

Chapter LVII

'The unripe grape, the ripe, and the dried. All things are changes, not into nothing, but into that which is not at present.' - MARCUS AURELIUS.

Deeds are the pulse of Time, his beating life, And righteous or unrighteous, being done, Must throb in after-throbs till Time itself Be laid in darkness, and the universe Quiver and breathe upon no mirror more.

In the evening she sent for him again. It was already near the hour at which she had been brought in from the sea the evening before, and the light was subdued enough with blinds drawn up and windows open. She was seated gazing fixedly on the sea, resting her cheek on her hand, looking less shattered than when he had left her, but with a deep melancholy in her expression which as Deronda approached her passed into an anxious timidity. She did not put out her hand, but said, 'How long ago it is!' Then, 'Will you sit near me again a little while?'

He placed himself by her side as he had done before, and seeing that she turned to him with that indefinable expression which implies a wish to say something, he waited for her to speak. But again she looked toward the window silently, and again turned with the same expression, which yet did not issue in speech. There was some fear hindering her, and Deronda, wishing to relieve her timidity, averted his face. Presently he heard her cry imploringly -

'You will not say that any one else should know?'

'Most decidedly not,' said Deronda. 'There is no action that ought to be taken in consequence. There is no injury that could be righted in that way. There is no retribution that any mortal could apportion justly.'

She was so still during a pause that she seemed to be holding her breath before she said -

'But if I had not had that murderous will - that moment - if I had thrown the rope on the instant - perhaps it would have hindered death?'

'No - I think not,' said Deronda, slowly. 'If it were true that he could swim, he must have been seized with cramp. With your quickest, utmost effort, it seems impossible that you could have done anything to save him. That momentary murderous will cannot, I think, have altered the course of events. Its effect is confined to the motives in your own breast. Within ourselves our evil will is momentous, and

sooner or later it works its way outside us - it may be in the vitiation that breeds evil acts, but also it may be in the self-abhorrence that stings us into better striving.'

'I am saved from robbing others - there are others - they will have everything - they will have what they ought to have. I knew that some time before I left town. You do not suspect me of wrong desires about those things?' She spoke hesitatingly.

'I had not thought of them,' said Deronda; 'I was thinking too much of the other things.'

'Perhaps you don't quite know the beginning of it all,' said Gwendolen, slowly, as if she were overcoming her reluctance. 'There was some one else he ought to have married. And I knew it, and I told her I would not hinder it. And I went away - that was when you first saw me. But then we became poor all at once, and I was very miserable, and I was tempted. I thought, 'I shall do as I like and make everything right.' I persuaded myself. And it was all different. It was all dreadful. Then came hatred and wicked thoughts. That was how it all came. I told you I was afraid of myself. And I did what you told me - I did try to make my fear a safeguard. I thought of what would be if I - I felt what would come - how I should dread the morning - wishing it would be always night - and yet in the darkness always seeing something - seeing death. If you did not know how miserable I was, you might - but now it has all been no use. I can care for nothing but saving the rest from knowing - poor mamma, who has never been happy.'

There was silence again before she said with a repressed sob - 'You cannot bear to look at me any more. You think I am too wicked. You do not believe that I can become any better - worth anything - worthy enough - I shall always be too wicked to - ' The voice broke off helpless.

Deronda's heart was pierced. He turned his eyes on her poor beseeching face and said, 'I believe that you may become worthier than you have ever yet been - worthy to lead a life that may be a blessing. No evil dooms us hopelessly except the evil we love, and desire to continue in, and make no effort to escape from. You *have* made efforts - you will go on making them.'

'But you were the beginning of them. You must not forsake me,' said Gwendolen, leaning with her clasped hands on the arm of her chair and looking at him, while her face bore piteous traces of the life-experience concentrated in the twenty-four hours - that new terrible life lying on the other side of the deed which fulfills a criminal desire. 'I will bear any penance. I will lead any life you tell me. But you must not forsake me. You must be near. If you had been near me - if I could

have said everything to you, I should have been different. You will not forsake me?’

‘It could never be my impulse to forsake you,’ said Deronda promptly, with that voice which, like his eyes, had the unintentional effect of making his ready sympathy seem more personal and special than it really was. And in that moment he was not himself quite free from a foreboding of some such self-committing effect. His strong feeling for this stricken creature could not hinder rushing images of future difficulty. He continued to meet her appealing eyes as he spoke, but it was with the painful consciousness that to her ear his words might carry a promise which one day would seem unfulfilled: he was making an indefinite promise to an indefinite hope. Anxieties, both immediate and distant, crowded on his thought, and it was under their influence that, after a moment's silence, he said -

‘I expect Sir Hugh Mallinger to arrive by to-morrow night at least; and I am not without hope that Mrs. Davilow may shortly follow him. Her presence will be the greatest comfort to you - it will give you a motive to save her from unnecessary pain?’

‘Yes, yes - I will try. And you will not go away?’

‘Not till after Sir Hugo has come.’

‘But we shall all go to England?’

‘As soon as possible,’ said Deronda, not wishing to enter into particulars.

Gwendolen looked toward the window again with an expression which seemed like a gradual awakening to new thoughts. The twilight was perceptibly deepening, but Deronda could see a movement in her eyes and hands such as accompanies a return of perception in one who has been stunned.

‘You will always be with Sir Hugo now!’ she said presently, looking at him. ‘You will always live at the Abbey - or else at Diplow?’

‘I am quite uncertain where I shall live,’ said Deronda, coloring.

She was warned by his changed color that she had spoken too rashly, and fell silent. After a little while she began, again looking away -

‘It is impossible to think how my life will go on. I think now it would be better for me to be poor and obliged to work.’

'New promptings will come as the days pass. When you are among your friends again, you will discern new duties,' said Deronda. 'Make it a task now to get as well and calm - as much like yourself as you can, before - ' He hesitated.

'Before my mother comes,' said Gwendolen. 'Ah! I must be changed. I have not looked at myself. Should you have known me,' she added, turning toward him, 'if you had met me now? - should you have known me for the one you saw at Leubronn?'

'Yes, I should have known you,' said Deronda, mournfully. 'The outside change is not great. I should have seen at once that it was you, and that you had gone through some great sorrow.'

'Don't wish now that you had never seen me; don't wish that,' said Gwendolen, imploringly, while the tears gathered.

'I should despise myself for wishing it,' said Deronda. 'How could I know what I was wishing? We must find our duties in what comes to us, not in what we imagine might have been. If I took to foolish wishing of that sort, I should wish - not that I had never seen you, but that I had been able to save you from this.'

'You have saved me from worse,' said Gwendolen, in a sobbing voice. 'I should have been worse if it had not been for you. If you had not been good, I should have been more wicked than I am.'

'It will be better for me to go now,' said Deronda, worn in spirit by the perpetual strain of this scene. 'Remember what we said of your task - to get well and calm before other friends come.'

He rose as he spoke, and she gave him her hand submissively. But when he had left her she sank on her knees, in hysterical crying. The distance between them was too great. She was a banished soul - beholding a possible life which she had sinned herself away from.

She was found in this way, crushed on the floor. Such grief seemed natural in a poor lady whose husband had been drowned in her presence.