

Chapter LXVIII

'All thoughts, all passions, all delights, Whatever stirs this mortal frame, All are but ministers of Love, And feed his sacred flame.' - COLERIDGE.

Deronda's eagerness to confess his love could hardly have had a stronger stimulus than Hans had given it in his assurance that Mirah needed relief from jealousy. He went on his next visit to Ezra with the determination to be resolute in using - nay, in requesting - an opportunity of private conversation with her. If she accepted his love, he felt courageous about all other consequences, and as her betrothed husband he would gain a protective authority which might be a desirable defense for her in future difficulties with her father. Deronda had not observed any signs of growing restlessness in Lapidoth, or of diminished desire to recommend himself; but he had forebodings of some future struggle, some mortification, or some intolerable increase of domestic disquietude in which he might save Ezra and Mirah from being helpless victims.

His forebodings would have been strengthened if he had known what was going on in the father's mind. That amount of restlessness, that desultoriness of attention, which made a small torture to Ezra, was to Lapidoth an irksome submission to restraint, only made bearable by his thinking of it as a means of by-and-by securing a well-conditioned freedom. He began with the intention of awaiting some really good chance, such as an opening for getting a considerable sum from Deronda; but all the while he was looking about curiously, and trying to discover where Mirah deposited her money and her keys. The imperious gambling desire within him, which carried on its activity through every other occupation, and made a continuous web of imagination that held all else in its meshes, would hardly have been under the control of a contracted purpose, if he had been able to lay his hands on any sum worth capturing. But Mirah, with her practical clear-sightedness, guarded against any frustration of the promise she had given to Ezra, by confiding all money, except what she was immediately in want of, to Mrs. Meyrick's care, and Lapidoth felt himself under an irritating completeness of supply in kind as in a lunatic asylum where everything was made safe against him. To have opened a desk or drawer of Mirah's, and pocketed any bank-notes found there, would have been to his mind a sort of domestic appropriation which had no disgrace in it; the degrees of liberty a man allows himself with other people's property being often delicately drawn, even beyond the boundary where the law begins to lay its hold - which is the reason why spoons are a safer investment than mining shares. Lapidoth really felt himself injuriously treated by his daughter, and thought that he ought to have had what he wanted of her other earnings as he had of her apple-tart. But he remained

submissive; indeed, the indiscretion that most tempted him, was not any insistance with Mirah, but some kind of appeal to Deronda. Clever persons who have nothing else to sell can often put a good price on their absence, and Lapidoth's difficult search for devices forced upon him the idea that his family would find themselves happier without him, and that Deronda would be willing to advance a considerable sum for the sake of getting rid of him. But, in spite of well-practiced hardihood, Lapidoth was still in some awe of Ezra's imposing friend, and deferred his purpose indefinitely.

On this day, when Deronda had come full of a gladdened consciousness, which inevitably showed itself in his air and speech, Lapidoth was at a crisis of discontent and longing that made his mind busy with schemes of freedom, and Deronda's new amenity encouraged them. This pre-occupation was at last so strong as to interfere with his usual show of interest in what went forward, and his persistence in sitting by even when there was reading which he could not follow. After sitting a little while, he went out to smoke and walk in the square, and the two friends were all the easier. Mirah was not at home, but she was sure to be in again before Deronda left, and his eyes glowed with a secret anticipation: he thought that when he saw her again he should see some sweetness of recognition for himself to which his eyes had been sealed before. There was an additional playful affectionateness in his manner toward Ezra.

'This little room is too close for you, Ezra,' he said, breaking off his reading. 'The week's heat we sometimes get here is worse than the heat in Genoa, where one sits in the shaded coolness of large rooms. You must have a better home now. I shall do as I like with you, being the stronger half.' He smiled toward Ezra, who said -

'I am straitened for nothing except breath. But you, who might be in a spacious palace, with the wide green country around you, find this a narrow prison. Nevertheless, I cannot say, 'Go.'"

'Oh, the country would be a banishment while you are here,' said Deronda, rising and walking round the double room, which yet offered no long promenade, while he made a great fan of his handkerchief. 'This is the happiest room in the world to me. Besides, I will imagine myself in the East, since I am getting ready to go there some day. Only I will not wear a cravat and a heavy ring there,' he ended emphatically, pausing to take off those superfluities and deposit them on a small table behind Ezra, who had the table in front of him covered with books and papers.

'I have been wearing my memorable ring ever since I came home,' he went on, as he reseated himself. 'But I am such a Sybarite that I constantly put it off as a burden when I am doing anything. I

understand why the Romans had summer rings - *if* they had them. Now then, I shall get on better.'

They were soon absorbed in their work again. Deronda was reading a piece of rabbinical Hebrew under Ezra's correction and comment, and they took little notice when Lapidoth re-entered and took a seat somewhat in the background.

His rambling eyes quickly alighted on the ring that sparkled on the bit of dark mahogany. During his walk, his mind had been occupied with the fiction of an advantageous opening for him abroad, only requiring a sum of ready money, which, on being communicated to Deronda in private, might immediately draw from him a question as to the amount of the required sum: and it was this part of his forecast that Lapidoth found the most debatable, there being a danger in asking too much, and a prospective regret in asking too little. His own desire gave him no limit, and he was quite without guidance as to the limit of Deronda's willingness. But now, in the midst of these airy conditions preparatory to a receipt which remained indefinite, this ring, which on Deronda's finger had become familiar to Lapidoth's envy, suddenly shone detached and within easy grasp. Its value was certainly below the smallest of the imaginary sums that his purpose fluctuated between; but then it was before him as a solid fact, and his desire at once leaped into the thought (not yet an intention) that if he were quietly to pocket that ring and walk away he would have the means of comfortable escape from present restraint, without trouble, and also without danger; for any property of Deronda's (available without his formal consent) was all one with his children's property, since their father would never be prosecuted for taking it. The details of this thinking followed each other so quickly that they seemed to rise before him as one picture. Lapidoth had never committed larceny; but larceny is a form of appropriation for which people are punished by law; and, take this ring from a virtual relation, who would have been willing to make a much heavier gift, would not come under the head of larceny. Still, the heavier gift was to be preferred, if Lapidoth could only make haste enough in asking for it, and the imaginary action of taking the ring, which kept repeating itself like an inward tune, sank into a rejected idea. He satisfied his urgent longing by resolving to go below, and watch for the moment of Deronda's departure, when he would ask leave to join him in his walk and boldly carry out his meditated plan. He rose and stood looking out of the window, but all the while he saw what lay beyond him - the brief passage he would have to make to the door close by the table where the ring was. However he was resolved to go down; but - by no distinct change of resolution, rather by a dominance of desire, like the thirst of the drunkard - it so happened that in passing the table his fingers fell noiselessly on the ring, and he found himself in the passage with the ring in his hand. It followed that he put on his hat and quitted the

house. The possibility of again throwing himself on his children receded into the indefinite distance, and before he was out on the square his sense of haste had concentrated itself on selling the ring and getting on shipboard.

Deronda and Ezra were just aware of his exit; that was all. But, by-and-by, Mirah came in and made a real interruption. She had not taken off her hat; and when Deronda rose and advanced to shake hands with her, she said, in a confusion at once unaccountable and troublesome to herself -

'I only came in to see that Ezra had his new draught. I must go directly to Mrs. Meyrick's to fetch something.'

'Pray allow me to walk with you,' said Deronda urgently. 'I must not tire Ezra any further; besides my brains are melting. I want to go to Mrs. Meyrick's: may I go with you?'

'Oh, yes,' said Mirah, blushing still more, with the vague sense of something new in Deronda, and turning away to pour out Ezra's draught; Ezra meanwhile throwing back his head with his eyes shut, unable to get his mind away from the ideas that had been filling it while the reading was going on. Deronda for a moment stood thinking of nothing but the walk, till Mirah turned round again and brought the draught, when he suddenly remembered that he had laid aside his cravat, and saying - 'Pray excuse my dishabille - I did not mean you to see it,' he went to the little table, took up his cravat, and exclaimed with a violent impulse of surprise, 'Good heavens, where is my ring gone?' beginning to search about on the floor.

Ezra looked round the corner of his chair. Mirah, quick as thought, went to the spot where Deronda was seeking, and said, 'Did you lay it down?'

'Yes,' said Deronda, still unvisited by any other explanation than that the ring had fallen and was lurking in shadow, indiscernable on the variegated carpet. He was moving the bits of furniture near, and searching in all possible and impossible places with hand and eyes.

But another explanation had visited Mirah and taken the color from her cheeks. She went to Ezra's ear and whispered 'Was my father here?' He bent his head in reply, meeting her eyes with terrible understanding. She darted back to the spot where Deronda was still casting down his eyes in that hopeless exploration which are apt to carry on over a space we have examined in vain. 'You have not found it?' she said, hurriedly.

He, meeting her frightened gaze, immediately caught alarm from it and answered, 'I perhaps put it in my pocket,' professing to feel for it there.

She watched him and said, 'It is not there? - you put it on the table,' with a penetrating voice that would not let him feign to have found it in his pocket; and immediately she rushed out of the room. Deronda followed her - she was gone into the sitting-room below to look for her father - she opened the door of the bedroom to see if he were there - she looked where his hat usually hung - she turned with her hands clasped tight and her lips pale, gazing despairingly out of the window. Then she looked up at Deronda, who had not dared to speak to her in her white agitation. She looked up at him, unable to utter a word - the look seemed a tacit acceptance of the humiliation she felt in his presence. But he, taking her clasped hands between both his, said, in a tone of reverent adoration -

'Mirah, let me think that he is my father as well as yours - that we can have no sorrow, no disgrace, no joy apart. I will rather take your grief to be mine than I would take the brightest joy of another woman. Say you will not reject me - say you will take me to share all things with you. Say you will promise to be my wife - say it now. I have been in doubt so long - I have had to hide my love so long. Say that now and always I may prove to you that I love you with complete love.'

The change in Mirah had been gradual. She had not passed at once from anguish to the full, blessed consciousness that, in this moment of grief and shame, Deronda was giving her the highest tribute man can give to woman. With the first tones and the first words, she had only a sense of solemn comfort, referring this goodness of Deronda's to his feeling for Ezra. But by degrees the rapturous assurance of un hoped-for good took possession of her frame: her face glowed under Deronda's as he bent over her; yet she looked up still with intense gravity, as when she had first acknowledged with religious gratitude that he had thought her 'worthy of the best;' and when he had finished, she could say nothing - she could only lift up her lips to his and just kiss them, as if that were the simplest 'yes.' They stood then, only looking at each other, he holding her hands between his - too happy to move, meeting so fully in their new consciousness that all signs would have seemed to throw them farther apart, till Mirah said in a whisper: 'Let us go and comfort Ezra.'