The Conquered

Dorothy Edwards

Last summer, just before my proper holiday, I went to stay with an aunt who lives on the borders of Wales, where there are so many orchards. I must say I went there simply as a duty, because I used to stay a lot with her when I was a boy, and she was, in those days, very good to me. However, I took plenty of books down so that it should not be a waste of time.

Of course, when I got there it was really not so bad. They made a great fuss of me. My aunt was as tolerant as she used to be in the old days, leaving me to do exactly as I liked. My cousin Jessica, who is just my age, had hardly changed at all, though they both looked different with their hair up; but my younger cousin Ruth, who used to be very lively and something of a tomboy, had altered quite a lot. She had become very quiet; at least, on the day I arrived she was lively enough, and talked about the fun we used to have there, but afterwards she became more quiet every day, or perhaps it was that I noticed it more. She remembered far more about what we used to do than I did; but I suppose that is only natural, since she had been there all the time in between, and I do not suppose anything very exciting had happened to her, whereas I have been nearly everywhere.

But what I wanted to say is, that not far from my aunt's house, on the top of a little slope, on which there was an apple orchard, was a house with French windows and a

large green lawn in front, and in this lived a very charming Welsh lady whom my cousins knew. Her grandfather had the house built, and it was his own design. It is said that he had been quite a friend of the Prince Consort, who once, I believe, actually stayed there for a night.

I knew the house very well, but I had never met any of the family, because they had not always occupied it, and, in any case, they would have been away at the times that I went to my aunt for holidays. Now only this one granddaughter was left of the family; her father and mother were dead, and she had just come back to live there. I found out all this at breakfast the morning after I came, when Jessica said, 'Ruthie, we must take Frederick to see Gwyneth.'

'Oh yes,' said Ruthie. 'Let's go today.'

'And who is Gwyneth?'

Jessica laughed. 'You will be most impressed. Won't he, mother?'

'Yes,' said my aunt, categorically.

However, we did not call on her that afternoon, because it poured with rain all day, and it did not seem worthwhile, though Ruthie appeared in her macintosh and galoshes ready to go, and Jessica and I had some difficulty in dissuading her.

I did not think it was necessary to do any reading the first day, so I just sat and talked to the girls, and after tea Jessica and I even played duets on the piano, which had not been tuned lately, while Ruthie turned over the pages.

The next morning, though the grass was wet and every movement of the trees sent down a shower of rain, the sun began to shine brightly through the clouds. I should certainly have been taken to see their wonderful friend in the afternoon, only she herself called in the morning. I was sitting at one end of the dining-room, reading Tourguéniev with a dictionary and about three grammars, and I dare say I looked very busy. I do not know where my aunt was when she came, and the girls were upstairs. I heard a most beautiful voice, that was very high-pitched though, not low, say:

'All right, I will wait for them in here,' and she came into the room. Of course I had expected her to be nice, because my cousins liked her so much, but still they do not meet many people down there, and I thought they would be impressed with the sort of person I would be quite used to. But she really was charming.

She was not very young – older, I should say, than Jessica. She was very tall, and she had very fair hair. But the chief thing about her was her finely carved features, which gave to her face the coolness of stone and a certain appearance of immobility, though she laughed very often and talked a lot. When she laughed she raised her chin a little, and looked down her nose in a bantering way. And she had a really perfect nose. If I had been a sculptor I should have put it on every one of my statues. When she saw me she laughed and said, 'Ah! I am disturbing you,' and she sat down, smiling to herself.

I did not have time to say anything to her before my cousins came in. She kissed Jessica and Ruthie, and kept Ruthie by her side.

'This is our cousin Frederick,' said Jessica.

'We have told you about him,' said Ruthie gravely.

Gwyneth laughed. 'Oh, I recognised him, but how could I interrupt so busy a person! Let me tell you what I have come for. Will you come to tea tomorrow and bring Mr Trenier?' She laughed at me again.

We thanked her, and then my aunt came in.

'How do you do, Gwyneth?' she said. 'Will you stay to lunch?'

'No, thank you so much, Mrs Haslett,' she answered. 'I only came to ask Jessica and Ruthie to tea tomorrow, and, of course, to see your wonderful nephew. You will come too, won't you?'

'Yes, thank you,' said my aunt. 'You and Frederick ought to find many things to talk about together.'

Gwyneth looked at me and laughed.

Ruthie went out to make some coffee, and afterwards Gwyneth sat in the window seat drinking it and talking.

'What were you working at so busily when I came in?' she asked me.

'I was only trying to read Tourguéniev in the original,' I said.

'Do you like Tourguéniev very much?' she asked, laughing.

'Yes,' I said. 'Do you?'

'Oh, I have only read one, *Fumée*.'

She stayed for about an hour, laughing and talking all the time. I really found her very charming. She was like a personification, in a restrained manner, of Gaiety. Yes, really, very much like Milton's *L'Allegro*.

The moment she was gone Jessica said excitedly, 'Now, Frederick, weren't you impressed?'

And Ruthie looked at me anxiously until I answered, 'Yes, I really think I was.'

The next day we went there to tea. It was a beautiful warm day, and we took the short cut across the fields and down a road now overgrown with grass to the bottom of the little slope on which her house was built. There is an old Roman road not far from here, and I am not quite sure whether that road is not part of it. We did not go into the house, but were taken at once to the orchard at the back, where she was sitting near a table, and we all sat down with her. The orchard was not very big, and, of course, the trees were no longer in flower, but the fruit on them was just beginning to grow and look like tiny apples and pears. At the other end some white chickens strutted about in the sunlight. We had tea outside.

She talked a lot, but I cannot remember now what she said; when she spoke to me it was nearly always to tell me about her grandfather, and the interesting people who used to come to visit him.

When it began to get cool we went into the house across the flat green lawn and through the French window. We went

to a charming room; on the wall above the piano were some Japanese prints on silk, which were really beautiful. Outside it was just beginning to get dark.

She sang to us in a very nice high soprano voice, and she chose always gay, light songs which suited her excellently. She sang that song of Schumann, *Der Nussbaum*; but then it is possible to sing that lightly and happily, though it is more often sung with a trace of sadness in it. Jessica played for her. She is a rather good accompanist. I never could accompany singers. But I played afterwards; I played some Schumann too.

'Has Ruthie told you I am teaching her to sing?' said Gwyneth. 'I don't know much about it, and her voice is not like mine, but I remember more or less what my master taught me.'

'No,' I said, looking at Ruthie. 'Sing for us now and let me hear.'

'No,' said Ruthie, and blushed a little. She never used to be shy.

Gwyneth pulled Ruthie towards her. 'Now do sing. The fact is you are ashamed of your teacher.'

'No,' said Ruthie; 'only you know I can't sing your songs.'

Gwyneth laughed. 'You would hardly believe what a melancholy little creature she is. She won't sing anything that is not tearful.'

'But surely,' I said, 'in the whole of Schubert and Schumann you can find something sad enough for you?'

'No,' said Ruthie, looking at the carpet, 'I don't know any Schumann, and Schubert is never sad even in the sad songs. Really I can't sing what Gwyneth sings.'

'Then you won't?' I said, feeling rather annoyed with her.

'No,' she said, flushing, and she looked out of the window.

Ruthie and Jessica are quite different. Jessica is, of course, like her mother, but Ruthie is like her father, whom I never knew very well.

Next morning, immediately after breakfast, I went for a

walk by myself, and though I went by a very roundabout way, I soon found myself near Gwyneth's house, and perhaps that was not very surprising. I came out by a large bush of traveller's nightshade. I believe that is its name. At least it is called old man's beard too, but that does not describe it when it is in flower at all. You know that it has tiny white waxen flowers, of which the buds look quite different from the open flower, so that it looks as though there are two different kinds of flowers on one stem. But what I wanted to say was, I came out by this bush, and there, below me, was the grass-covered road, with new cartwheel ruts in it, which made two brown lines along the green where the earth showed. Naturally I walked down it, and stood by the fence of the orchard below her house. I looked up between the trees, and there she was coming down towards me.

'Good morning, Mr Trenier,' she said, laughing. 'Why are you deserting Tourguéniev?'

'It is such a lovely morning,' I said, opening the gate for her; 'and if I had known I should meet you, I should have felt even less hesitation.'

She laughed, and we walked slowly across the grass, which was still wet with dew. It was a perfectly lovely day, with a soft pale blue sky and little white clouds in it, and the grass was wet enough to be bright green.

'Oh, look!' she said suddenly, and pointed to two enormous mushrooms, like dinner-plates, growing at our feet.

'Do you want them?' I asked, stooping to pick them.

'Oh yes,' she said; 'when they are as big as that they make excellent sauces. Fancy such monsters growing in a night! They were not here yesterday.'

'And last week I had not met you,' I said, smiling.

She laughed, and took the mushrooms from me.

'Now we must take them to the cook,' she said, 'and then you shall come for a little walk with me.'

As we crossed the lawn to the house she was carrying the pink-lined mushrooms by their little stalks.

'They look like the sunshades of Victorian ladies,' I said.

She laughed, and said, 'Did you know that Jenny Lind came here once?'

Afterwards we walked along the real Roman road, now only a pathway with grass growing up between the stones, and tall trees overshadowing it. On the right is a hill where the ancient Britons made a great stand against the Romans, and were defeated.

'Did you know this was a Roman road?' she asked. 'Just think of the charming Romans who must have walked here! And I expect they developed a taste for apples. Does it shock you to know that I like the Romans better than the Greeks?'

I said 'No,' but now, when I think of it, I believe I *was* a little shocked, although, when I think of the Romans as the Silver Age, I see that silver was more appropriate to her than gold.

She was really very beautiful, and it was a great pleasure to be with her, because she walked in such a lovely way. She moved quickly, but she somehow preserved that same immobility which, though she laughed and smiled so often, made her face cool like stone, and calm.

After this we went for many walks and picnics.

Sometimes the girls came too, but sometimes we went together. We climbed the old battle hill, and she stood at the top looking all around at the orchards on the plain below.

I had meant to stay only a week, but I decided to stay a little longer, or, rather, I stayed on without thinking about it at all. I had not told my aunt and the girls that I was going at the end of the week, so it did not make any difference, and I knew they would expect me to stay longer. The only difference it made was to my holiday, and, after all, I was going for the holiday to enjoy myself, and I could not have been happier than I was there.

I remember how one night I went out by myself down in the direction of her house, where my steps always seemed to take me. When I reached the traveller's nightshade it was

growing dark. For a moment I looked towards her house and a flood of joy came into my soul, and I began to think how strange it was that, although I have met so many interesting people, I should come there simply by chance and meet her. I walked towards the entrance of a little wood, and, full of a profound joy and happiness, I walked in between the trees. I stayed there for a long time imagining her coming gaily into the wood where the moonlight shone through the branches. And I remember thinking suddenly how we have grown used to believing night to be a sad and melancholy time, not romantic and exciting as it used to be. I kept longing for some miracle to bring her there to me, but she did not come, and I had to go home.

Then, one evening, we all went to her house for music and conversation. On the way there Ruthie came round to my side and said, 'Frederick, I have brought with me a song that I can sing, and I will sing this time if you want me to.'

'Yes, I certainly want you to,' I said, walking on with her. 'I want to see how she teaches.'

'Yes,' said Ruthie. 'You do see that I could not sing her songs, don't you?'

In the old days Ruthie and I used to get on very well, better than I got on with Jessica, who was inclined to keep us in order then, and I must say it was very difficult for her to do so.

When we got there, right at the beginning of the evening Gwyneth sang a little Welsh song. And I felt suddenly disappointed. I always thought that the Welsh were melancholy in their music, but if she sang it sadly at all, it was with the gossipy sadness of the tea after a funeral. However, afterwards we talked, and I forgot the momentary impression.

During the evening Ruthie sang. She sang Brahms' *An die Nachtigall*, which was really very foolish of her, because I am sure it is not an easy thing to sing, with its melting softness and its sudden cries of ecstasy and despair. Her voice

was very unsteady, of a deeper tone than Gwyneth's, and sometimes it became quite hoarse from nervousness.

Gwyneth drew her down to the sofa beside her. She laughed, 'I told you nothing was sad enough for her.'

Ruthie was quite pale from the ordeal of singing before us.

'It is rather difficult, isn't it?' I said.

'Yes,' said Ruthie, flushing.

'Have you ever heard a nightingale?' asked Gwyneth of me.

'No,' I said.

'Why, there is one in the wood across here; I have heard it myself,' said Jessica. 'On just such a night as this,' she added, laughing, and looking out of the window at the darkness coming to lie on the tops of the apple trees beyond the green lawn.

'Ah! You must hear a nightingale as well as read Tourguéniev, you know,' said Gwyneth.

I laughed.

But later on in the evening I was sitting near the piano looking over a pile of music by my side. Suddenly I came across Chopin's *Polnische Lieder*. It is not often that one finds them. I looked up in excitement and said, 'Oh, do you know the *Polens Grabgesang*? I implore you to sing it.'

She laughed a little at my excitement and said, 'Yes, I know it. But I can't sing it. It does not suit me at all. Mrs Haslett, your nephew actually wants me to sing a funeral march!'

'Oh, please do sing it!' I said. 'I have only heard it once before in my life. Nobody ever sings it. I have been longing to hear it again.'

'It does not belong to me, you know,' she said. 'I found it here; it must have belonged to my father.' She smiled at me over the edge of some music she was putting on the piano. 'No, I can't sing it. That is really decisive.'

I was so much excited about the song, because I shall never forget the occasion on which I first heard it. I have a great friend, a very wonderful man, a perfect genius, in fact, and

a very strong personality, and we have evenings at his house, and we talk about nearly everything, and have music too, sometimes. Often, when I used to go, there was a woman there, who never spoke much but always sat near my friend. She was not particularly beautiful and had a rather unhappy face, but one evening my friend turned to her suddenly and put his hand on her shoulder and said, 'Sing for us.'

She obeyed without a word. Everybody obeys him at once. And she sang this song. I shall never forget all the sorrow and pity for the sorrows of Poland that she put into it. And the song, too, is wonderful. I do not think I have ever heard in my life anything so terribly moving as the part, 'O Polen, mein Polen,' which is repeated several times. Everyone in the room was stirred, and, after she had sung it, we talked about nothing but politics and the Revolution for the whole of the evening. I do not think she was Polish either. After a few more times she did not come to the evenings any more, and I have never had the opportunity of asking him about her. And although, as I said, she was not beautiful, when I looked at Gwyneth again it seemed to me that some of her beauty had gone, and I thought to myself quite angrily, 'No, of course she could not sing that song. She would have been on the side of the conquerors!'

And I felt like this all the evening until we began to walk home. Before we had gone far Jessica said, 'Wouldn't you like to stay and listen for the nightingale, Frederick? We can find our way home without you.'

'Yes,' I said. 'Where can I hear her?'

'The best place,' said Jessica, 'is to sit on the fallen tree – that is where I heard it. Go into the wood by the wild rose bush with pink roses on it. Do you know it?'

'Yes.'

'Don't be very late,' said my aunt.

'No,' I answered, and left them.

I went into the little wood and sat down on the fallen tree looking up and waiting, but there was no sound. I felt that

there was nothing I wanted so much as to hear her sad notes. I remember thinking how Nietzsche said that Brahms' melancholy was the melancholy of impotence, not of power, and I remember feeling that there was much truth in it when I thought of his *Nachtigall* and then of Keats. And I sat and waited for the song that came to:

> …the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home
> She stood in tears amid the alien corn.

Suddenly I heard a sound, and, looking round, I saw Gwyneth coming through the trees. She caught sight of me and laughed.

'You are here too,' she said. 'I came to hear Jessica's nightingale.'

'So did I,' I said; 'but I do not think she will sing tonight.'

'It is a beautiful night,' she said. 'Anybody should want to sing on such a lovely night.'

I took her back to her gate, and I said goodnight and closed the gate behind her. But, all the same, I shall remember always how beautiful she looked standing under the apple trees by the gate in the moonlight, her smile resting like the reflection of light on her carved face. Then, however, I walked home, feeling angry and annoyed with her; but of course that was foolish. Because it seems to me now that the world is made up of gay people and sad people, and however charming and beautiful the gay people are, their souls can never really meet the souls of those who are born for suffering and melancholy, simply because they are made in a different mould. Of course I see that this is a sort of dualism, but still it seems to me to be the truth, and I believe my friend, of whom I spoke, is a dualist, too, in some things.

I did not stay more than a day or two after this, though my aunt and the girls begged me to do so. I did not see Gwyneth again, only something took place which was a little ridiculous in the circumstances.

The evening before I went Ruthie came and said, half in an anxious whisper, 'Frederick, will you do something very important for me?'

'Yes, if I can,' I said. 'What is it?'

'Well, it is Gwyneth's birthday tomorrow, and she is so rich it is hard to think of something to give her.'

'Yes,' I said, without much interest.

'But do you know what I thought of? I have bought an almond tree – the man has just left it out in the shed – and I am going to plant it at the edge of the lawn so that she will see it tomorrow morning. So it will have to be planted in the middle of the night, and I wondered if you would come and help me.'

'But is it the right time of the year to plant an almond tree – in August?'

'I don't know,' said Ruthie; 'but surely the man in the nursery would have said if it were not. You can sleep in the train, you know. You used always to do things with me.'

'All right, I will,' I said, 'only we need not go in the middle of the night – early in the morning will do, before it is quite light.'

'Oh, thank you so much,' said Ruthie, trembling with gratitude and excitement. 'But don't tell anyone, will you – not even Jessica?'

'No,' I said.

Exceedingly early in the morning, long before it was light, Ruthie came into my room in her dressing gown to wake me, looking exactly as she used to do. We went quietly downstairs and through the wet grass to Gwyneth's house, Ruthie carrying the spade and I the tree. It was still rather dark when we reached there, but Ruthie had planned the exact place before.

We hurried with the work. I did the digging, and Ruthie stood with the tree in her hand looking up at the house. We hardly spoke.

Ruthie whispered, 'We must be quiet. That is her window.

She will be able to see it as soon as she looks out. She is asleep now.'

'Look here,' I said, 'don't tell her that I planted it, because it may not grow. I can't see very well.'

'Oh, but she must never know that either of us did it.'

'But are you going to give her a present and never let her know who it is from?'

'Yes,' said Ruthie.

'I think that is rather silly,' I said.

Ruthie turned away.

We put the tree in. I have never heard whether it grew or not. Just as the sun was rising we walked back, and that morning I went away.