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Chapter 11

They decided to find their way through the lanes to Alum Bay, and then, keeping the cross in sight, to return over the downs, with the moon-path broad on the water before them. For the moon was rising late. Twilight, however, rose more rapidly than they had anticipated. The lane twisted among meadows and wild lands and copses - a wilful little lane, quite incomprehensible. So they lost their distant landmark, the white cross.

Darkness filtered through the daylight. When at last they came to a signpost, it was almost too dark to read it. The fingers seemed to withdraw into the dusk the more they looked.

'We must go to the left,' said Helena.

To the left rose the downs, smooth and grey near at hand, but higher black with gorse, like a giant lying asleep with a bearskin over his shoulders.

Several pale chalk-tracks ran side by side through the turf. Climbing, they came to a disused chalk-pit, which they circumvented. Having passed a lonely farmhouse, they mounted the side of the open down, where was a sense of space and freedom.

'We can steer by the night,' said Siegmund, as they trod upwards pathlessly. Helena did not mind whither they steered. All places in that large fair night were home and welcome to her. They drew nearer to the shaggy cloak of furze.

'There will be a path through it,' said Siegmund.

But when they arrived there was no path. They were confronted by a tall, impenetrable growth of gorse, taller than Siegmund.

'Stay here,' said he, 'while I look for a way through. I am afraid you will be tired.'

She stood alone by the walls of gorse. The lights that had flickered into being during the dusk grew stronger, so that a little farmhouse down the hill glowed with great importance on the night, while the far-off in visible sea became like a roadway, large and mysterious, its specks of light moving slowly, and its bigger lamps stationed out amid the darkness. Helena wanted the day-wanness to be quite wiped off the west. She asked for the full black night, that would obliterate everything save Siegmund. Siegmund it was that the whole world meant. The darkness, the gorse, the downs, the specks of light, seemed only to bespeak him. She waited for him to come back. She could hardly endure the condition of intense waiting.

He came, in his grey clothes almost invisible. But she felt him coming.

'No good,' he said, 'no vestige of a path. Not a rabbit-run.'

'Then we will sit down awhile,' said she calmly.

'Here on this mole-hill,' he quoted mockingly.

They sat down in a small gap in the gorse, where the turf was very soft, and where the darkness seemed deeper. The night was all fragrance, cool odour of darkness, keen, savoury scent of the downs, touched with honeysuckle and gorse and bracken scent.

Helena turned to him, leaning her hand on his thigh.

'What day is it, Siegmund?' she asked, in a joyous, wondering tone. He laughed, understanding, and kissed her.

'But really,' she insisted, 'I would not have believed the labels could have fallen off everything like this.'

He laughed again. She still leaned towards him, her weight on her hand, stopping the flow in the artery down his thigh.

'The days used to walk in procession like seven marionettes, each in order and costume, going endlessly round.' She laughed, amused at the idea.

'It is very strange,' she continued, 'to have the days and nights smeared into one piece, as if the clock-hand only went round once in a lifetime.'

'That is how it is,' he admitted, touched by her eloquence. 'You have torn the labels off things, and they all are so different. This morning! It does seem absurd to talk about this morning. Why should I be parcelled up into mornings and evenings and nights? I am not made up of sections of time. Now, nights and days go racing over us like cloud-shadows and sunshine over the sea, and all the time we take no notice.'

She put her arms round his neck. He was reminded by a sudden pain in his leg how much her hand had been pressing on him. He held his breath from pain. She was kissing him softly over the eyes. They lay cheek to cheek, looking at the stars. He felt a peculiar tingling sense of joy, a keenness of perception, a fine, delicate tingling as of music.

'You know,' he said, repeating himself, 'it is true. You seem to have knit all things in a piece for me. Things are not separate; they are all in a symphony. They go moving on and on. You are the motive in everything.'

Helena lay beside him, half upon him, sad with bliss.

'You must write a symphony of this - of us,' she said, prompted by a disciple's vanity.

'Some time,' he answered. 'Later, when I have time.'

'Later,' she murmured - 'later than what?'

'I don't know,' he replied. 'This is so bright we can't see beyond.' He turned his face to hers and through the darkness smiled into her eyes that were so close to his. Then he kissed her long and lovingly. He lay, with her head on his shoulder looking through her hair at the stars.

'I wonder how it is you have such a fine natural perfume,' he said, always in the same abstract, inquiring tone of happiness.

'Haven't all women?' she replied, and the peculiar penetrating twang of a brass reed was again in her voice.

'I don't know,' he said, quite untouched. 'But you are scented like nuts, new kernels of hazel-nuts, and a touch of opium....' He remained abstractedly breathing her with his open mouth, quite absorbed in her.

'You are so strange,' she murmured tenderly, hardly able to control her voice to speak.

'I believe,' he said slowly, 'I can see the stars moving through your hair. No, keep still, you can't see them.' Helena lay obediently very still. 'I thought I could watch them travelling, crawling like gold flies on the ceiling,' he continued in a slow sing-song. 'But now you make your hair tremble, and the stars rush about.' Then, as a new thought struck him: 'Have you noticed that you can't recognize the constellations lying back like this. I can't see one. Where is the north, even?'

She laughed at the idea of his questioning her concerning these things. She refused to learn the names of the stars or of the constellations, as of the wayside plants. 'Why should I want to label them?' she would say. 'I prefer to look at them, not to hide them under a name.' So she laughed when he asked her to find Vega or Arcturus.

'How full the sky is!' Siegmund dreamed on - 'like a crowded street. Down here it is vastly lonely in comparison. We've found a place far quieter and more private than the stars, Helena. Isn't it fine to be up here, with the sky for nearest neighbour?'

'I did well to ask you to come?' she inquired wistfully. He turned to her.

'As wise as God for the minute,' he replied softly. 'I think a few furtive angels brought us here - smuggled us in.'

'And you are glad?' she asked. He laughed.

'Carpe diem,' he said. 'We have plucked a beauty, my dear. With this rose in my coat I dare go to hell or anywhere.'

'Why hell, Siegmund?' she asked in displeasure.

'I suppose it is the postero. In everything else I'm a failure, Helena. But,' he laughed, 'this day of ours is a rose not many men have plucked.'

She kissed him passionately, beginning to cry in a quick, noiseless fashion.

'What does it matter, Helena?' he murmured. 'What does it matter? We are here yet.'

The quiet tone of Siegmund moved her with a vivid passion of grief. She felt she should lose him. Claspng him very closely, she burst into uncontrollable sobbing. He did not understand, but he did not interrupt her. He merely held her very close, while he looked through her shaking hair at the motionless stars. He bent his head to hers, he sought her face with his lips, heavy with pity. She grew a little quieter. He felt his cheek all wet with her tears, and, between his cheek and hers, the ravelled roughness of her wet hair that chafed and made his face burn.

'What is it, Helena?' he asked at last. 'Why should you cry?'

She pressed her face in his breast, and said in a muffled, unrecognizable voice:

'You won't leave me, will you, Siegmund?'

'How could I? How should I?' he murmured soothingly. She lifted her face suddenly and pressed on him a fierce kiss.

'How could I leave you?' he repeated, and she heard his voice waking, the grip coming into his arms, and she was glad.

An intense silence came over everything. Helena almost expected to hear the stars moving, everything below was so still. She had no idea what Siegmund was thinking. He lay with his arms strong around her. Then she heard the beating of his heart, like the muffled sound of salutes, she thought. It gave her the same thrill of dread and excitement, mingled with a sense of triumph. Siegmund had changed again, his mood was gone, so that he was no longer wandering in a night of thoughts, but had become different, incomprehensible to her. She had no idea what she thought or felt. All she knew was that he was strong, and was knocking urgently with his heart on her breast, like a man who wanted something and who dreaded to be sent away. How he came to be so concentratedly urgent she could not understand. It seemed an unreasonable, incomprehensible obsession to her. Yet she was glad, and she smiled in her heart, feeling triumphant and restored. Yet again, dimly, she wondered where was the Siegmund of ten minutes ago, and her heart lifted slightly with yearning, to sink with a dismay. This Siegmund was so incomprehensible. Then again, when he raised his head and found her mouth, his lips filled her with a hot flush like wine, a sweet, flaming flush of her whole body, most exquisite, as if she were nothing but a soft rosy flame of fire against him for a moment or two. That, she decided, was supreme, transcendental.

The lights of the little farmhouse below had vanished, the yellow specks of ships were gone. Only the pier-light, far away, shone in the black sea like the broken piece of a star. Overhead was a silver-greyness of stars; below was the velvet blackness of the night and the sea. Helena found herself glimmering with fragments of poetry, as she saw the sea, when she looked very closely, glimmered dustily with a reflection of stars.

„Tiefe Stille herrscht im Wasser
Ohne Regung ruht das Meer ...“

She was fond of what scraps of German verse she knew. With French verse she had no sympathy; but Goethe and Heine and Uhland seemed to speak her language.

„Die Luft ist kühl, und es dunkelt,
Und ruhig fließt der Rhein.“

She liked Heine best of all:

„Wie Träume der Kindheit seh' ich es flimmern
Auf deinem wogenden Wellengebiet,
Und alte Erinnerung erzählt mir auf's Neue
Von all dem lieben herrlichen Spielzeug,
Von all den blinkenden Weihnachtsgaben....“

As she lay in Siegmund's arms again, and he was very still, dreaming she knew not what, fragments such as these flickered and were gone, like the gleam of a falling star over water. The night moved on imperceptibly across the sky. Unlike the day, it made no sound and gave no sign, but passed unseen, unfelt, over them. Till the moon was ready to step forth. Then the eastern sky blenched, and there was a small gathering of clouds round the opening gates:

„Aus alten Märchen winket es
Hervor mit weisser Hand,
Da singt es und da klingt es
Von einem Zauberland.“

Helena sang this to herself as the moon lifted herself slowly among the clouds. She found herself repeating them aloud in a forgetful singsong, as children do.

'What is it?' said Siegmund. They were both of them sunk in their own stillness, therefore it was a moment or two before she repeated her singsong, in a little louder tone. He did not listen to her, having forgotten that he had asked her a question.

'Turn your head,' she told him, when she had finished the verse, 'and look at the moon.'

He pressed back his head, so that there was a gleaming pallor on his chin and his forehead and deep black shadow over his eyes and his nostrils. This thrilled Helena with a sense of mystery and magic.

„Die grossen Blumen schmachten,“ she said to herself, curiously awake and joyous. 'The big flowers open with black petals and silvery ones, Siegmund. You are the big flowers, Siegmund; yours is the bridegroom face, Siegmund, like a black and glistening flesh-petalled flower, Siegmund, and it blooms in the Zauberland, Siegmund - this is the magic land.'

Between the phrases of this whispered ecstasy she kissed him swiftly on the throat, in the shadow, and on his faintly gleaming cheeks. He lay still, his heart beating heavily; he was almost afraid of the strange ecstasy she concentrated on him. Meanwhile she whispered over him sharp, breathless phrases in German and English, touching him with her mouth and her cheeks and her forehead.

„Und Liebesweisen tönen“ - not tonight, Siegmund. They are all still - the gorse and the stars and the sea and the trees, are all kissing, Siegmund. The sea has its mouth on the earth, and the gorse and the trees press together, and they all look up at the moon, they put up their faces in a kiss, my darling. But they haven't you - and it all centres in you, my dear, all the wonder-love is in you, more than in them all Siegmund - Siegmund!

He felt the tears falling on him as he lay with heart beating in slow heavy drops under the ecstasy of her love. Then she sank down and lay prone on him, spent, clinging to him, lifted up and down by the beautiful strong motion of his breathing. Rocked thus on his strength, she swooned lightly into unconsciousness.

When she came to herself she sighed deeply. She woke to the exquisite heaving of his life beneath her.

'I have been beyond life. I have been a little way into death!' she said to her soul, with wide-eyed delight. She lay dazed, wondering upon it. That she should come back into a marvellous, peaceful happiness astonished her.

Suddenly she became aware that she must be slowly weighing down the life of Siegmund. There was a long space between the lift of one breath and the next. Her heart melted with sorrowful pity. Resting herself on her hands, she kissed him - a long, anguished kiss, as if she would fuse her soul into his for ever. Then she rose, sighing, sighing again deeply. She put up her hands to her head and looked at the moon. 'No more,' said her heart, almost as if it sighed too - 'no more!'

She looked down at Siegmund. He was drawing in great heavy breaths. He lay still on his back, gazing up at her, and she stood motionless at his side, looking down at him. He felt stunned, half-conscious. Yet as he lay helplessly looking up at her some other consciousness inside him murmured; 'Hawwa - Eve - Mother!' She stood compassionate over him. Without touching him she seemed to be yearning over him like a mother. Her compassion, her benignity, seemed so different from his little Helena. This woman, tall and pale, drooping with the strength of her compassion, seemed stable, immortal, not a fragile human being, but a personification of the great motherhood of women.

'I am her child, too,' he dreamed, as a child murmurs unconscious in sleep. He had never felt her eyes so much as now, in the darkness, when he looked only into deep shadow. She had never before so entered and gathered his plaintive masculine soul to the bosom of her nurture.

'Come,' she said gently, when she knew he was restored. 'Shall we go?'

He rose, with difficulty gathering his strength.