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Chapter 10

Siegmund carried the boots and the shoes while they wandered over the sand to the rocks. There was a delightful sense of risk in scrambling with bare feet over the smooth irregular jumble of rocks. Helena laughed suddenly from fear as she felt herself slipping. Siegmund's heart was leaping like a child's with excitement as he stretched forward, himself very insecure, to succour her. Thus they travelled slowly. Often she called to him to come and look in the lovely little rock-pools, dusky with blossoms of red anemones and brown anemones that seemed nothing but shadows, and curtained with green of finest sea-silk. Siegmund loved to poke the white pebbles, and startle the little ghosts of crabs in a shadowy scuttle through the weed. He would tease the expectant anemones, causing them to close suddenly over his finger. But Helena liked to watch without touching things. Meanwhile the sun was slanting behind the cross far away to the west, and the light was swimming in silver and gold upon the lacquered water. At last Siegmund looked doubtfully at two miles more of glistening, gilded boulders. Helena was seated on a stone, dabbling her feet in a warm pool, delicately feeling the wet sea-velvet of the weeds.

'Don't you think we had better be mounting the cliffs?' he said.

She glanced up at him, smiling with irresponsible eyes. Then she lapped the water with her feet, and surveyed her pink toes. She was absurdly, childishly happy.

'Why should we?' she asked lightly.

He watched her. Her child-like indifference to consequences touched him with a sense of the distance between them. He himself might play with the delicious warm surface of life, but always he reeked of the relentless mass of cold beneath - the mass of life which has no sympathy with the individual, no cognizance of him.

She loved the trifles and the toys, the mystery and the magic of things. She would not own life to be relentless. It was either beautiful, fantastic, or weird, or inscrutable, or else mean and vulgar, below consideration. He had to get a sense of the anemone and a sympathetic knowledge of its experience, into his blood, before he was satisfied. To Helena an anemone was one more fantastic pretty figure in her kaleidoscope.

So she sat dabbling her pink feet in the water, quite unconscious of his gravity. He waited on her, since he never could capture her.

'Come,' he said very gently. 'You are only six years old today.'

She laughed as she let him take her. Then she nestled up to him, smiling in a brilliant, child-like fashion. He kissed her with all the father in him sadly alive.

'Now put your stockings on,' he said.

'But my feet are wet.' She laughed.

He kneeled down and dried her feet on his handkerchief while she sat tossing his hair with her finger-tips. The sunlight grew more and more golden.

'I envy the savages their free feet,' she said.

'There is no broken glass in the wilderness - or there used not to be,' he replied.

As they were crossing the sands, a whole family entered by the cliff track. They descended in single file, unequally, like the theatre; two boys, then a little girl, the father, another girl, then the mother. Last of all trotted the dog, warily, suspicious of the descent. The boys emerged into the bay with a shout; the dog rushed, barking, after them. The little one waited for her father, calling shrilly:

'Tiss can't fall now, can she, dadda? Shall I put her down?'

'Ay, let her have a run,' said the father.

Very carefully she lowered the kitten which she had carried clasped to her bosom. The mite was bewildered and scared. It turned round pathetically.

'Go on, Tissie; you're all right,' said the child. 'Go on; have a run on the sand.'

The kitten stood dubious and unhappy. Then, perceiving the dog some distance ahead, it scampered after him, a fluffy, scurrying mite. But the dog had already raced into the water. The kitten walked a few steps, turning its small face this way and that, and mewing piteously. It looked extraordinarily tiny as it stood, a fluffy handful, staring away from the noisy water, its thin cry floating over the splash of waves.

Helena glanced at Siegmund, and her eyes were shining with pity. He was watching the kitten and smiling.

'Crying because things are too big, and it can't take them in,' he said.

'But look how frightened it is,' she said.

'So am I.' He laughed. 'And if there are any gods looking on and laughing at me, at least they won't be kind enough to put me in their pinafores....'

She laughed very quickly.

'But why?' she exclaimed. 'Why should you want putting in a pinafore?'

'I don't,' he laughed.

On the top of the cliff they were between two bays, with darkening blue water on the left, and on the right gold water smoothing to the sun. Siegmund seemed to stand waist-deep in shadow, with his face bright and glowing. He was watching earnestly.

'I want to absorb it all,' he said.

When at last they turned away:

'Yes,' said Helena slowly: 'one can recall the details, but never the atmosphere.'

He pondered a moment.

'How strange!' he said. 'I can recall the atmosphere, but not the detail. It is a moment to me, not a piece of scenery. I should say the picture was in me, not out there.'

Without troubling to understand - she was inclined to think it verbiage - she made a small sound of assent.

'That is why you want to go again to a place, and I don't care so much, because I have it with me,' he concluded.

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