

BOOK III - Maidens Choosing

Chapter XIX

'I pity the man who can travel from Dan to Beersheba, and say, 'Tis all barren': and so it is: and so is all the world to him who will not cultivate the fruits it offers.' - STERNE: *Sentimental Journey*.

To say that Deronda was romantic would be to misrepresent him; but under his calm and somewhat self-repressed exterior there was a fervor which made him easily find poetry and romance among the events of every-day life. And perhaps poetry and romance are as plentiful as ever in the world except for those phlegmatic natures who I suspect would in any age have regarded them as a dull form of erroneous thinking. They exist very easily in the same room with the microscope and even in railway carriages: what banishes them in the vacuum in gentlemen and lady passengers. How should all the apparatus of heaven and earth, from the farthest firmament to the tender bosom of the mother who nourished us, make poetry for a mind that had no movements of awe and tenderness, no sense of fellowship which thrills from the near to the distant, and back again from the distant to the near?

To Deronda this event of finding Mirah was as heart-stirring as anything that befell Orestes or Rinaldo. He sat up half the night, living again through the moments since he had first discerned Mirah on the river-brink, with the fresh and fresh vividness which belongs to emotive memory. When he took up a book to try and dull this urgency of inward vision, the printed words were no more than a network through which he saw and heard everything as clearly as before - saw not only the actual events of two hours, but possibilities of what had been and what might be which those events were enough to feed with the warm blood of passionate hope and fear. Something in his own experience caused Mirah's search after her mother to lay hold with peculiar force on his imagination. The first prompting of sympathy was to aid her in her search: if given persons were extant in London there were ways of finding them, as subtle as scientific experiment, the right machinery being set at work. But here the mixed feelings which belonged to Deronda's kindred experience naturally transfused themselves into his anxiety on behalf of Mirah.

The desire to know his own mother, or to know about her, was constantly haunted with dread; and in imagining what might befall Mirah it quickly occurred to him that finding the mother and brother from whom she had been parted when she was a little one might turn out to be a calamity. When she was in the boat she said that her mother and brother were good; but the goodness might have been chiefly in her own ignorant innocence and yearning memory, and the

ten or twelve years since the parting had been time enough for much worsening. Spite of his strong tendency to side with the objects of prejudice, and in general with those who got the worst of it, his interest had never been practically drawn toward existing Jews, and the facts he knew about them, whether they walked conspicuous in fine apparel or lurked in by-streets, were chiefly of a sort most repugnant to him. Of learned and accomplished Jews he took it for granted that they had dropped their religion, and wished to be merged in the people of their native lands. Scorn flung at a Jew as such would have roused all his sympathy in griefs of inheritance; but the indiscriminate scorn of a race will often strike a specimen who has well earned it on his own account, and might fairly be gibbeted as a rascally son of Adam. It appears that the Caribs, who know little of theology, regard thieving as a practice peculiarly connected with Christian tenets, and probably they could allege experimental grounds for this opinion. Deronda could not escape (who can?) knowing ugly stories of Jewish characteristics and occupations; and though one of his favorite protests was against the severance of past and present history, he was like others who shared his protest, in never having cared to reach any more special conclusions about actual Jews than that they retained the virtues and vices of a long-oppressed race. But now that Mirah's longing roused his mind to a closer survey of details, very disagreeable images urged themselves of what it might be to find out this middle-aged Jewess and her son. To be sure, there was the exquisite refinement and charm of the creature herself to make a presumption in favor of her immediate kindred, but - he must wait to know more: perhaps through Mrs. Meyrick he might gather some guiding hints from Mirah's own lips. Her voice, her accent, her looks - all the sweet purity that clothed her as with a consecrating garment made him shrink the more from giving her, either ideally or practically, an association with what was hateful or contaminating. But these fine words with which we fumigate and becloud unpleasant facts are not the language in which we think. Deronda's thinking went on in rapid images of what might be: he saw himself guided by some official scout into a dingy street; he entered through a dim doorway, and saw a hawk-eyed woman, rough-headed, and unwashed, cheapening a hungry girl's last bit of finery; or in some quarter only the more hideous for being smarter, he found himself under the breath of a young Jew talkative and familiar, willing to show his acquaintance with gentlemen's tastes, and not fastidious in any transactions with which they would favor him - and so on through the brief chapter of his experience in this kind. Excuse him: his mind was not apt to run spontaneously into insulting ideas, or to practice a form of wit which identifies Moses with the advertisement sheet; but he was just now governed by dread, and if Mirah's parents had been Christian, the chief difference would have been that his forebodings would have been fed with wider knowledge. It was the habit of his

mind to connect dread with unknown parentage, and in this case as well as his own there was enough to make the connection reasonable.

But what was to be done with Mirah? She needed shelter and protection in the fullest sense, and all his chivalrous sentiment roused itself to insist that the sooner and the more fully he could engage for her the interest of others besides himself, the better he should fulfill her claims on him. He had no right to provide for her entirely, though he might be able to do so; the very depth of the impression she had produced made him desire that she should understand herself to be entirely independent of him; and vague visions of the future which he tried to dispel as fantastic left their influence in an anxiety stronger than any motive he could give for it, that those who saw his actions closely should be acquainted from the first with the history of his relation to Mirah. He had learned to hate secrecy about the grand ties and obligations of his life - to hate it the more because a strong spell of interwoven sensibilities hindered him from breaking such secrecy. Deronda had made a vow to himself that - since the truths which disgrace mortals are not all of their own making - the truth should never be made a disgrace to another by his act. He was not without terror lest he should break this vow, and fall into the apologetic philosophy which explains the world into containing nothing better than one's own conduct.

At one moment he resolved to tell the whole of his adventure to Sir Hugo and Lady Mallinger the next morning at breakfast, but the possibility that something quite new might reveal itself on his next visit to Mrs. Meyrick's checked this impulse, and he finally went to sleep on the conclusion that he would wait until that visit had been made.