

Chapter XXXIX

‘Vor den Wissenden sich stellen Sicher ist's in alien Faellen! Wenn du lange dich gequaelet Weiss er gleich wo dir es fehlet; Auch auf Beifall darfst du hoffen, Denn er weiss wo du's getroffen,’ - GOETHE: *West-oestlicker Divan*.

Momentous things happened to Deronda the very evening of that visit to the small house at Chelsea, when there was the discussion about Mirah's public name. But for the family group there, what appeared to be the chief sequence connected with it occurred two days afterward. About four o'clock wheels paused before the door, and there came one of those knocks with an accompanying ring which serve to magnify the sense of social existence in a region where the most enlivening signals are usually those of the muffin-man. All the girls were at home, and the two rooms were thrown together to make space for Kate's drawing, as well as a great length of embroidery which had taken the place of the satin cushions - a sort of *piece de resistance* in the courses of needlework, taken up by any clever fingers that happened to be at liberty. It stretched across the front room picturesquely enough, Mrs. Meyrick bending over it on one corner, Mab in the middle, and Amy at the other end. Mirah, whose performances in point of sewing were on the make-shift level of the tailor-bird's, her education in that branch having been much neglected, was acting as reader to the party, seated on a camp-stool; in which position she also served Kate as model for a title-page vignette, symbolizing a fair public absorbed in the successive volumes of the family tea-table. She was giving forth with charming distinctness the delightful Essay of Elia, ‘The Praise of Chimney-Sweeps,’ and all were smiling over the ‘innocent blackness,’ when the imposing knock and ring called their thoughts to loftier spheres, and they looked up in wonderment.

‘Dear me!’ said Mrs. Meyrick; ‘can it be Lady Mallinger? Is there a grand carriage, Amy?’

‘No - only a hansom cab. It must be a gentleman.’

‘The Prime Minister, I should think,’ said Kate dryly. ‘Hans says the greatest man in London may get into a hansom cab.’

‘Oh, oh, oh!’ cried Mab. ‘Suppose it should be Lord Russell!’

The five bright faces were all looking amused when the old maid-servant bringing in a card distractedly left the parlor-door open, and there was seen bowing toward Mrs. Meyrick a figure quite unlike that of the respected Premier - tall and physically impressive even in his kid and kerseymere, with massive face, flamboyant hair, and gold

spectacles: in fact, as Mrs. Meyrick saw from the card, *Julius Klesmer*.

Even embarrassment could hardly have made the 'little mother' awkward, but quick in her perceptions she was at once aware of the situation, and felt well satisfied that the great personage had come to Mirah instead of requiring her to come to him; taking it as a sign of active interest. But when he entered, the rooms shrank into closets, the cottage piano, Mab thought, seemed a ridiculous toy, and the entire family existence as petty and private as an establishment of mice in the Tuileries. Klesmer's personality, especially his way of glancing round him, immediately suggested vast areas and a multitudinous audience, and probably they made the usual scenery of his consciousness, for we all of us carry on our thinking in some habitual locus where there is a presence of other souls, and those who take in a larger sweep than their neighbors are apt to seem mightily vain and affected. Klesmer was vain, but not more so than many contemporaries of heavy aspect, whose vanity leaps out and startles one like a spear out of a walking-stick; as to his carriage and gestures, these were as natural to him as the length of his fingers; and the rankest affectation he could have shown would have been to look diffident and demure. While his grandiose air was making Mab feel herself a ridiculous toy to match the cottage piano, he was taking in the details around him with a keen and thoroughly kind sensibility. He remembered a home no longer than this on the outskirts of Bohemia; and in the figurative Bohemia too he had had large acquaintance with the variety and romance which belong to small incomes. He addressed Mrs. Meyrick with the utmost deference.

'I hope I have not taken too great a freedom. Being in the neighborhood, I ventured to save time by calling. Our friend, Mr Deronda, mentioned to me an understanding that I was to have the honor of becoming acquainted with a young lady here - Miss Lapidoth.'

Klesmer had really discerned Mirah in the first moment of entering, but, with subtle politeness, he looked round bowingly at the three sisters as if he were uncertain which was the young lady in question.

'Those are my daughters: this is Miss Lapidoth,' said Mrs. Meyrick, waving her hand toward Mirah.

'Ah,' said Klesmer, in a tone of gratified expectation, turning a radiant smile and deep bow to Mirah, who, instead of being in the least taken by surprise, had a calm pleasure in her face. She liked the look of Klesmer, feeling sure that he would scold her, like a great musician and a kind man.

'You will not object to beginning our acquaintance by singing to me,' he added, aware that they would all be relieved by getting rid of preliminaries.

'I shall be very glad. It is good of you to be willing to listen to me,' said Mirah, moving to the piano. 'Shall I accompany myself?'

'By all means,' said Klesmer, seating himself, at Mrs. Meyrick's invitation, where he could have a good view of the singer. The acute little mother would not have acknowledged the weakness, but she really said to herself, 'He will like her singing better if he sees her.'

All the feminine hearts except Mirah's were beating fast with anxiety, thinking Klesmer terrific as he sat with his listening frown on, and only daring to look at him furtively. If he did say anything severe it would be so hard for them all. They could only comfort themselves with thinking that Prince Camaralzaman, who had heard the finest things, preferred Mirah's singing to any other: - also she appeared to be doing her very best, as if she were more instead of less at ease than usual.

The song she had chosen was a fine setting of some words selected from Leopardi's grand Ode to Italy: -

'O patria mia, vedo le mura c gli archi E le colonne e i simula-cri e l'erme Torridegli avi nostri' -

This was recitative: then followed -

'Ma la gloria - non vedo' -

a mournful melody, a rhythmic plaint. After this came a climax of devout triumph - passing from the subdued adoration of a happy Andante in the words -

'Beatissimi voi. Che offriste il petto alle nemiche lance Per amor di costei che al sol vi diede' -

to the joyous outburst of an exultant Allegro in -

'Oh viva, oh viva: Beatissimi voi Mentre nel monde si favelli o scriva.'

When she had ended, Klesmer said after a moment -

'That is Joseph Leo's music.'

'Yes, he was my last master - at Vienna: so fierce and so good,' said Mirah, with a melancholy smile. 'He prophesied that my voice would not do for the stage. And he was right.'

'Continue, if you please,' said Klesmer, putting out his lips and shaking his long fingers, while he went on with a smothered articulation quite unintelligible to the audience.

The three girls detested him unanimously for not saying one word of praise. Mrs. Meyrick was a little alarmed.

Mirah, simply bent on doing what Klesmer desired, and imagining that he would now like to hear her sing some German, went through Prince Radzivil's music to Gretchen's songs in the 'Faust,' one after the other without any interrogatory pause. When she had finished he rose and walked to the extremity of the small space at command, then walked back to the piano, where Mirah had risen from her seat and stood looking toward him with her little hands crossed before her, meekly awaiting judgment; then with a sudden unknitting of his brow and with beaming eyes, he stretched out his hand and said abruptly, 'Let us shake hands: you are a musician.'

Mab felt herself beginning to cry, and all the three girls held Klesmer adorable. Mrs. Meyrick took a long breath.

But straightway the frown came again, the long hand, back uppermost, was stretched out in quite a different sense to touch with finger-tip the back of Mirah's, and with protruded lip he said -

'Not for great tasks. No high roofs. We are no skylarks. We must be modest.' Klesmer paused here. And Mab ceased to think him adorable: 'as if Mirah had shown the least sign of conceit!'

Mirah was silent, knowing that there was a specific opinion to be waited for, and Klesmer presently went on - 'I would not advise - I would not further your singing in any larger space than a private drawing-room. But you will do there. And here in London that is one of the best careers open. Lessons will follow. Will you come and sing at a private concert at my house on Wednesday?'

'Oh, I shall be grateful,' said Mirah, putting her hands together devoutly. 'I would rather get my bread in that way than by anything more public. I will try to improve. What should I work at most?'

Klesmer made a preliminary answer in noises which sounded like words bitten in two and swallowed before they were half out, shaking his fingers the while, before he said, quite distinctly, 'I shall introduce you to Astorga: he is the foster-father of good singing and will give you

advice.' Then addressing Mrs. Meyrick, he added, 'Mrs. Klesmer will call before Wednesday, with your permission.'

'We shall feel that to be a great kindness,' said Mrs. Meyrick.

'You will sing to her,' said Klesmer, turning again to Mirah. 'She is a thorough musician, and has a soul with more ears to it than you will often get in a musician. Your singing will satisfy her: -

'Vor den Wissenden sich stellen;'

you know the rest?'

'Sicher ist's in alien Faellen.'

said Mirah, promptly. And Klesmer saying 'Schoen!' put out his hand again as a good-bye.

He had certainly chosen the most delicate way of praising Mirah, and the Meyrick girls had now given him all their esteem. But imagine Mab's feeling when suddenly fixing his eyes on her, he said decisively, 'That young lady is musical, I see!' She was a mere blush and sense of scorching.

'Yes,' said Mirah, on her behalf. 'And she has a touch.'

'Oh, please, Mirah - a scramble, not a touch,' said Mab, in anguish, with a horrible fear of what the next thing might be: this dreadful divining personage - evidently Satan in gray trousers - might order her to sit down to the piano, and her heart was like molten wax in the midst of her. But this was cheap payment for her amazed joy when Klesmer said benignantly, turning to Mrs. Meyrick, 'Will she like to accompany Miss Lapidoth and hear the music on Wednesday?'

'There could hardly be a greater pleasure for her,' said Mrs. Meyrick. 'She will be most glad and grateful.'

Thereupon Klesmer bowed round to the three sisters more grandly than they had ever been bowed to before. Altogether it was an amusing picture - the little room with so much of its diagonal taken up in Klesmer's magnificent bend to the small feminine figures like images a little less than life-size, the grave Holbein faces on the walls, as many as were not otherwise occupied, looking hard at this stranger who by his face seemed a dignified contemporary of their own, but whose garments seemed a deplorable mockery of the human form.

Mrs. Meyrick could not help going out of the room with Klesmer and closing the door behind her. He understood her, and said with a frowning nod -

'She will do: if she doesn't attempt too much and her voice holds out, she can make an income. I know that is the great point: Deronda told me. You are taking care of her. She looks like a good girl.'

'She is an angel,' said the warm-hearted woman.

'No,' said Klesmer, with a playful nod; 'she is a pretty Jewess: the angels must not get the credit of her. But I think she has found a guardian angel,' he ended, bowing himself out in this amiable way.

The four young creatures had looked at each other mutely till the door banged and Mrs. Meyrick re-entered. Then there was an explosion. Mab clapped her hands and danced everywhere inconveniently; Mrs. Meyrick kissed Mirah and blessed her; Amy said emphatically, 'We can never get her a new dress before Wednesday!' and Kate exclaimed, 'Thank heaven my table is not knocked over!'

Mirah had reseated herself on the music-stool without speaking, and the tears were rolling down her cheeks as she looked at her friends.

'Now, now, Mab!' said Mrs. Meyrick; 'come and sit down reasonably and let us talk?'

'Yes, let us talk,' said Mab, cordially, coming back to her low seat and caressing her knees. 'I am beginning to feel large again. Hans said he was coming this afternoon. I wish he had been here - only there would have been no room for him. Mirah, what are you looking sad for?'

'I am too happy,' said Mirah. 'I feel so full of gratitude to you all; and he was so very kind.'

'Yes, at last,' said Mab, sharply. 'But he might have said something encouraging sooner. I thought him dreadfully ugly when he sat frowning, and only said, 'Continue.' I hated him all the long way from the top of his hair to the toe of his polished boot.'

'Nonsense, Mab; he has a splendid profile,' said Kate.

'*Now*, but not *then* I cannot bear people to keep their minds bottled up for the sake of letting them off with a pop. They seem to grudge making you happy unless they can make you miserable beforehand. However, I forgive him everything,' said Mab, with a magnanimous air, 'but he has invited me. I wonder why he fixed on me as the musical

one? Was it because I have a bulging forehead, ma, and peep from under it like a newt from under a stone?’

‘It was your way of listening to the singing, child,’ said Mrs. Meyrick. ‘He has magic spectacles and sees everything through them, depend upon it. But what was that German quotation you were so ready with, Mirah - you learned puss?’

‘Oh, that was not learning,’ said Mirah, her tearful face breaking into an amused smile. ‘I said it so many times for a lesson. It means that it is safer to do anything - singing or anything else - before those who know and understand all about it.’

‘That was why you were not one bit frightened, I suppose,’ said Amy. ‘But now, what we have to talk about is a dress for you on Wednesday.’

‘I don't want anything better than this black merino,’ said Mirah, rising to show the effect. ‘Some white gloves and some new *bottines*.’ She put out her little foot, clad in the famous felt slipper.

‘There comes Hans,’ said Mrs. Meyrick. ‘Stand still, and let us hear what he says about the dress. Artists are the best people to consult about such things.’

‘You don't consult me, ma,’ said Kate, lifting up her eyebrow with a playful complainingness. ‘I notice mothers are like the people I deal with - the girls' doings are always priced low.’

‘My dear child, the boys are such a trouble - we could never put up with them, if we didn't make believe they were worth more,’ said Mrs. Meyrick, just as her boy entered. ‘Hans, we want your opinion about Mirah's dress. A great event has happened. Klesmer has been here, and she is going to sing at his house on Wednesday among grand people. She thinks this dress will do.’

‘Let me see,’ said Hans. Mirah in her childlike way turned toward him to be looked at; and he, going to a little further distance, knelt with one knee on a hassock to survey her.

‘This would be thought a very good stage-dress for me,’ she said, pleadingly, ‘in a part where I was to come on as a poor Jewess and sing to fashionable Christians.’

‘It would be effective,’ said Hans, with a considering air; ‘it would stand out well among the fashionable *chiffons*.’

'But you ought not to claim all the poverty on your side, Mirah,' said Amy. 'There are plenty of poor Christians and dreadfully rich Jews and fashionable Jewesses.'

'I didn't mean any harm,' said Mirah. 'Only I have been used to thinking about my dress for parts in plays. And I almost always had a part with a plain dress.'

'That makes me think it questionable,' said Hans, who had suddenly become as fastidious and conventional on this occasion as he had thought Deronda was, apropos of the Berenice-pictures. 'It looks a little too theatrical. We must not make you a *role* of the poor Jewess - or of being a Jewess at all.' Hans had a secret desire to neutralize the Jewess in private life, which he was in danger of not keeping secret.

'But it is what I am really. I am not pretending anything. I shall never be anything else,' said Mirah. 'I always feel myself a Jewess.'

'But we can't feel that about you,' said Hans, with a devout look. 'What does it signify whether a perfect woman is a Jewess or not?'

'That is your kind way of praising me; I never was praised so before,' said Mirah, with a smile, which was rather maddening to Hans and made him feel still more of a cosmopolitan.

'People don't think of me as a British Christian,' he said, his face creasing merrily. 'They think of me as an imperfectly handsome young man and an unpromising painter.'

'But you are wandering from the dress,' said Amy. 'If that will not do, how are we to get another before Wednesday? and to-morrow Sunday?'

'Indeed this will do,' said Mirah, entreatingly. 'It is all real, you know,' here she looked at Hans - 'even if it seemed theatrical. Poor Berenice sitting on the ruins - any one might say that was theatrical, but I know that this is just what she would do.'

'I am a scoundrel,' said Hans, overcome by this misplaced trust. 'That is my invention. Nobody knows that she did that. Shall you forgive me for not saying so before?'

'Oh, yes,' said Mirah, after a momentary pause of surprise. 'You knew it was what she would be sure to do - a Jewess who had not been faithful - who had done what she did and was penitent. She could have no joy but to afflict herself; and where else would she go? I think it is very beautiful that you should enter so into what a Jewess would feel.'

'The Jewesses of that time sat on ruins,' said Hans, starting up with a sense of being checkmated. 'That makes them convenient for pictures.'

'But the dress - the dress,' said Amy; 'is it settled?'

'Yes; is it not?' said Mirah, looking doubtfully at Mrs. Meyrick, who in her turn looked up at her son, and said, 'What do you think, Hans?'

'That dress will not do,' said Hans, decisively. 'She is not going to sit on ruins. You must jump into a cab with her, little mother, and go to Regent Street. It's plenty of time to get anything you like - a black silk dress such as ladies wear. She must not be taken for an object of charity. She has talents to make people indebted to her.'

'I think it is what Mr Deronda would like - for her to have a handsome dress,' said Mrs. Meyrick, deliberating.

'Of course it is,' said Hans, with some sharpness. 'You may take my word for what a gentleman would feel.'

'I wish to do what Mr Deronda would like me to do,' said Mirah, gravely, seeing that Mrs. Meyrick looked toward her; and Hans, turning on his heel, went to Kate's table and took up one of her drawings as if his interest needed a new direction.

'Shouldn't you like to make a study of Klesmer's head, Hans?' said Kate. 'I suppose you have often seen him?'

'Seen him!' exclaimed Hans, immediately throwing back his head and mane, seating himself at the piano and looking round him as if he were surveying an amphitheatre, while he held his fingers down perpendicularly toward the keys. But then in another instant he wheeled round on the stool, looked at Mirah and said, half timidly - 'Perhaps you don't like this mimicry; you must always stop my nonsense when you don't like it.'

Mirah had been smiling at the swiftly-made image, and she smiled still, but with a touch of something else than amusement, as she said - 'Thank you. But you have never done anything I did not like. I hardly think he could, belonging to you,' she added, looking at Mrs. Meyrick.

In this way Hans got food for his hope. How could the rose help it when several bees in succession took its sweet odor as a sign of personal attachment?