don't be alarmed, my dear. She would like to have a more precise idea of you than my report can give. And a mother is naturally scrupulous about a companion for her daughters. I have told her you are very young. But she herself exercises a close supervision over her daughters' education, and that makes her less anxious as to age. She is a woman of taste and also of strict principle, and objects to having a French person in the house. I feel sure that she will think your manners and accomplishments as good as she is likely to find; and over the religious and moral tone of the education she, and indeed the bishop himself, will preside.'

Gwendolen dared not answer, but the repression of her decided dislike to the whole prospect sent an unusually deep flush over her face and neck, subsiding as quickly as it came. Anna, full of tender fears, put her little hand into her cousin's, and Mr Gascoigne was too kind a man not to conceive something of the trial which this sudden change must be for a girl like Gwendolen. Bent on giving a cheerful view of things, he went on, in an easy tone of remark, not as if answering supposed objections -

'I think so highly of the position, that I should have been tempted to try and get it for Anna, if she had been at all likely to meet Mrs. Mompert's wants. It is really a home, with a continuance of education in the highest sense: 'governess' is a misnomer. The bishop's views are of a more decidedly Low Church color than my own - he is a close friend of Lord Grampian's; but, though privately strict, he is not by any means narrow in public matters. Indeed, he has created as little dislike in his diocese as any bishop on the bench. He has always remained friendly to me, though before his promotion, when he was

an incumbent of this diocese, we had a little controversy about the Bible Society.'

The rector's words were too pregnant with satisfactory meaning to himself for him to imagine the effect they produced in the mind of his niece. 'Continuance of education' - 'bishop's views' - 'privately strict' - 'Bible Society,' - it was as if he had introduced a few snakes at large for the instruction of ladies who regarded them as all alike furnished with poison-bags, and, biting or stinging, according to convenience. To Gwendolen, already shrinking from the prospect open to her, such phrases came like the growing heat of a burning glass - not at all as the links of persuasive reflection which they formed for the good uncle. She began, desperately, to seek an alternative.

'There was another situation, I think, mamma spoke of?' she said, with determined self-mastery.

'Yes,' said the rector, in rather a depreciatory tone; 'but that is in a school. I should not have the same satisfaction in your taking that. It would be much harder work, you are aware, and not so good in any other respect. Besides, you have not an equal chance of getting it.'

'Oh dear no,' said Mrs. Gascoigne, 'it would be much less appropriate, You might not have a bedroom to yourself.' And Gwendolen's memories of school suggested other particulars which forced her to admit to herself that this alternative would be no relief. She turned to her uncle again and said, apparently in acceptance of his ideas -

'When is Mrs. Mompert likely to send for me?'

'That is rather uncertain, but she has promised not to entertain any other proposal till she has seen you. She has entered with much feeling into your position. It will be within the next fortnight, probably. But I must be off now. I am going to let part of my glebe uncommonly well.'

The rector ended very cheerfully, leaving the room with the satisfactory conviction that Gwendolen was going to adapt herself to circumstances like a girl of good sense. Having spoken appropriately, he naturally supposed that the effects would be appropriate; being accustomed, as a household and parish authority, to be asked to 'speak to' refractory persons, with the understanding that the measure was morally coercive.

'What a stay Henry is to us all?' said Mrs. Gascoigne, when her husband had left the room.

'He is indeed,' said Mrs. Davilow, cordially. 'I think cheerfulness is a fortune in itself. I wish I had it.'

'And Rex is just like him,' said Mrs. Gascoigne. 'I must tell you the comfort we have had in a letter from him. I must read you a little bit,' she added, taking the letter from her pocket, while Anna looked rather frightened - she did not know why, except that it had been a rule with her not to mention Rex before Gwendolen.

The proud mother ran her eyes over the letter, seeking for sentences to read aloud. But apparently she had found it sown with what might seem to be closer allusions than she desired to the recent past, for she looked up, folding the letter, and saying -

'However, he tells us that our trouble has made a man of him; he sees a reason for any amount of work: he means to get a fellowship, to take pupils, to set one of his brothers going, to be everything that is most remarkable. The letter is full of fun - just like him. He says, 'Tell mother she has put out an advertisement for a jolly good hard-working son, in time to hinder me from taking ship; and I offer myself for the place.' The letter came on Friday. I never saw my husband so much moved by anything since Rex was born. It seemed a gain to balance our loss.'

This letter, in fact, was what had helped both Mrs. Gascoigne and Anna to show Gwendolen an unmixed kindness; and she herself felt very amiably about it, smiling at Anna, and pinching her chin, as much as to say, 'Nothing is wrong with you now, is it?' She had no gratuitously ill-natured feeling, or egoistic pleasure in making men miserable. She only had an intense objection to their making her miserable.

But when the talk turned on furniture for the cottage Gwendolen was not roused to show even a languid interest. She thought that she had done as much as could be expected of her this morning, and indeed felt at an heroic pitch in keeping to herself the struggle that was going on within her. The recoil of her mind from the only definite prospect allowed her, was stronger than even she had imagined beforehand. The idea of presenting herself before Mrs. Mompert in the first instance, to be approved or disapproved, came as pressure on an already painful bruise; even as a governess, it appeared she was to be tested and was liable to rejection. After she had done herself the violence to accept the bishop and his wife, they were still to consider whether they would accept her; it was at her peril that she was to look, speak, or be silent. And even when she had entered on her dismal task of self-constraint in the society of three girls whom she was bound incessantly to edify, the same process of inspection was to go on: there was always to be Mrs. Mompert's supervision; always

something or other would be expected of her to which she had not the slightest inclination; and perhaps the bishop would examine her on serious topics. Gwendolen, lately used to the social successes of a handsome girl, whose lively venturesomeness of talk has the effect of wit, and who six weeks before would have pitied the dullness of the bishop rather than have been embarrassed by him, saw the life before her as an entrance into a penitentiary. Wild thoughts of running away to be an actress, in spite of Klesmer, came to her with the lure of freedom; but his words still hung heavily on her soul; they had alarmed her pride and even her maidenly dignity: dimly she conceived herself getting amongst vulgar people who would treat her with rude familiarity - odious men, whose grins and smirks would not be seen through the strong grating of polite society. Gwendolen's daring was not in the least that of the adventuress; the demand to be held a lady was in her very marrow; and when she had dreamed that she might be the heroine of the gaming-table, it was with the understanding that no one should treat her with the less consideration, or presume to look at her with irony as Deronda had done. To be protected and petted, and to have her susceptibilities consulted in every detail, had gone along with her food and clothing as matters of course in her life: even without any such warning as Klesmer's she could not have thought it an attractive freedom to be thrown in solitary dependence on the doubtful civility of strangers. The endurance of the episcopal penitentiary was less repulsive than that; though here too she would certainly never be petted or have her susceptibilities consulted. Her rebellion against this hard necessity which had come just to her of all people in the world - to her whom all circumstances had concurred in preparing for something quite different - was exaggerated instead of diminished as one hour followed another, with the imagination of what she might have expected in her lot and what it was actually to be. The family troubles, she thought, were easier for every one than for her - even for poor dear mamma, because she had always used herself to not enjoying. As to hoping that if she went to the Momperts' and was patient a little while, things might get better - it would be stupid to entertain hopes for herself after all that had happened: her talents, it appeared, would never be recognized as anything remarkable, and there was not a single direction in which probability seemed to flatter her wishes. Some beautiful girls who, like her, had read romances where even plain governesses are centres of attraction and are sought in marriage, might have solaced themselves a little by transporting such pictures into their own future; but even if Gwendolen's experience had led her to dwell on love-making and marriage as her elysium, her heart was too much oppressed by what was near to her, in both the past and the future, for her to project her anticipations very far off. She had a world- nausea upon her, and saw no reason all through her life why she should wish to live. No religious view of trouble helped her: her troubles had in her opinion all been caused by other people's disagreeable or wicked conduct; and there

was really nothing pleasant to be counted on in the world: that was her feeling; everything else she had heard said about trouble was mere phrase-making not attractive enough for her to have caught it up and repeated it. As to the sweetness of labor and fulfilled claims; the interest of inward and outward activity; the impersonal delights of life as a perpetual discovery; the dues of courage, fortitude, industry, which it is mere baseness not to pay toward the common burden; the supreme worth of the teacher's vocation; - these, even if they had been eloquently preached to her, could have been no more than faintly apprehended doctrines: the fact which wrought upon her was her invariable observation that for a lady to become a governess - to 'take a situation' - was to descend in life and to be treated at best with a compassionate patronage. And poor Gwendolen had never dissociated happiness from personal pre-eminence and *eclat*. That where these threatened to forsake her, she should take life to be hardly worth the having, cannot make her so unlike the rest of us, men or women, that we should cast her out of our compassion; our moments of temptation to a mean opinion of things in general being usually dependent on some susceptibility about ourselves and some dullness to subjects which every one else would consider more important. Surely a young creature is pitiable who has the labyrinth of life before her and no clue - to whom distrust in herself and her good fortune has come as a sudden shock, like a rent across the path that she was treading carelessly.

In spite of her healthy frame, her irreconcilable repugnance affected her even physically; she felt a sort of numbness and could set about nothing; the least urgency, even that she should take her meals, was an irritation to her; the speech of others on any subject seemed unreasonable, because it did not include her feeling and was an ignorant claim on her. It was not in her nature to busy herself with the fancies of suicide to which disappointed young people are prone: what occupied and exasperated her was the sense that there was nothing for her but to live in a way she hated. She avoided going to the rectory again: it was too intolerable to have to look and talk as if she were compliant; and she could not exert herself to show interest about the furniture of that horrible cottage. Miss Merry was staying on purpose to help, and such people as Jocosa liked that sort of thing. Her mother had to make excuses for her not appearing, even when Anna came to see her. For that calm which Gwendolen had promised herself to maintain had changed into sick motivelessness: she thought, 'I suppose I shall begin to pretend by-and-by, but why should I do it now?'

Her mother watched her with silent distress; and, lapsing into the habit of indulgent tenderness, she began to think what she imagined that Gwendolen was thinking, and to wish that everything should give way to the possibility of making her darling less miserable.

One day when she was in the black and yellow bedroom and her mother was lingering there under the pretext of considering and arranging Gwendolen's articles of dress, she suddenly roused herself to fetch the casket which contained the ornaments.

'Mamma,' she began, glancing over the upper layer, 'I had forgotten these things. Why didn't you remind me of them? Do see about getting them sold. You will not mind about parting with them. You gave them all to me long ago.'

She lifted the upper tray and looked below.

'If we can do without them, darling, I would rather keep them for you,' said Mrs. Davilow, seating herself beside Gwendolen with a feeling of relief that she was beginning to talk about something. The usual relation between them had become reversed. It was now the mother who tried to cheer the daughter. 'Why, how came you to put that pocket handkerchief in here?'

It was the handkerchief with the corner torn off which Gwendolen had thrust in with the turquoise necklace.

'It happened to be with the necklace - I was in a hurry,' said Gwendolen, taking the handkerchief away and putting it in her pocket. 'Don't sell the necklace, mamma,' she added, a new feeling having come over her about that rescue of it which had formerly been so offensive.

'No, dear, no; it was made out of your dear father's chain. And I should prefer not selling the other things. None of them are of any great value. All my best ornaments were taken from me long ago.'

Mrs. Davilow colored. She usually avoided any reference to such facts about Gwendolen's step-father as that he had carried off his wife's jewelry and disposed of it. After a moment's pause she went on -

'And these things have not been reckoned on for any expenses. Carry them with you.'

'That would be quite useless, mamma,' said Gwendolen, coldly. 'Governesses don't wear ornaments. You had better get me a gray frieze livery and a straw poke, such as my aunt's charity children wear.'

'No, dear, no; don't take that view of it. I feel sure the Momperts will like you the better for being graceful and elegant.'

'I am not at all sure what the Momperts will like me to be. It is enough that I am expected to be what they like,' said Gwendolen bitterly.

'If there is anything you would object to less - anything that could be done - instead of your going to the bishop's, do say so, Gwendolen. Tell me what is in your heart. I will try for anything you wish,' said the mother, beseechingly. 'Don't keep things away from me. Let us bear them together.'

'Oh, mamma, there is nothing to tell. I can't do anything better. I must think myself fortunate if they will have me. I shall get some money for you. That is the only thing I have to think of. I shall not spend any money this year: you will have all the eighty pounds. I don't know how far that will go in housekeeping; but you need not stitch your poor fingers to the bone, and stare away all the sight that the tears have left in your dear eyes.'

Gwendolen did not give any caresses with her words as she had been used to do. She did not even look at her mother, but was looking at the turquoise necklace as she turned it over her fingers.

'Bless you for your tenderness, my good darling!' said Mrs. Davilow, with tears in her eyes. 'Don't despair because there are clouds now. You are so young. There may be great happiness in store for you yet.'

'I don't see any reason for expecting it, mamma,' said Gwendolen, in a hard tone; and Mrs. Davilow was silent, thinking as she had often thought before - 'What did happen between her and Mr Grandcourt?'

'I *will* keep this necklace, mamma,' said Gwendolen, laying it apart and then closing the casket. 'But do get the other things sold, even if they will not bring much. Ask my uncle what to do with them. I shall certainly not use them again. I am going to take the veil. I wonder if all the poor wretches who have ever taken it felt as I do.'

'Don't exaggerate evils, dear.'

'How can any one know that I exaggerate, when I am speaking of my own feeling? I did not say what any one else felt.'

She took out the torn handkerchief from her pocket again, and wrapped it deliberately round the necklace. Mrs. Davilow observed the action with some surprise, but the tone of her last words discouraged her from asking any question.

The 'feeling' Gwendolen spoke of with an air of tragedy was not to be explained by the mere fact that she was going to be a governess: she was possessed by a spirit of general disappointment. It was not simply

that she had a distaste for what she was called on to do: the distaste spread itself over the world outside her penitentiary, since she saw nothing very pleasant in it that seemed attainable by her even if she were free. Naturally her grievances did not seem to her smaller than some of her male contemporaries held theirs to be when they felt a profession too narrow for their powers, and had an *a priori* conviction that it was not worth while to put forth their latent abilities. Because her education had been less expensive than theirs, it did not follow that she should have wider emotions or a keener intellectual vision. Her griefs were feminine; but to her as a woman they were not the less hard to bear, and she felt an equal right to the Promethean tone.

But the movement of mind which led her to keep the necklace, to fold it up in the handkerchief, and rise to put it in her *necessaire*, where she had first placed it when it had been returned to her, was more peculiar, and what would be called less reasonable. It came from that streak of superstition in her which attached itself both to her confidence and her terror - a superstition which lingers in an intense personality even in spite of theory and science; any dread or hope for self being stronger than all reasons for or against it. Why she should suddenly determine not to part with the necklace was not much clearer to her than why she should sometimes have been frightened to find herself in the fields alone: she had a confused state of emotion about Deronda - was it wounded pride and resentment, or a certain awe and exceptional trust? It was something vague and yet mastering, which impelled her to this action about the necklace. There, is a great deal of unmapped country within us which would have to be taken into account in an explanation of our gusts and storms.