

# The Silence of Gwynneth.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

### CHAPTER IV.

Katharine Jessop sat by the open window, looking out over the wide stretch of sea.

The restless waves were tipped with white, and glistened brightly in the sunshine as they ran inland.

Sailing boats danced merrily before the breeze, dipping their bows from time to time, as though coquetting playfully with Father Neptune.

Gulls flew hither and thither, sometimes circling round the high rocks to the left of the bay, sometimes riding recklessly on the crest of a hurrying wave, and shrieking discordantly, or mewing plaintively, to the delight of the children at play on the pebbly beach.

But the woman at the window of the centre house on the little parade saw nothing of all this.

Her quiet patient eyes looked straight across at the spot where sky and sea appeared to meet, her thoughts busy with an event which was to happen that day—a great event in her colorless existence.

To please her old friend, Clarence Sterne she had consented to have Gwynneth Naylor to share her peaceful solitude.

Mrs. Naylor had closed the door of her house, as well as that of her heart, against the step daughter who had dragged the family honor in the dust; and Gwynneth, with the taint of recent imprisonment fresh on her, would have found it difficult to obtain a refuge anywhere, had not Katharine Jessop stretched out a willing hand, in response to Mr. Sterne's appeal to her to give the friendless girl a home.

Edmund and Maude had tried their hardest to soften their mother, but she was inexorable; and forebade them ever to mention Gwynneth in her hearing.

So, her term of imprisonment at an end, Gwynneth travelled to Beachhollow with the vicar of St. Cuthbert's, to be given into the charge of the only person, save himself, who was ready to befriend her.

Clarence was afraid to let her travel alone.

He did not like the reckless indifference with which she returned the curious stare of these who recognised her, as he and she waited for the train which was to take them away from Kingslea.

He had tried to persuade her to stay out of sight, in the waiting-room, until the time to start, but Gwynneth only laughed—a hard little laugh, with no mirth in it.

"You think I care? I don't; not a bit! I've got over all that sort of thing. A few weeks in prison soon takes all the nonsense out of you."

"There is no nonsense about honest shame, child," he answered gravely.

She flushed slightly at that, and moved away from him a little.

"I forgot! Of course, you can't help feeling ashamed to be seen with me. I ought to have thought of that."

"Gwynneth! You know me better than to think I meant—"

She interrupted him quickly, terrified by the sternness of his face and tone.

"Forgive me! Yes, I do know. Oh! don't you turn from me—ever—or I don't know what will become of me!"

"I turn from you?"

He could not trust himself to say more than that, but his eyes sought her for an instant, and the flush deepened on the girl's face.

Long before the journey was at an end, however, the old hardness had possession of eyes and mouth again, and only deepened when Gwynneth remembered that it was her birthday.

"It is my birthday, Mr. Sterne. I am eighteen to-day. What a birthday! But then, I never remember having many happy ones."

"Poor child! I trust this may be the last unhappy one. I am going to wish you many happy returns, Gwynneth."

"Thank you. I rather hope I may not live to see another."

"You must not, you shall not wish that. To say nothing of the wickedness of such a wish—the ingratitude of it—"

"Where does the ingratitude come in? What have I to be grateful for to anyone except to you? My own dear mother died when I was a baby, and my father's second wife took a dislike to me. You see, I was thrown back on her hands when she thought she had got rid of me."

"I know; your sister told me. But, in spite of all this, you have much to be grateful for. Is health nothing? Is sanity nothing? Is it nothing to have been born in a Christian land?"

"I didn't ask to be born! I'd rather not have been born! You might as well spare yourself the trouble of trying to make a respectable person of me, Mr. Sterne! I tell you plainly I would rather a thousand times have been born a heathen, with parents who would love me!"

"Poor child! Poor little Gwynneth!"

For the life of him he could not control his voice, or his eyes.

She blushed again at the tenderness which flooded her lonely young heart with comfort.

Recovering himself partially, he continued, more steadily—

"I think you will be happy with Katharine Jessop. You will, it you will let her love you?"

"I shan't like her well enough!"

"I shall be sorry if you don't like my friend."

"Something in the words touched the rebellious heart."

She glanced at him half apologetically.

"I will try to like her, of course; but I suppose she is perfect in your eyes, and I am so much the reverse, that I feel more like hating her. You can't help comparing us in your mind."

"I should never think of attempting anything so uselessly absurd. Does one compare strength and weakness, light and darkness, peace and storm? Katharine represents strength, light and peace; you weakness, darkness and storm."

"Strength? I thought she was an invalid—lame?"

"I was thinking of her soul, and yours. What does the body matter?"

"Oh! so my soul is weak, dark, and stormy? Well, I think it is—if I have one. How you must adore Miss Jessop!"

And what a pity that she should not have better bodily health! You could marry her if—"

"Gwynneth, do you wish to pain me, or are you only speaking at random? You force me to make a confession—to tell you what I had not intended telling you for, at least, a year. Can you not guess—have you not seen that I love you, tempt tossed and hardened as you are? I have tried to close my heart to you, but the task is beyond me. I love you, and I desire nothing better, at this moment, than to flood your young life with happiness. Will you let me do it, Gwynneth? Will you come to me, and let me teach you to forget the dreary, mistaken past? As my wife—"

"Ah! she almost shrieked, as she drew away the hand he had taken. "Your wife? I—thief and gaol-bird as I am—become your wife, to spoil your life and drag you down to the gutter, which is the only fit place for me? Never! You don't even tempt me, Mr. Sterne."

Was this fine face, with the brave, flashing eyes, the same he had looked on a moment previously?

Clarence Sterne's heart bowed low in reverence before this noble young thing who showed such unexpected courage and high-mindedness.

"When you have learnt to love me," he murmured, "will you marry me then?"

The priest was forgotten in the man; he remembered only that he loved her, and that she was necessary to his happiness.

"Love!" she raised her eyes—dreamy eyes now—and looked at him questioningly. "I never thought of love. Of course, people do love—or ought to—when they marry."

"I would teach you to love me, Gwynneth."

Was not the lesson already partially learnt?

Not for long could she meet that impassioned gaze with calmness; very soon her eyelids quivered and drooped, as she shrank from him, trembling with a new and delicious fear.

Again he took her hand.

"Dear, you will not refuse to think of what I have said? We would go away—quite away—out of England where your history would not be known. And I would make you so happy that—"

"Don't!" she said, sharply, her old hard manner returning, as she once more snatched her hand from his. "I will not listen to you. If I loved you ever so well, I would not marry you. Bah! if I loved you at all, I should not even think of it. Love makes one think of others, not of oneself. I will not ruin your life, Mr. Sterne. No, not a word more—if you really love me; for, if you persist in wishing for such an impossible thing to happen, I must refuse ever to see you again."

"Say, at least, that it things had been different—"

"If things had been different, I should have been different, and you would have been different, and we might never have met."

"But, Gwynneth, listen to me a moment—I love you, and I believe you like me a little—"

"I like you too much to allow you to talk nonsense. Tell me about Miss Jessop, please—is she dark or fair?"

Clarence almost smiled as he looked at the determined young face, feeling a new respect for, and confidence in, its owner, and, as he fell under the influence of the girl's innate strength of character, his first belief in her utter innocence returned to him.

"Gwynneth," he said suddenly, "you never took that money!"

She raised her eyebrows as she glanced at him.

"Yes, I did." She spoke as coolly as though they were an everyday thing with her. "What new idea have you got hold of?"

"One I am not going to impart to you," he replied, still watching her face with his keen, questioning eyes.

She turned away with a little frown, and did not ask him anything else. And as he noted her unusual silence, an expression of satisfaction stole into those watching eyes.

Very little more passed between them until the train reached Beachhollow.

"This is our destination," said Clarence Sterne, in order to rouse his companion from a reverie into which she had fallen during the last half hour. I wonder if Katharine has driven to meet us?" Here comes Deborah at least!

A grave-looking, middle-aged woman advanced as he spoke.

"Miss Jessop's compliments, sir, and she hopes Miss Naylor wouldn't think her unkind not to come herself. It's one of her bad days, and I persuaded her to stay at home."

"Quite right, Deborah. I am sure Miss Naylor doesn't mind. Do you?"

He smiled down at Gwynneth, who looked sadly irresponsible as she replied that she would have been sorry had Miss Jessop put herself at all out of the way on her account.

Inwardly Gwynneth was saying to herself—

"She is beginning as she means to go on. I am only her companion, and I must be shown my proper place at once."

Mr. Sterne felt somewhat dismayed as he saw the obstinate look he knew so well settling down on the young face.

If Gwynneth persisted in setting up a barrier of pride between herself and Katharine Jessop, it was useless to hope that the two would ever become friends.

He watched the meeting with very real anxiety.

Miss Jessop sat in her low chair, by the open window, her eyes turned to the door as Gwynneth entered, and both hands held out to her.

"Forgive me for not coming to meet you, dear, and for not rising now. I don't feel equal to any exertion to-day; but I am very, very glad to see you."

Gwynneth took the hands with slowly-flushing face, and responded to the gentle movement which drew her low enough for the invalid to kiss her.

"You have been worrying about me, Miss Jessop. But you must not do that. I will try my hardest to make you feel glad of your goodness to me."

The words were only whispered, and Katharine Jessop alone heard them; but Clarence sighed with infinite relief as he saw the look which passed from the brown eyes to the grey ones.

He did not stay long. Satisfied that he had not made a mistake in bringing these two together, and hoping great things of the influence of his old friend over the girl he loved, he took his departure within an hour of his arrival.

### CHAPTER V.

Nearly a year passed without affording Mr. Sterne the proof for which he sought unceasingly, of Gwynneth Naylor's innocence.

He became more and more convinced that she was shielding someone; that someone being her step-brother; but he could not win a word of confession from her, and, as for Edmund, if he really were guilty he had so wrapped himself in the cloak of utter selfishness which had permitted his young sister to suffer in his stead, that it seemed useless to hope that he would ever exonerate her at his own expense.

He still lived at home—he and his mother being alone now, for Maude had married a man who refused to spoil his life and hers by holding aloof on account of her family history.

Almost before Maude and her husband went to America, where the latter held a good post in a large mercantile house, it began to be whispered in Kingslea, that the shame of his younger sister's guilt had been the ruin of Edmund Naylor.

Up to that time he had been a quiet, well-conducted fellow, but latterly he had changed terribly.

It had become nothing unusual for him to go home at night so intoxicated that his mother took to sitting up for him, in fear lest he should set the house on fire.

But she still believed in him and adored him as some mothers are always foolish enough to do, no matter how badly their sons turn out.

And all this while Clarence Sterne watched and waited for the time when Gwynneth would be proved innocent of the sin for which she had suffered imprisonment and shame.

Now and then Miss Jessop tried to win her confidence, and to get close to the heart which had ached so sadly, in spite of its short experience of the world.

But always, on such occasions, the old hard look settled down on Gwynneth's eyes and mouth, and her kind friend felt herself repelled by the forbidding silence with which her overtures to a more thorough understanding were received.

Later, Clarence Sterne's well-wisher tried another tack.

She began to talk of him and his many sterling qualities.

"It is time Clarence paid us another visit."

With this little speech she one day broke into a reverie in which both she and her companion had indulged, tempted thereunto by the beauty of the evening.

The sun was setting into the sea just beyond the rocks, to which Gwynneth was so fond of roving—for she was becoming quite clever with the oars, and was a constant source of pride to the old fisherman who, on her first coming to Beachhollow, had instructed him in matters nautical.

Clarence Sterne had not been to see them since quite early in the year.

But, except that the red lips parted in a grave smile—far too grave a smile for so young a girl—Gwynneth did not appear to notice her friend's remark; so Katharine continued—

"He will surely come before long, now that the weather has settled so nicely. The seaside ought to tempt anyone in the summer, and Clarence works so hard that a week here would do him good."

"He will scarcely think of taking a holiday before Trinity Sunday," observed Gwynneth, looking out to sea.

"I never thought of that, and it wants nearly three weeks to it. Perhaps that is what he is waiting for."

"Perhaps so. The breeze is freshening. Shall I close the window, Miss Jessop?"

"Not unless you feel cold, dear. I am all right. I like to listen to the waves breaking on the beach. See, Gwynneth—the sun is going for today. I rarely watch a sunset without wondering if it is the last I am destined to see in this world."

"Do you ever hope it may be?"

"Not quite. Once or twice, when the pain has been greater than usual, I have dropped to sleep at last with the thought that it might be well never to wake again."

"I used to wish every night and every minute of each day that I could die."

"But you don't wish it now? You see, you lived through it. It is always possible to live through trouble if one will only face it bravely. It is when one tries to shirk it that it looks so formidable."

"Yes, I suppose there is something in that. But why should trouble exist? Some people seem to go through life without it, while others get more—far more—than their share."

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"Don't you think that, very often, people bring trouble on themselves?"

"Not as often as—" she broke off suddenly, and went to the window, where Katharine could not see the expression of her face. "It is really getting chilly, Miss Jessop; I think I had better close it."

"As you will, dear. Won't you finish what you were going to say?"

"I think not. I am not a philosopher, like you. I can't take things calmly when I don't see the use of their happening. Shall I read to you?"

"By all means. Go on with the book we were reading last night."

Gwynneth fetched the book and read a few pages aloud; then, tossing it aside, she rose and went to the window again.

"I can't read all that nonsense! Nothing but love, love, love! I don't believe in love of any sort."

"Not in mine for you, Gwynneth? And don't you love me at all?"

"You? Yes, if I love anyone it is certainly you, Miss Jessop. You have been so good to me, you see."

"And how about Clarence?"

"Oh, of course, I am grateful to Mr. Sterne, too."

"Only grateful, Gwynneth? Surely you do not repay his devotion to you with mere gratitude? Can you not love him as he loves you?"

"Can I not? The question is more one of 'ought' than 'can,' I think. Should I ever cease to loath and despise myself, if I weakly yielded to the temptation to love and be loved like other women? Does Clarence Sterne, of all men, deserve to have the finger of scorn pointed at him? Heaven grant I may never be such a coward as to sacrifice his noble life to anything so petty as my desire for happiness!"

She turned from the window and faced Miss Jessop as the passionate words left her lips.

No sooner were they spoken, than she seemed to repent her usual lack of self-control, for she rushed from the room as though fearful of being led to say more.

But Katharine Jessop, in spite of her keen sympathy with her young companion, felt better satisfied than she had ever been with her.

The ice had thawed, the hardness had

given place to passion, and the glimpse she had had of the warm unselfish heart under the rebellious surface, made her long more than before to see this girl safe in the keeping of the man who loved her.

But Clarence himself knew that Gwynneth would never listen to him as long as the world deemed her guilty of theft.

All he could hope for was that she might, perchance, consent to marry him if her innocence were fully established.

He paid frequent calls in Church Road, though Mrs. Naylor showed her resentment of his championship of her step-daughter by refusing to attend his church.

But he did not let this, or anything else discourage him.

He wanted to keep his eye on Edmund, and the best way to do this was to be on visiting terms with his mother.

One evening, as Clarence was returning to the vicarage after a late evensong, he overtook Edmund reeling along the road, evidently fresh from the same public-house out of which he had rolled, half-intoxicated on the day of Gwynneth's trial.

"Come, Naylor, this won't do, you know. You'll break your mother's heart if you go on like this, and she has only you left now."

Edmund turned, and gazed with stupid anger at St. Cuthbert's vicar, as he replied, almost incoherently—

"Just leave me alone, will you? I'm not interfering with you that that I'm aware of. It's a free country, and if I like to enjoy myself, I shall do so without asking your permission."

"You call it enjoying yourself to be slowly but steadily committing suicide?"

"Who talks about suicide? I don't. Only fools commit suicide, I'm not a fool. Go 'long, Mr. Sterne, and leave me alone; I'm all right, and as jolly as a sandboy!"

"You are not all right, and I'm not going to leave you. You'll be under the boots of the first horse that comes along, if you stagger about as you are doing. Take my arm, and I'll walk as far as your house with you."

"I won't take your arm, and, if I like to stagger, I shall do it without asking you. I believe you're staggering yourself, and that's why you want to hook on to me."

"Don't be an idiot, Naylor! Come, take my arm!"

"I won't, so there! And if you touch me, I'll have you up for assault."

Disregarding this absurd threat, Clarence took the other by the arm, and tried to make him walk steadily.

But Edmund had drunk enough to make him quarrelsome, and ready to resent all interference, however kindly intended.

He struggled furiously, until he suddenly lost his balance, and fell to the ground, where he lay, without attempting to rise.

### CHAPTER VI.

Stooping over the prostrate form in some uneasiness at its utter stillness, Mr. Sterne discovered that Edmund was unconscious.

In falling, he had struck his head with sufficient force to stun him.

The vicar looked up the road and down, in search of assistance, for young Naylor was no dwarf.

To raise him alone, and carry him to a softer couch was impossible.

But there was no one in sight. What was to be done?

As Clarence knit his brows in perplexity pondering over the wisdom, or otherwise, of going to seek the help he needed, he noticed that a pocket book had fallen from Edmund's coat in his brief struggle.

Mechanically, Mr. Sterne picked it up. It was very old and shabby, the elastic band round it being so badly frayed, that a careless touch from those a roving fingers snapped it, and some papers, released thereby, fluttered to the ground.

Clarence stopped to recover them, and, as he did so, his eyes fell on a small unfolded strip, which had escaped from the others.

The sense of what was written on it found its way to the vicar's brain, deepening the suspicion with which he had long regarded Gwynneth's brother.

For, that which he saw was a receipt for ten pounds, dated the previous July, signed by a name not known to him.

There was nothing to indicate why the money had been paid—nothing but the fact that Oswald Snellgrove had received

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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