

Chapter XLIII

'My spirit is too weak; mortality Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep, And each imagined pinnacle and steep Of godlike hardship tells me I must die Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.' - KEATS.

After a few minutes the unwonted stillness had penetrated Mordecai's consciousness, and he looked up at Deronda, not in the least with bewilderment and surprise, but with a gaze full of reposing satisfaction. Deronda rose and placed his chair nearer, where there could be no imagined need for raising the voice. Mordecai felt the action as a patient feels the gentleness that eases his pillow. He began to speak in a low tone, as if he were only thinking articulately, not trying to reach an audience.

'In the doctrine of the Cabbala, souls are born again and again in new bodies till they are perfected and purified, and a soul liberated from a worn-out body may join the fellow-soul that needs it, that they may be perfected together, and their earthly work accomplished. Then they will depart from the mortal region, and leave place for new souls to be born out of the store in the eternal bosom. It is the lingering imperfection of the souls already born into the mortal region that hinders the birth of new souls and the preparation of the Messianic time: - thus the mind has given shape to what is hidden, as the shadow of what is known, and has spoken truth, though it were only in parable. When my long-wandering soul is liberated from this weary body, it will join yours, and its work will be perfected.'

Mordecai's pause seemed an appeal which Deronda's feeling would not let him leave unanswered. He tried to make it truthful; but for Mordecai's ear it was inevitably filled with unspoken meaning. He only said -

'Everything I can in conscience do to make your life effective I will do.'

'I know it,' said Mordecai, in a tone of quiet certainty which dispenses with further assurance. 'I heard it. You see it all - you are by my side on the mount of vision, and behold the paths of fulfillment which others deny.'

He was silent a moment or two, and then went on meditatively -

'You will take up my life where it was broken. I feel myself back in that day when my life was broken. The bright morning sun was on the quay - it was at Trieste - the garments of men from all nations shone like jewels - the boats were pushing off - the Greek vessel that would land us at Beyrout was to start in an hour. I was going with a merchant as his clerk and companion. I said, I shall behold the lands

and people of the East, and I shall speak with a fuller vision. I breathed then as you do, without labor; I had the light step and the endurance of youth, I could fast, I could sleep on the hard ground. I had wedded poverty, and I loved my bride - for poverty to me was freedom. My heart exulted as if it had been the heart of Moses ben Maimon, strong with the strength of three score years, and knowing the work that was to fill them. It was the first time I had been south; the soul within me felt its former sun; and standing on the quay, where the ground I stood on seemed to send forth light, and the shadows had an azure glory as of spirits become visible, I felt myself in the flood of a glorious life, wherein my own small year-counted existence seemed to melt, so that I knew it not; and a great sob arose within me as at the rush of waters that were too strong a bliss. So I stood there awaiting my companion; and I saw him not till he said: 'Ezra, I have been to the post and there is your letter.'

'Ezra!' exclaimed Deronda, unable to contain himself.

'Ezra,' repeated Mordecai, affirmatively, engrossed in memory. 'I was expecting a letter; for I wrote continually to my mother. And that sound of my name was like the touch of a wand that recalled me to the body wherefrom I had been released as it were to mingle with the ocean of human existence, free from the pressure of individual bondage. I opened the letter; and the name came again as a cry that would have disturbed me in the bosom of heaven, and made me yearn to reach where that sorrow was - 'Ezra, my son!'

Mordecai paused again, his imagination arrested by the grasp of that long- passed moment. Deronda's mind was almost breathlessly suspended on what was coming. A strange possibility had suddenly presented itself. Mordecai's eyes were cast down in abstracted contemplation, and in a few moments he went on -

'She was a mother of whom it might have come - yea, might have come to be said, 'Her children arise up and call her blessed.' In her I understood the meaning of that Master who, perceiving the footsteps of his mother, rose up and said, 'The Majesty of the Eternal cometh near!' And that letter was her cry from the depths of anguish and desolation - the cry of a mother robbed of her little ones. I was her eldest. Death had taken four babes one after the other. Then came, late, my little sister, who was, more than all the rest, the desire of my mother's eyes; and the letter was a piercing cry to me - 'Ezra, my son, I am robbed of her. He has taken her away and left disgrace behind. They will never come again.' - Here Mordecai lifted his eyes suddenly, laid his hand on Deronda's arm, and said, 'Mine was the lot of Israel. For the sin of the father my soul must go into exile. For the sin of the father the work was broken, and the day of fulfilment delayed. She who bore me was desolate, disgraced, destitute. I turned back. On the

instant I turned - her spirit and the spirit of her fathers, who had worthy Jewish hearts, moved within me, and drew me. God, in whom dwells the universe, was within me as the strength of obedience. I turned and traveled with hardship - to save the scant money which she would need. I left the sunshine, and traveled into freezing cold. In the last stage I spent a night in exposure to cold and snow. And that was the beginning of this slow death.'

Mordecai let his eyes wander again and removed his hand. Deronda resolutely repressed the questions which urged themselves within him. While Mordecai was in this state of emotion, no other confidence must be sought than what came spontaneously: nay, he himself felt a kindred emotion which made him dread his own speech as too momentous.

'But I worked. We were destitute - every thing had been seized. And she was ill: the clutch of anguish was too strong for her, and wrought with some lurking disease. At times she could not stand for the beating of her heart, and the images in her brain became as chambers of terror, where she beheld my sister reared in evil. In the dead of night I heard her crying for her child. Then I rose, and we stretched forth our arms together and prayed. We poured forth our souls in desire that Mirah might be delivered from evil.'

'Mirah?' Deronda repeated, wishing to assure, himself that his ears had not been deceived by a forecasting imagination. 'Did you say Mirah?'

'That was my little sister's name. After we had prayed for her, my mother would rest awhile. It lasted hardly four years, and in the minute before she died, we were praying the same prayer - I aloud, she silently. Her soul went out upon its wings.'

'Have you never since heard of your sister?' said Deronda, as quietly as he could.

'Never. Never have I heard whether she was delivered according to our prayer. I know not, I know not. Who shall say where the pathways lie? The poisonous will of the wicked is strong. It poisoned my life - it is slowly stifling this breath. Death delivered my mother, and I felt it a blessedness that I was alone in the winters of suffering. But what are the winters now? - they are far off' - here Mordecai again rested his hand on Deronda's arm, and looked at him with that joy of the hectic patient which pierces us to sadness - 'there is nothing to wail in the withering of my body. The work will be the better done. Once I said the work of this beginning was mine, I am born to do it. Well, I shall do it. I shall live in you. I shall live in you.'

His grasp had become convulsive in its force, and Deronda, agitated as he had never been before - the certainty that this was Mirah's brother suffusing his own strange relation to Mordecai with a new solemnity and tenderness - felt his strong young heart beating faster and his lips paling. He shrank from speech. He feared, in Mordecai's present state of exaltation (already an alarming strain on his feeble frame), to utter a word of revelation about Mirah. He feared to make an answer below that high pitch of expectation which resembled a flash from a dying fire, making watchers fear to see it die the faster. His dominant impulse was to do as he had once done before: he laid his firm, gentle hand on the hand that grasped him. Mordecai's, as if it had a soul of its own - for he was not distinctly willing to do what he did - relaxed its grasp, and turned upward under Deronda's. As the two palms met and pressed each other Mordecai recovered some sense of his surroundings, and said -

'Let us go now. I cannot talk any longer.'

And in fact they parted at Cohen's door without having spoken to each other again - merely with another pressure of the hands.

Deronda felt a weight on him which was half joy, half anxiety. The joy of finding in Mirah's brother a nature even more than worthy of that relation to her, had the weight of solemnity and sadness; the reunion of brother and sister was in reality the first stage of a supreme parting - like that farewell kiss which resembles greeting, that last glance of love which becomes the sharpest pang of sorrow. Then there was the weight of anxiety about the revelation of the fact on both sides, and the arrangements it would be desirable to make beforehand. I suppose we should all have felt as Deronda did, without sinking into snobbishness or the notion that the primal duties of life demand a morning and an evening suit, that it was an admissible desire to free Mirah's first meeting with her brother from all jarring outward conditions. His own sense of deliverance from the dreaded relationship of the other Cohens, notwithstanding their good nature, made him resolve if possible to keep them in the background for Mirah, until her acquaintance with them would be an unmarred rendering of gratitude for any kindness they had shown to her brother. On all accounts he wished to give Mordecai's surroundings not only more suited to his frail bodily condition, but less of a hindrance to easy intercourse, even apart from the decisive prospect of Mirah's taken up her abode with her brother, and tending him through the precious remnant of his life. In the heroic drama, great recognitions are not encumbered with these details; and certainly Deronda had as reverential an interest in Mordecai and Mirah as he could have had in the offspring of Agamemnon; but he was caring for destinies still moving in the dim streets of our earthly life, not yet lifted among the constellations, and his task presented itself to him as difficult and delicate, especially in

persuading Mordecai to change his abode and habits. Concerning Mirah's feeling and resolve he had no doubt: there would be a complete union of sentiment toward the departed mother, and Mirah would understand her brother's greatness. Yes, greatness: that was the word which Deronda now deliberately chose to signify the impression that Mordecai had made on him. He said to himself, perhaps rather defiantly toward the more negative spirit within him, that this man, however erratic some of his interpretations might be - this consumptive Jewish workman in threadbare clothing, lodged by charity, delivering himself to hearers who took his thoughts without attaching more consequences to them than the Flemings to the ethereal chimes ringing above their market-places - had the chief elements of greatness; a mind consciously, energetically moving with the larger march of human destinies, but not the less full of conscience and tender heart for the footsteps that tread near and need a leaning-place; capable of conceiving and choosing a life's task with far-off issues, yet capable of the unapplauded heroism which turns off the road of achievement at the call of the nearer duty whose effect lies within the beatings of the hearts that are close to us, as the hunger of the unfledged bird to the breast of its parent.

Deronda to-night was stirred with, the feeling that the brief remnant of this fervid life had become his charge. He had been peculiarly wrought on by what he had seen at the club of the friendly indifference which Mordecai must have gone on encountering. His own experience of the small room that ardor can make for itself in ordinary minds had had the effect of increasing his reserve; and while tolerance was the easiest attitude to him, there was another bent in him also capable of becoming a weakness - the dislike to appear exceptional or to risk an ineffective insistence on his own opinion. But such caution appeared contemptible to him just now, when he, for the first time, saw in a complete picture and felt as a reality the lives that burn themselves out in solitary enthusiasm: martyrs of obscure circumstance, exiled in the rarity of their own minds, whose deliverances in other ears are no more than a long passionate soliloquy - unless perhaps at last, when they are nearing the invisible shores, signs of recognition and fulfilment may penetrate the cloud of loneliness; or perhaps it may be with them as with the dying Copernicus made to touch the first printed copy of his book when the sense of touch was gone, seeing it only as a dim object through the deepening dusk. Deronda had been brought near to one of those spiritual exiles, and it was in his nature to feel the relation as a strong chain, nay, to feel his imagination moving without repugnance in the direction of Mordecai's desires. With all his latent objection to schemes only definite in their generality and nebulous in detail - in the poise of his sentiments he felt at one with this man who had made a visionary selection of him: the lines of what may be called their emotional theory touched. He had not the Jewish consciousness, but

he had a yearning, grown the stronger for the denial which had been his grievance, after the obligation of avowed filial and social ties. His feeling was ready for difficult obedience. In this way it came that he set about his new task ungrudgingly; and again he thought of Mrs. Meyrick as his chief helper. To her first he must make known the discovery of Mirah's brother, and with her he must consult on all preliminaries of bringing the mutually lost together. Happily the best quarter for a consumptive patient did not lie too far off the small house at Chelsea, and the first office Deronda had to perform for this Hebrew prophet who claimed him as a spiritual inheritor, was to get him a healthy lodging. Such is the irony of earthly mixtures, that the heroes have not always had carpets and teacups of their own; and, seen through the open window by the mackerel-vender, may have been invited with some hopefulness to pay three hundred per cent, in the form of fourpence. However, Deronda's mind was busy with a prospective arrangement for giving a furnished lodging some faint likeness to a refined home by dismantling his own chambers of his best old books in vellum, his easiest chair, and the bas-reliefs of Milton and Dante.

But was not Mirah to be there? What furniture can give such finish to a room as a tender woman's face? - and is there any harmony of tints that has such stirrings of delight as the sweet modulation of her voice? Here is one good, at least, thought Deronda, that comes to Mordecai from his having fixed his imagination on me. He has recovered a perfect sister, whose affection is waiting for him.