

Chapter XXVII

Desire has trimmed the sails, and Circumstance Brings but the breeze to fill them.

While Grandcourt on his beautiful black Yarico, the groom behind him on Criterion, was taking the pleasant ride from Diplow to Offendene, Gwendolen was seated before the mirror while her mother gathered up the lengthy mass of light-brown hair which she had been carefully brushing.

‘Only gather it up easily and make a coil, mamma,’ said Gwendolen.

‘Let me bring you some ear-rings, Gwen,’ said Mrs. Davilow, when the hair was adjusted, and they were both looking at the reflection in the glass. It was impossible for them not to notice that the eyes looked brighter than they had done of late, that there seemed to be a shadow lifted from the face, leaving all the lines once more in their placid youthfulness. The mother drew some inference that made her voice rather cheerful. ‘You do want your earrings?’

‘No, mamma; I shall not wear any ornaments, and I shall put on my black silk. Black is the only wear when one is going to refuse an offer,’ said Gwendolen, with one of her old smiles at her mother, while she rose to throw off her dressing-gown.

‘Suppose the offer is not made after all,’ said Mrs. Davilow, not without a sly intention.

‘Then that will be because I refuse it beforehand,’ said Gwendolen. ‘It comes to the same thing.’

There was a proud little toss of the head as she said this; and when she walked down-stairs in her long black robes, there was just that firm poise of head and elasticity of form which had lately been missing, as in a parched plant. Her mother thought, ‘She is quite herself again. It must be pleasure in his coming. Can her mind be really made up against him?’

Gwendolen would have been rather angry if that thought had been uttered; perhaps all the more because through the last twenty hours, with a brief interruption of sleep, she had been so occupied with perpetually alternating images and arguments for and against the possibility of her marrying Grandcourt, that the conclusion which she had determined on beforehand ceased to have any hold on her consciousness: the alternate dip of counterbalancing thoughts begotten of counterbalancing desires had brought her into a state in which no conclusion could look fixed to her. She would have

expressed her resolve as before; but it was a form out of which the blood had been sucked - no more a part of quivering life than the 'God's will be done' of one who is eagerly watching chances. She did not mean to accept Grandcourt; from the first moment of receiving his letter she had meant to refuse him; still, that could not but prompt her to look the unwelcome reasons full in the face until she had a little less awe of them, could not hinder her imagination from filling out her knowledge in various ways, some of which seemed to change the aspect of what she knew. By dint of looking at a dubious object with a constructive imagination, who can give it twenty different shapes. Her indistinct grounds of hesitation before the interview at the Whispering Stones, at present counted for nothing; they were all merged in the final repulsion. If it had not been for that day in Cardell Chase, she said to herself now, there would have been no obstacle to her marrying Grandcourt. On that day and after it, she had not reasoned and balanced; she had acted with a force of impulse against which all questioning was no more than a voice against a torrent. The impulse had come - not only from her maidenly pride and jealousy, not only from the shock of another woman's calamity thrust close on her vision, but - from her dread of wrong-doing, which was vague, it was true, and aloof from the daily details of her life, but not the less strong. Whatever was accepted as consistent with being a lady she had no scruple about; but from the dim region of what was called disgraceful, wrong, guilty, she shrunk with mingled pride and terror; and even apart from shame, her feeling would have made her place any deliberate injury of another in the region of guilt.

But now - did she know exactly what was the state of the case with regard to Mrs. Glasher and her children? She had given a sort of promise - had said, 'I will not interfere with your wishes.' But would another woman who married Grandcourt be in fact the decisive obstacle to her wishes, or be doing her and her boy any real injury? Might it not be just as well, nay better, that Grandcourt should marry? For what could not a woman do when she was married, if she knew how to assert herself? Here all was constructive imagination. Gwendolen had about as accurate a conception of marriage - that is to say, of the mutual influences, demands, duties of man and woman in the state of matrimony - as she had of magnetic currents and the law of storms.

'Mamma managed baldly,' was her way of summing up what she had seen of her mother's experience: she herself would manage quite differently. And the trials of matrimony were the last theme into which Mrs. Davilow could choose to enter fully with this daughter.

'I wonder what mamma and my uncle would say if they knew about Mrs. Glasher!' thought Gwendolen in her inward debating; not that she could imagine herself telling them, even if she had not felt bound

to silence. 'I wonder what anybody would say; or what they would say to Mr Grandcourt's marrying some one else and having other children!' To consider what 'anybody' would say, was to be released from the difficulty of judging where everything was obscure to her when feeling had ceased to be decisive. She had only to collect her memories, which proved to her that 'anybody' regarded the illegitimate children as more rightfully to be looked shy on and deprived of social advantages than illegitimate fathers. The verdict of 'anybody' seemed to be that she had no reason to concern herself greatly on behalf of Mrs. Glasher and her children.

But there was another way in which they had caused her concern. What others might think, could not do away with a feeling which in the first instance would hardly be too strongly described as indignation and loathing that she should have been expected to unite herself with an outworn life, full of backward secrets which must have been more keenly felt than any association with *her*. True, the question of love on her own part had occupied her scarcely at all in relation to Grandcourt. The desirability of marriage for her had always seemed due to other feeling than love; and to be enamored was the part of the man, on whom the advances depended. Gwendolen had found no objection to Grandcourt's way of being enamored before she had had that glimpse of his past, which she resented as if it had been a deliberate offense against her. His advances to *her* were deliberate, and she felt a retrospective disgust for them. Perhaps other men's lives were of the same kind - full of secrets which made the ignorant suppositions of the women they wanted to marry a farce at which they were laughing in their sleeves.

These feelings of disgust and indignation had sunk deep; and though other troublous experience in the last weeks had dulled them from passion into remembrance, it was chiefly their reverberating activity which kept her firm to the understanding with herself, that she was not going to accept Grandcourt. She had never meant to form a new determination; she had only been considering what might be thought or said. If anything could have induced her to change, it would have been the prospect of making all things easy for 'poor mamma:' that, she admitted, was a temptation. But no! she was going to refuse him. Meanwhile, the thought that he was coming to be refused was inspiriting: she had the white reins in her hands again; there was a new current in her frame, reviving her from the beaten-down consciousness in which she had been left by the interview with Klesmer. She was not now going to crave an opinion of her capabilities; she was going to exercise her power.

Was this what made her heart palpitate annoyingly when she heard the horse's footsteps on the gravel? - when Miss Merry, who opened the door to Grandcourt, came to tell her that he was in the drawing-

room? The hours of preparation and the triumph of the situation were apparently of no use: she might as well have seen Grandcourt coming suddenly on her in the midst of her despondency. While walking into the drawing-room, she had to concentrate all her energy in that self-control, which made her appear gravely gracious - as she gave her hand to him, and answered his hope that she was quite well in a voice as low and languid as his own. A moment afterward, when they were both of them seated on two of the wreath-painted chairs - Gwendolen upright with downcast eyelids, Grandcourt about two yards distant, leaning one arm over the back of his chair and looking at her, while he held his hat in his left hand - any one seeing them as a picture would have concluded that they were in some stage of love-making suspense. And certainly the love-making had begun: she already felt herself being wooed by this silent man seated at an agreeable distance, with the subtlest atmosphere of attar of roses and an attention bent wholly on her. And he also considered himself to be wooing: he was not a man to suppose that his presence carried no consequences; and he was exactly the man to feel the utmost piquancy in a girl whom he had not found quite calculable.

'I was disappointed not to find you at Leubronn,' he began, his usual broken drawl having just a shade of amorous languor in it. 'The place was intolerable without you. A mere kennel of a place. Don't you think so?'

'I can't judge what it would be without myself,' said Gwendolen, turning her eyes on him, with some recovered sense of mischief. '*With* myself I like it well enough to have stayed longer, if I could. But I was obliged to come home on account of family troubles.'

'It was very cruel of you to go to Leubronn,' said Grandcourt, taking no notice of the troubles, on which Gwendolen - she hardly knew why - wished that there should be a clear understanding at once. 'You must have known that it would spoil everything: you knew you were the heart and soul of everything that went on. Are you quite reckless about me?'

It would be impossible to say 'yes' in a tone that would be taken seriously; equally impossible to say 'no;' but what else could she say? In her difficulty, she turned down her eyelids again and blushed over face and neck. Grandcourt saw her in a new phase, and believed that she was showing her inclination. But he was determined that she should show it more decidedly.

'Perhaps there is some deeper interest? Some attraction - some engagement - which it would have been only fair to make me aware of? Is there any man who stands between us?'

Inwardly the answer framed itself. 'No; but there is a woman.' Yet how could she utter this? Even if she had not promised that woman to be silent, it would have been impossible for her to enter on the subject with Grandcourt. But how could she arrest his wooing by beginning to make a formal speech - 'I perceive your intention - it is most flattering, etc.?' A fish honestly invited to come and be eaten has a clear course in declining, but how if it finds itself swimming against a net? And apart from the network, would she have dared at once to say anything decisive? Gwendolen had not time to be clear on that point. As it was, she felt compelled to silence, and after a pause, Grandcourt said -

'Am I to understand that some one else is preferred?'

Gwendolen, now impatient of her own embarrassment, determined to rush at the difficulty and free herself. She raised her eyes again and said with something of her former clearness and defiance, 'No' - wishing him to understand, 'What then? I may not be ready to take *you*.' There was nothing that Grandcourt could not understand which he perceived likely to affect his *amour propre*.

'The last thing I would do, is to importune you. I should not hope to win you by making myself a bore. If there were no hope for me, I would ask you to tell me so at once, that I might just ride away to - no matter where.'

Almost to her own astonishment, Gwendolen felt a sudden alarm at the image of Grandcourt finally riding away. What would be left her then? Nothing but the former dreariness. She liked him to be there. She snatched at the subject that would defer any decisive answer.

'I fear you are not aware of what has happened to us. I have lately had to think so much of my mamma's troubles, that other subjects have been quite thrown into the background. She has lost all her fortune, and we are going to leave this place. I must ask you to excuse my seeming preoccupied.'

In eluding a direct appeal Gwendolen recovered some of her self-possession. She spoke with dignity and looked straight at Grandcourt, whose long, narrow, impenetrable eyes met hers, and mysteriously arrested them: mysteriously; for the subtly-varied drama between man and woman is often such as can hardly be rendered in words put together like dominoes, according to obvious fixed marks. The word of all work, Love, will no more express the myriad modes of mutual attraction, than the word Thought can inform you what is passing through your neighbor's mind. It would be hard to tell on which side - Gwendolen's or Grandcourt's - the influence was more mixed. At that moment his strongest wish was to be completely master of this creature - this piquant combination of maidenliness and mischief:

that she knew things which had made her start away from him, spurred him to triumph over that repugnance; and he was believing that he should triumph. And she - ah, piteous equality in the need to dominate! - she was overcome like the thirsty one who is drawn toward the seeming water in the desert, overcome by the suffused sense that here in this man's homage to her lay the rescue from helpless subjection to an oppressive lot.

All the while they were looking at each other; and Grandcourt said, slowly and languidly, as if it were of no importance, other things having been settled -

'You will tell me now, I hope, that Mrs. Davilow's loss of fortune will not trouble you further. You will trust me to prevent it from weighing upon her. You will give me the claim to provide against that.'

The little pauses and refined drawlings with which this speech was uttered, gave time for Gwendolen to go through the dream of a life. As the words penetrated her, they had the effect of a draught of wine, which suddenly makes all things easier, desirable things not so wrong, and people in general less disagreeable. She had a momentary phantasmal love for this man who chose his words so well, and who was a mere incarnation of delicate homage. Repugnance, dread, scruples - these were dim as remembered pains, while she was already tasting relief under the immediate pain of hopelessness. She imagined herself already springing to her mother, and being playful again. Yet when Grandcourt had ceased to speak, there was an instant in which she was conscious of being at the turning of the ways.

'You are very generous,' she said, not moving her eyes, and speaking with a gentle intonation.

'You accept what will make such things a matter of course?' said Grandcourt, without any new eagerness. 'You consent to become my wife?'

This time Gwendolen remained quite pale. Something made her rise from her seat in spite of herself and walk to a little distance. Then she turned and with her hands folded before her stood in silence.

Grandcourt immediately rose too, resting his hat on the chair, but still keeping hold of it. The evident hesitation of this destitute girl to take his splendid offer stung him into a keenness of interest such as he had not known for years. None the less because he attributed her hesitation entirely to her knowledge about Mrs. Glasher. In that attitude of preparation, he said -

'Do you command me to go?' No familiar spirit could have suggested to him more effective words.

'No,' said Gwendolen. She could not let him go: that negative was a clutch. She seemed to herself to be, after all, only drifted toward the tremendous decision - but drifting depends on something besides the currents when the sails have been set beforehand.

'You accept my devotion?' said Grandcourt, holding his hat by his side and looking straight into her eyes, without other movement. Their eyes meeting in that way seemed to allow any length of pause: but wait as long as she would, how could she contradict herself! What had she detained him for? He had shut out any explanation.

'Yes,' came as gravely from Gwendolen's lips as if she had been answering to her name in a court of justice. He received it gravely, and they still looked at each other in the same attitude. Was there ever such a way before of accepting the bliss-giving 'Yes'? Grandcourt liked better to be at that distance from her, and to feel under a ceremony imposed by an indefinable prohibition that breathed from Gwendolen's bearing.

But he did at length lay down his hat and advance to take her hand, just pressing his lips upon it and letting it go again. She thought his behavior perfect, and gained a sense of freedom which made her almost ready to be mischievous. Her 'Yes' entailed so little at this moment that there was nothing to screen the reversal of her gloomy prospects; her vision was filled by her own release from the Momperts, and her mother's release from Sawyer's Cottage. With a happy curl of the lips, she said -

'Will you not see mamma? I will fetch her.'

'Let us wait a little,' said Grandcourt, in his favorite attitude, having his left forefinger and thumb in his waist-coat pocket, and with his right hand caressing his whisker, while he stood near Gwendolen and looked at her - not unlike a gentleman who has a felicitous introduction at an evening party.

'Have you anything else to say to me,' said Gwendolen, playfully.

'Yes - I know having things said to you is a great bore,' said Grandcourt, rather sympathetically.

'Not when they are things I like to hear.'

'Will it bother you to be asked how soon we can be married?'

'I think it will, to-day,' said Gwendolen, putting up her chin saucily.

'Not to-day, then, but to-morrow. Think of it before I come to-morrow. In a fortnight - or three weeks - as soon as possible.'

'Ah, you think you will be tired of my company,' said Gwendolen. 'I notice when people are married the husband is not so much with his wife as when they are engaged. But perhaps I shall like that better, too.'

She laughed charmingly.

'You shall have whatever you like,' said Grandcourt.

'And nothing that I don't like? - please say that; because I think I dislike what I don't like more than I like what I like,' said Gwendolen, finding herself in the woman's paradise, where all her nonsense is adorable.

Grandcourt paused; these were subtleties in which he had much experience of his own. 'I don't know - this is such a brute of a world, things are always turning up that one doesn't like. I can't always hinder your being bored. If you like to ride Criterion, I can't hinder his coming down by some chance or other.'

'Ah, my friend Criterion, how is he?'

'He is outside: I made the groom ride him, that you might see him. He had the side-saddle on for an hour or two yesterday. Come to the window and look at him.'

They could see the two horses being taken slowly round the sweep, and the beautiful creatures, in their fine grooming, sent a thrill of exultation through Gwendolen. They were the symbols of command and luxury, in delightful contrast with the ugliness of poverty and humiliation at which she had lately been looking close.

'Will you ride Criterion to-morrow?' said Grandcourt. 'If you will, everything shall be arranged.'

'I should like it of all things,' said Gwendolen. 'I want to lose myself in a gallop again. But now I must go and fetch mamma.'

'Take my arm to the door, then,' said Grandcourt, and she accepted. Their faces were very near each other, being almost on a level, and he was looking at her. She thought his manners as a lover more agreeable than any she had seen described. She had no alarm lest he

meant to kiss her, and was so much at her ease, that she suddenly paused in the middle of the room and said half archly, half earnestly -

‘Oh, while I think of it - there is something I dislike that you can save me from. I do *not* like Mr Lush's company.’

‘You shall not have it. I'll get rid of him.’

‘You are not fond of him yourself?’

‘Not in the least. I let him hang on me because he has always been a poor devil,’ said Grandcourt, in an *adagio* of utter indifference. ‘They got him to travel with me when I was a lad. He was always that coarse-haired kind of brute - sort of cross between a hog and a *dilettante*.’

Gwendolen laughed. All that seemed kind and natural enough: Grandcourt's fastidiousness enhanced the kindness. And when they reached the door, his way of opening it for her was the perfection of easy homage. Really, she thought, he was likely to be the least disagreeable of husbands.

Mrs. Davilow was waiting anxiously in her bed-room when Gwendolen entered, stepped toward her quickly, and kissing her on both cheeks said in a low tone, ‘Come down, mamma, and see Mr Grandcourt. I am engaged to him.’

‘My darling child,’ said Mrs. Davilow, with a surprise that was rather solemn than glad.

‘Yes,’ said Gwendolen, in the same tone, and with a quickness which implied that it was needless to ask questions. ‘Everything is settled. You are not going to Sawyer's Cottage, I am not going to be inspected by Mrs. Mompert, and everything is to be as I like. So come down with me immediately.’