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Chapter 19

The air was warm and sweet in the little lane, remote from the sea, which led them along their last walk. On either side the white path was a grassy margin thickly woven with pink convolvuli. Some of the reckless little flowers, so gay and evanescent, had climbed the trunks of an old yew tree, and were looking up pertly at their rough host.

Helena walked along, watching the flowers, and making fancies out of them.

'Who called them "fairies' telephones"?' she said to herself. 'They are tiny children in pinafores. How gay they are! They are children dawdling along the pavement of a morning. How fortunate they are! See how they take a wind-thrill! See how wide they are set to the sunshine! And when they are tired, they will curl daintily to sleep, and some fairies in the dark will gather them away. They won't be here in the morning, shrivelled and dowdy ... If only we could curl up and be gone, after our day....'

She looked at Siegmund. He was walking moodily beside her.

'It is good when life holds no anti-climax,' she said.

'Ay!' he answered. Of course, he could not understand her meaning.

She strayed into the thick grass, a sturdy white figure that walked with bent head, abstract, but happy.

'What is she thinking?' he asked himself. 'She is sufficient to herself - she doesn't want me. She has her own private way of communing with things, and is friends with them.'

'The dew has been very heavy,' she said, turning, and looking up at him from under her brows, like a smiling witch.

'I see it has,' he answered. Then to himself he said: 'She can't translate herself into language. She is incommunicable; she can't render herself to the intelligence. So she is alone and a law unto herself: she only wants me to explore me, like a rock-pool, and to bathe in me. After a while, when I am gone, she will see I was not indispensable....'

The lane led up to the eastern down. As they were emerging, they saw on the left hand an extraordinarily spick and span red bungalow. The low roof of dusky red sloped down towards the coolest green lawn, that was edged and ornamented with scarlet, and yellow, and white flowers brilliant with dew.

A stout man in an alpaca jacket and panama hat was seated on the bare lawn, his back to the sun, reading a newspaper. He tried in vain to avoid the glare of the sun on his reading. At last he closed the paper and looked angrily at the house - not at anything in particular.

He irritably read a few more lines, then jerked up his head in sudden decision, glared at the open door of the house, and called:

'Amy! Amy!'

No answer was forthcoming. He flung down the paper and strode off indoors, his mien one of wrathful resolution. His voice was heard calling curtly from the dining-room. There was a jingle of crockery as he bumped the table leg in sitting down.

'He is in a bad temper,' laughed Siegmund.

'Breakfast is late,' said Helena with contempt.

'Look!' said Siegmund.

An elderly lady in black and white striped linen, a young lady in holland, both carrying some wild flowers, hastened towards the garden gate. Their faces were turned anxiously to the house. They were hot with hurrying, and had no breath for words. The girl pressed forward, opened the gate for the lady in striped linen, who hastened over the lawn. Then the daughter followed, and vanished also under the shady veranda.

There was a quick sound of women's low, apologetic voices, overridden by the resentful abuse of the man.

The lovers moved out of hearing.

'Imagine that breakfast-table!' said Siegmund.

'I feel,' said Helena, with a keen twang of contempt in her voice, 'as if a fussy cock and hens had just scuffled across my path.'

'There are many such roosts,' said Siegmund pertinently.

Helena's cold scorn was very disagreeable to him. She talked to him winsomely and very kindly as they crossed the open down to meet the next incurving of the coast, and Siegmund was happy. But the sense of humiliation, which he had got from her the day before, and which had fixed itself, bled him secretly, like a wound. This haemorrhage of self-esteem tortured him to the end.

Helena had rejected him. She gave herself to her fancies only. For some time she had confused Siegmund with her god. Yesterday she had cried to her ideal lover, and found only Siegmund. It was the spear in the side of his tortured self-respect.

'At least,' he said, in mortification of himself - 'at least, someone must recognize a strain of God in me - and who does? I don't believe in it myself.'

And, moreover, in the intense joy and suffering of his realized passion, the island, with its sea and sky, had fused till, like a brilliant bead, all their beauty ran together out of the common ore, and Siegmund saw it naked, saw the beauty of everything naked in the shifting magic of this bead. The island would be gone tomorrow: he would look for the beauty and find the dirt. What was he to do?

'You know, Domine,' said Helena - it was his old nickname she used - 'you look quite stern today.'

'I feel anything but stern,' he laughed. 'Weaker than usual, in fact.'

'Yes, perhaps so, when you talk. Then you are really surprisingly gentle. But when you are silent, I am even afraid of you - you seem so grave.'

He laughed.

'And shall I not be brave?' he said. 'Can't you smell _Fumum et opes strepitumque Romae_?' He turned quickly to Helena. 'I wonder if that's right,' he said. 'It's years since I did a line of Latin, and I thought it had all gone.'

'In the first place, what does it mean?' said Helena calmly, 'for I can only half translate. I have thrown overboard all my scrap-books of such stuff.'

'Why,' said Siegmund, rather abashed, 'only "the row and the smoke of Rome". But it is remarkable, Helena' - here the peculiar look of interest came on his face again - 'it is really remarkable that I should have said that.'

'Yes, you look surprised,' smiled she.

'But it must be twenty' - he counted - 'twenty-two or three years since I learned that, and I forgot it - goodness knows how long ago. Like a drowning man, I have these memories before....' He broke off, smiling mockingly, to tease her.

'Before you go back to London,' said she, in a matter-of-fact, almost ironical tone. She was inscrutable. This morning she could not bear to let any deep emotion come uppermost. She wanted rest. 'No,' she said, with calm distinctness, a few moments after, when they were climbing the rise to the cliff's edge. 'I can't say that I smell the smoke of London. The mist-curtain is thick yet. There it is' - she pointed to the heavy, purple-grey haze that hung like arras on a wall, between the sloping sky and the sea. She thought of yesterday morning's mist-curtain, thick and blazing gold, so heavy that no wind could sway its fringe.

They lay down in the dry grass, upon the gold bits of bird's-foot trefoil of the cliff's edge, and looked out to sea. A warm, drowsy calm drooped over everything.

'Six hours,' thought Helena, 'and we shall have passed the mist-curtain. Already it is thinning. I could break it open with waving my hand. I will not wave my hand.'

She was exhausted by the suffering of the last night, so she refused to allow any emotion to move her this morning, till she was strong. Siegmund was also exhausted; but his thoughts laboured like ants, in spite of himself, striving towards a conclusion.

Helena had rejected him. In his heart he felt that in this love affair also he had been a failure. No matter how he contradicted himself, and said it was absurd to imagine he was a failure as Helena's lover, yet he felt a physical sensation of defeat, a kind of knot in his breast which neither reason, nor dialectics, nor circumstance, not even Helena, could untie. He had failed as lover to Helena.

It was not surprising his marriage with Beatrice should prove disastrous. Rushing into wedlock as he had done, at the ripe age of seventeen, he had known nothing of his woman, nor she of him. When his mind and soul set to develop, as Beatrice could not sympathize with his interests, he naturally inclined away from her, so that now, after twenty years, he was almost a stranger to her. That was not very surprising.

But why should he have failed with Helena?

The bees droned fitfully over the scented grass, aimlessly swinging in the heat. Siegmund watched one gold and amber fellow lazily let go a white clover-head, and boom in a careless curve out to sea, humming softer and softer as he reeled along in the giddy space.

'The little fool!' said Siegmund, watching the black dot swallowed into the light.

No ship sailed the curving sea. The light danced in a whirl upon the ripples. Everything else watched with heavy eyes of heat enhancement the wild spinning of the lights.

'Even if I were free,' he continued to think, 'we should only grow apart, Helena and I. She would leave me. This time I should be the laggard. She is young and vigorous; I am beginning to set.'

'Is that why I have failed? I ought to have had her in love sufficiently to keep her these few days. I am not quick. I do not follow her or understand her swiftly enough. And I am always timid of compulsion. I cannot compel anybody to follow me.'

'So we are here. I am out of my depth. Like the bee, I was mad with the sight of so much joy, such a blue space, and now I shall find no footing to alight on. I have flown out into life beyond my strength to get back. When can I set my feet on when this is gone?'

The sun grew stronger. Slower and more slowly went the hawks of Siegmund's mind, after the quarry of conclusion. He lay bare-headed, looking out to sea. The sun was burning deeper into his face and head.

'I feel as if it were burning into me,' thought Siegmund abstractedly. 'It is certainly consuming some part of me. Perhaps it is making me ill.' Meanwhile, perversely, he gave his face and his hot black hair to the sun.

Helena lay in what shadow he afforded. The heat put out all her thought-activity. Presently she said:

'This heat is terrible, Siegmund. Shall we go down to the water?'

They climbed giddily down the cliff path. Already they were somewhat sun-intoxicated. Siegmund chose the hot sand, where no shade was, on which to lie.

'Shall we not go under the rocks?' said Helena.

'Look!' he said, 'the sun is beating on the cliffs. It is hotter, more suffocating, there.'

So they lay down in the glare, Helena watching the foam retreat slowly with a cool splash; Siegmund thinking. The naked body of heat was dreadful.

'My arms, Siegmund,' said she. 'They feel as if they were dipped in fire.'

Siegmund took them, without a word, and hid them under his coat.

'Are you sure it is not bad for you - your head, Siegmund? Are you sure?'

He laughed stupidly.

'That is all right,' he said. He knew that the sun was burning through him, and doing him harm, but he wanted the intoxication.

As he looked wistfully far away over the sea at Helena's mist-curtain, he said:

'I think we should be able to keep together if' - he faltered - 'if only I could have you a little longer. I have never had you ...'

Some sound of failure, some tone telling her it was too late, some ring of despair in his quietness, made Helena cling to him wildly, with a savage little cry as if she were wounded. She clung to him, almost beside herself. She could not lose him, she could not spare him. She would not let him go. Helena was, for the moment, frantic.

He held her safely, saying nothing until she was calmer, when, with his lips on her cheek, he murmured:

'I should be able, shouldn't I, Helena?'

'You are always able!' she cried. 'It is I who play with you at hiding.'

'I have really had you so little,' he said.

'Can't you forget it, Siegmund?' she cried. 'Can't you forget it? It was only a shadow, Siegmund. It was a lie, it was nothing real. Can't you forget it, dear?'

'You can't do without me?' he asked.

'If I lose you I am lost,' answered she with swift decision. She had no knowledge of weeping, yet her tears were wet on his face. He held her safely; her arms were hidden under his coat.

'I will have no mercy on those shadows the next time they come between us,' said Helena to herself. 'They may go back to hell.'

She still clung to him, craving so to have him that he could not be reft away.

Siegmund felt very peaceful. He lay with his arms about her, listening to the backward-creeping tide. All his thoughts, like bees, were flown out to sea and lost.

'If I had her more, I should understand her through and through. If we were side by side we should grow together. If we could stay here, I should get stronger and more upright.'

This was the poor heron of quarry the hawks of his mind had struck.

Another hour fell like a foxglove bell from the stalk. There were only two red blossoms left. Then the stem would have set to seed. Helena leaned her head upon the breast of Siegmund, her arms clasping, under his coat, his body, which swelled and sank gently, with the quiet of great power.

'If,' thought she, 'the whole clock of the world could stand still now, and leave us thus, me with the lift and fall of the strong body of Siegmund in my arms....'

But the clock ticked on in the heat, the seconds marked off by the falling of the waves, repeated so lightly, and in such fragile rhythm, that it made silence sweet.

'If now,' prayed Siegmund, 'death would wipe the sweat from me, and it were dark....'

But the waves softly marked the minutes, retreating farther, leaving the bare rocks to bleach and the weed to shrivel.

Gradually, like the shadow on a dial, the knowledge that it was time to rise and go crept upon them. Although they remained silent, each knew that the other felt the same weight of responsibility, the shadow-finger of the sundial travelling over them. The alternative was, not to return, to let the finger travel and be gone. But then ... Helena knew she must not let the time cross her; she must rise before it was too late, and travel before the coming finger. Siegmund hoped she would not get up. He lay in suspense, waiting.

At last she sat up abruptly.

'It is time, Siegmund,' she said.

He did not answer, he did not look at her, but lay as she had left him. She wiped her face with her handkerchief, waiting. Then she bent over him. He did not look at her. She saw his forehead was swollen and inflamed with the sun. Very gently she wiped from it the glistening sweat. He closed his eyes, and she wiped his cheeks and his mouth. Still he did not look at her. She bent very close to him, feeling her heart crushed with grief for him.

'We must go, Siegmund,' she whispered.

'All right,' he said, but still he did not move.

She stood up beside him, shook herself, and tried to get a breath of air. She was dazzled blind by the sunshine.

Siegmund lay in the bright light, with his eyes closed, never moving. His face was inflamed, but fixed like a mask.

Helena waited, until the terror of the passing of the hour was too strong for her. She lifted his hand, which lay swollen with heat on the sand, and she tried gently to draw him.

'We shall be too late,' she said in distress.

He sighed and sat up, looking out over the water.

Helena could not bear to see him look so vacant and expressionless. She put her arm round his neck, and pressed his head against her skirt.

Siegmund knew he was making it unbearable for her. Pulling himself together, he bent his head from the sea, and said:

'Why, what time is it?'

He took out his watch, holding it in his hand. Helena still held his left hand, and had one arm round his neck.

'I can't see the figures,' he said. 'Everything is dimmed, as if it were coming dark.'

'Yes,' replied Helena, in that reedy, painful tone of hers. 'My eyes were the same. It is the strong sunlight.'

'I can't,' he repeated, and he was rather surprised - 'I can't see the time. Can you?'

She stooped down and looked.

'It is half past one,' she said.

Siegmund hated her voice as she spoke. There was still sufficient time to catch the train. He stood up, moved inside his clothing, saying: 'I feel almost stunned by the heat. I can hardly see, and all my feeling in my body is dulled.'

'Yes,' answered Helena, 'I am afraid it will do you harm.'

'At any rate,' he smiled as if sleepily, 'I have had enough. If it's too much - what is too much?'

They went unevenly over the sand, their eyes sun-dimmed.

'We are going back - we are going back!' the heart of Helena seemed to run hot, beating these words.

They climbed the cliff path toilsomely. Standing at the top, on the edge of the grass, they looked down the cliffs at the beach and over the sea. The strand was wide, forsaken by the sea, forlorn with rocks bleaching in the sun, and sand and seaweed breathing off their painful scent upon the heat. The sea crept smaller, farther away; the sky stood still. Siegmund and Helena looked hopelessly out on their beautiful, incandescent world. They looked hopelessly at each other, Siegmund's mood was gentle and forbearing. He smiled faintly at Helena, then turned, and, lifting his hand to his mouth in a kiss for the beauty he had enjoyed, 'Addio!' he said.

He turned away, and, looking from Helena landwards, he said, smiling peculiarly:

'It reminds me of Traviata - an "Addio" at every verse-end.'

She smiled with her mouth in acknowledgement of his facetious irony; it jarred on her. He was pricked again by her supercilious reserve. 'Addi-i-i-o, Addi-i-i-o!' he whistled between his teeth, hissing out the Italian's passion-notes in a way that made Helena clench her fists.

'I suppose,' she said, swallowing, and recovering her voice to check this discord - 'I suppose we shall have a fairly easy journey - Thursday.'

'I don't know,' said Siegmund.

'There will not be very many people,' she insisted.

'I think,' he said, in a very quiet voice, 'you'd better let me go by the South-Western from Portsmouth while you go on by the Brighton.'

'But why?' she exclaimed in astonishment.

'I don't want to sit looking at you all the way,' he said.

'But why should you?' she exclaimed.

He laughed.

'Indeed, no!' she said. 'We shall go together.'

'Very well,' he answered.

They walked on in silence towards the village. As they drew near the little post office, he said:

'I suppose I may as well wire them that I shall be home tonight.'

'You haven't sent them any word?' she asked.

He laughed. They came to the open door of the little shop. He stood still, not entering. Helena wondered what he was thinking.

'Shall I?' he asked, meaning, should he wire to Beatrice. His manner was rather peculiar.

'Well, I should think so,' faltered Helena, turning away to look at the postcards in the window. Siegmund entered the shop. It was dark and cumbered with views, cheap china ornaments, and toys. He asked for a telegraph form.

'My God!' he said to himself bitterly as he took the pencil. He could not sign the abbreviated name his wife used towards him. He scribbled his surname, as he would have done to a stranger. As he watched the amiable, stout woman counting up his words carefully, pointing with her finger, he felt sick with irony.

'That's right,' she said, picking up the sixpence and taking the form to the instrument. 'What beautiful weather!' she continued. 'It will be making you sorry to leave us.'

'There goes my warrant,' thought Siegmund, watching the flimsy bit of paper under the post-mistress's heavy hand.

'Yes - it is too bad, isn't it,' he replied, bowing and laughing to the woman.

'It is, sir,' she answered pleasantly. 'Good morning.'

He came out of the shop still smiling, and when Helena turned from the postcards to look at him, the lines of laughter remained over his face like a mask. She glanced at his eyes for a sign; his facial expression told her nothing; his eyes were just as inscrutable, which made her falter with dismay.

'What is he thinking of?' she asked herself. Her thoughts flashed back. 'And why did he ask me so peculiarly whether he should wire them at home?'

'Well,' said Siegmund, 'are there any postcards?'

'None that I care to take,' she replied. 'Perhaps you would like one of these?'

She pointed to some faded-looking cards which proved to be imaginary views of Alum Bay done in variegated sand. Siegmund smiled.

'I wonder if they dribbled the sand on with a fine glass tube,' he said.

'Or a brush,' said Helena.

'She does not understand,' said Siegmund to himself. 'And whatever I do I must not tell her. I should have thought she would understand.'

As he walked home beside her there mingled with his other feelings resentment against her. Almost he hated her.