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Chapter 17

Towards morning, Siegmund went to sleep. For four hours, until seven o'clock, the womb of sleep received him and nourished him again.

'But it is finest of all to wake,' he said, as the bright sunshine of the window, and the luminous green sunshine coming through the lifted hands of the leaves, challenged him into the open.

The morning was exceedingly fair, and it looked at him so gently that his blue eyes trembled with self-pity. A fragment of scarlet geranium glanced up at him as he passed, so that amid the vermilion tyranny of the uniform it wore he could see the eyes of the flower, wistful, offering him love, as one sometimes sees the eyes of a man beneath the brass helmet of a soldier, and is startled. Everything looked at him with the same eyes of tenderness, offering him, timidly, a little love.

'They are all extraordinarily sweet,' said Siegmund to the full-mouthed scabious and the awkward, downcast ragwort. Three or four butterflies fluttered up and down in agitated little leaps, around him. Instinctively Siegmund put his hand forward to touch them.

'The careless little beggars!' he said.

When he came to the cliff tops there was the morning, very bravely dressed, rustling forward with a silken sound and much silken shining to meet him. The battleships had gone; the sea was blue with a panier of diamonds; the sky was full with a misty tenderness like love. Siegmund had never recognized before the affection that existed between him and everything. We do not realize how tremendously dear and indispensable to us are the hosts of common things, till we must leave them, and we break our hearts.

'We have been very happy together,' everything seemed to say.

Siegmund looked up into the eyes of the morning with a laugh.

'It is very lovely,' he said, 'whatever happens.'

So he went down to the beach; his dark blue eyes, darker from last night's experience, smiled always with the pride of love. He undressed by his usual altar-stone.

'How closely familiar everything is,' he thought. 'It seems almost as if the curves of this stone were rounded to fit in my soul.'

He touched the smooth white slope of the stone gently with discovering fingers, in the same way as he touched the cheek of Helena, or of his own babies. He found great pleasure in this feeling of intimacy with things. A very soft wind, shy as a girl, put his arms round him, and seemed to lay its cheek against his chest. He placed his hands beneath his arms, where the wind was caressing him, and his eyes opened with wondering pleasure.

'They find no fault with me,' he said. 'I suppose they are as fallible as I, and so don't judge,' he added, as he waded thigh-deep into the water, thrusting it to hear the mock-angry remonstrance.

'Once more,' he said, and he took the sea in his arms. He swam very quietly. The water buoyed him up, holding him closely clasped. He swam towards the white rocks of the headlands; they rose before him like beautiful buttressed gates, so glistening that he half expected to see fantail pigeons puffing like white irises in the niches, and white peacocks with dark green feet stepping down the terraces, trailing a sheen of silver.

'Helena is right,' he said to himself as he swam, scarcely swimming, but moving upon the bosom of the tide; 'she is right, it is all enchanted. I have got into her magic at last. Let us see what it is like.'

He determined to visit again his little bay. He swam carefully round the terraces, whose pale shadows through the swift-spinning emerald facets of the water seemed merest fancy. Siegmund touched them with his foot; they were hard, cold, dangerous. He swam carefully. As he made for the archway, the shadows of the headland chilled the water. There under water, clamouring in a throng at the base of the submerged walls, were sea-women with dark locks, and young sea-girls, with soft hair, vividly green, striving to climb up out of the darkness into the morning, their hair swirling in abandon. Siegmund was half afraid of their frantic efforts.

But the tide carried him swiftly through the high gate into the porch. There was exultance in this sweeping entry. The skin-white, full-fleshed walls of the archway were dappled with green lights that danced in and out among themselves. Siegmund was carried along in an invisible chariot, beneath the jewel-stained walls. The tide swerved, threw him as he swam against the inward-curving white rock; his elbow met the rock, and he was sick with pain. He held his breath, trying to get back the joy and magic. He could not believe that the lovely, smooth side of the rock, fair as his own side with its ripple of muscles, could have hurt him thus. He let the water carry him till he might climb out on to the shingle. There he sat upon a warm boulder, and twisted to look at his arm. The skin was grazed, not very badly, merely a ragged scarlet patch no bigger than a carnation petal. The bruise, however, was painful, especially when, a minute or two later, he bent his arm.

'No,' said he pitifully to himself, 'it is impossible it should have hurt me. I suppose I was careless.'

Nevertheless, the aspect of the morning changed. He sat on the boulder looking out on the sea. The azure sky and the sea laughed on, holding a bright conversation one with another. The two headlands of the tiny bay gossiped across the street of water. All the boulders and pebbles of the sea-shore played together.

'Surely,' said Siegmund, 'they take no notice of me; they do not care a jot or a tittle for me. I am a fool to think myself one with them.'

He contrasted this with the kindness of the morning as he had stood on the cliffs.

'I was mistaken,' he said. 'It was an illusion.'

He looked wistfully out again. Like neighbours leaning from opposite windows of an overhanging street, the headlands were occupied one with another. White rocks strayed out to sea, followed closely by other white rocks. Everything was busy, interested, occupied with its own pursuit and with its own comrades. Siegmund alone was without pursuit or comrade.

'They will all go on the same; they will be just as gay. Even Helena, after a while, will laugh and take interest in others. What do I matter?'

Siegmund thought of the futility of death:

We are not long for music and laughter,
Love and desire and hate;
I think we have no portion in them after
We pass the gate.

'Why should I be turned out of the game?' he asked himself, rebelling. He frowned, and answered: 'Oh, Lord! - the old argument!'

But the thought of his own expunging from the picture was very bitter.

'Like the puff from the steamer's funnel, I should be gone.'

He looked at himself, at his limbs and his body in the pride of his maturity. He was very beautiful to himself.

'Nothing, in the place where I am,' he said. 'Gone, like a puff of steam that melts on the sunshine.'

Again Siegmund looked at the sea. It was glittering with laughter as at a joke.

'And I,' he said, lying down in the warm sand, 'I am nothing. I do not count; I am inconsiderable.'

He set his teeth with pain. There were no tears, there was no relief. A convulsive gasping shook him as he lay on the sands. All the while he was arguing with himself.

'Well,' he said, 'if I am nothing dead I am nothing alive.'

But the vulgar proverb arose - 'Better a live dog than a dead lion,' to answer him. It seemed an ignominy to be dead. It meant, to be overlooked, even by the smallest creature of God's earth. Surely that was a great ignominy.

Helena, meanwhile, was bathing, for the last time, by the same sea-shore with him. She was no swimmer. Her endless delight was to explore, to discover small treasures. For her the world was still a great wonder-box which hid innumerable sweet toys for surprises in all its crevices. She had bathed in many rock-pools' tepid baths, trying first one, then another. She had lain on the sand where the cold arms of the ocean lifted her and smothered her impetuously, like an awful lover.

'The sea is a great deal like Siegmund,' she said, as she rose panting, trying to dash her nostrils free from water. It was true; the sea as it flung over her filled her with the same uncontrollable terror as did Siegmund when he sometimes grew silent and strange in a tide of passion.

She wandered back to her rock-pools; they were bright and docile; they did not fling her about in a game of terror. She bent over watching the anemone's fleshy petals shrink from the touch of her shadow, and she laughed to think they should be so needlessly fearful. The flowing tide trickled noiselessly among the rocks, widening and deepening insidiously her little pools. Helena retreated towards a large cave round the bend. There the water gurgled under the bladder-wrack of the large stones; the air was cool and clammy. She pursued her way into the gloom, bending, though there was no need, shivering at the coarse feel of the seaweed beneath her naked feet. The water came rustling up beneath the fucus as she crept along on the big stones; it returned with a quiet gurgle which made her shudder, though even that was not disagreeable. It needed, for all that, more courage than was easy to summon before she could step off her stone into the black pool that confronted her. It was festooned thick with weeds that slid under her feet like snakes. She scrambled hastily upwards towards the outlet.

Turning, the ragged arch was before her, brighter than the brightest window. It was easy to believe the light-fairies stood outside in a throng, excited with fine fear, throwing handfuls of light into the dragon's hole.

'How surprised they will be to see me!' said Helena, scrambling forward, laughing.

She stood still in the archway, astounded. The sea was blazing with white fire, and glowing with azure as coals glow red with heat below the flames. The sea was transfused with white burning, while over it hung the blue sky in a glory, like the blue smoke of the fire of God. Helena stood still and worshipped. It was a moment of astonishment, when she stood breathless and blinded, involuntarily offering herself for a thank-offering. She felt herself confronting God at home in His white incandescence, His fire settling on her like the Holy Spirit. Her lips were parted in a woman's joy of adoration.

The moment passed, and her thoughts hurried forward in confusion.

'It is good,' said Helena; 'it is very good.' She looked again, and saw the waves like a line of children racing hand in hand, the sunlight pursuing, catching hold of them from behind, as they ran wildly till they fell, caught, with the sunshine dancing upon them like a white dog.

'It is really wonderful here!' said she; but the moment had gone, she could not see again the grand burning of God among the waves. After a while she turned away.

As she stood dabbling her bathing-dress in a pool, Siegmund came over the beach to her.

'You are not gone, then?' he said.

'Siegmund!' she exclaimed, looking up at him with radiant eyes, as if it could not be possible that he had joined her in this rare place. His face was glowing with the sun's inflaming, but Helena did not notice that his eyes were full of misery.

'I, actually,' he said, smiling.

'I did not expect you,' she said, still looking at him in radiant wonder. 'I could easier have expected' - she hesitated, struggled, and continued - 'Eros walking by the sea. But you are like him,' she said, looking radiantly up into Siegmund's face. 'Isn't it beautiful this morning?' she added.

Siegmund endured her wide, glad look for a moment, then he stooped and kissed her. He remained moving his hand in the pool, ashamed, and full of contradiction. He was at the bitter point of farewell; could see, beyond the glamour around him, the ugly building of his real life.

'Isn't the sea wonderful this morning?' asked Helena, as she wrung the water from her costume.

'It is very fine,' he answered. He refrained from saying what his heart said: 'It is my last morning; it is not yours. It is my last morning, and the sea is enjoying the joke, and you are full of delight.'

'Yes,' said Siegmund, 'the morning is perfect.'

'It is,' assented Helena warmly. 'Have you noticed the waves? They are like a line of children chased by a white dog.'

'Ay!' said Siegmund.

'Didn't you have a good time?' she asked, touching with her finger-tips the nape of his neck as he stooped beside her.

'I swam to my little bay again,' he replied.

'Did you?' she exclaimed, pleased.

She sat down by the pool, in which she washed her feet free from sand, holding them to Siegmund to dry.

'I am very hungry,' she said.

'And I,' he agreed.

'I feel quite established here,' she said gaily, something in his position having reminded her of their departure.

He laughed.

'It seems another eternity before the three-forty-five train, doesn't it?' she insisted.

'I wish we might never go back,' he said.

Helena sighed.

'It would be too much for life to give. We have had something, Siegmund,' she said.

He bowed his head, and did not answer.

'It has been something, dear,' she repeated.

He rose and took her in his arms.

'Everything,' he said, his face muffled in the shoulder of her dress. He could smell her fresh and fine from the sea. 'Everything!' he said.

She pressed her two hands on his head.

'I did well, didn't I, Siegmund?' she asked. Helena felt the responsibility of this holiday. She had proposed it; when he had withdrawn, she had insisted, refusing to allow him to take back his word, declaring that she should pay the cost. He permitted her at last.

'Wonderfully well, Helena,' he replied.

She kissed his forehead.

'You are everything,' he said.

She pressed his head on her bosom.