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Chapter 20

At first they had a carriage to themselves. They sat opposite each other with averted faces, looking out of the windows and watching the houses, the downs dead asleep in the sun, the embankments of the railway with exhausted hot flowers go slowly past out of their reach. They felt as if they were being dragged away like criminals. Unable to speak or think, they stared out of the windows, Helena struggling in vain to keep back her tears, Siegmund labouring to breathe normally.

At Yarmouth the door was snatched open, and there was a confusion of shouting and running; a swarm of humanity, clamouring, attached itself at the carriage doorway, which was immediately blocked by a stout man who heaved a leather bag in front of him as he cried in German that here was room for all. Faces innumerable - hot, blue-eyed faces - strained to look over his shoulders at the shocked girl and the amazed Siegmund.

There entered eight Germans into the second-class compartment, five men and three ladies. When at last the luggage was stowed away they sank into the seats. The stout man on either side to be seated lowered himself carefully, like a wedge, between his two neighbours. Siegmund watched the stout man, the one who had led the charge, settling himself between his large lady and the small Helena. The latter crushed herself against the side of the carriage. The German's hips came down tight against her. She strove to lessen herself against the window, to escape the pressure of his flesh, whose heat was transmitted to her. The man squeezed in the opposite direction.

'I am afraid I press you,' he said, smiling in his gentle, chivalric German fashion. Helena glanced swiftly at him. She liked his grey eyes, she liked the agreeable intonation, and the pleasant sound of his words.

'Oh no,' she answered. 'You do not crush me.'

Almost before she had finished the words she turned away to the window. The man seemed to hesitate a moment, as if recovering himself from a slight rebuff, before he could address his lady with the good-humoured remark in German: 'Well, and have we not managed it very nicely, eh?'

The whole party began to talk in German with great animation. They told each other of the quaint ways of this or the other; they joked loudly over 'Billy' - this being a nickname discovered for the German Emperor - and what he would be saying of the Czar's trip; they questioned each other, and answered each other concerning the places they were going to see, with great interest, displaying admirable knowledge. They were pleased with everything; they extolled things English.

Helena's stout neighbour, who, it seemed, was from Dresden, began to tell anecdotes. He was a raconteur of the naive type: he talked with face, hands, with his whole body. Now and again he would give little spurts in his seat. After one of these he must have become aware of Helena - who felt as if she were enveloped by a soft stove - struggling to escape his compression. He stopped short, lifted his hat, and smiling beseechingly, said in his persuasive way:

'I am sorry. I am sorry. I compress you!' He glanced round in perplexity, seeking some escape or remedy. Finding none, he turned to her again, after having squeezed hard against his lady to free Helena, and said:

'Forgive me, I am sorry.'

'You are forgiven,' replied Helena, suddenly smiling into his face with her rare winsomeness. The whole party, attentive, relaxed into a smile at this. The good humour was complete.

'Thank you,' said the German gratefully.

Helena turned away. The talk began again like the popping of corn: the raconteur resumed his anecdote. Everybody was waiting to laugh. Helena rapidly wearied of trying to follow the tale. Siegmund had made no attempt. He had watched, with the others, the German's apologies, and the sight of his lover's face had moved him more than he could tell.

She had a peculiar, childish wistfulness at times, and with this an intangible aloofness that pierced his heart. It seemed to him he should never know her. There was a remoteness about her, an estrangement between her and all natural daily things, as if she were of an unknown race that never can tell its own story. This feeling always moved Siegmund's pity to its deepest, leaving him poignantly helpless. This same foreignness, revealed in other ways, sometimes made him hate her. It was as if she would sacrifice him rather than renounce her foreign birth. There was something in her he could never understand, so that never, never could he say he was master of her as she was of him the mistress.

As she smiled and turned away from the German, mute, uncomplaining, like a child wise in sorrow beyond its years, Siegmund's resentment against her suddenly took fire, and blazed him with sheer pain of pity. She was very small. Her quiet ways, and sometimes her impetuous clinging made her seem small; for she was very strong. But Siegmund saw her now, small, quiet, uncomplaining, living for him who sat and looked at her. But what would become of her when he had left her, when she was alone, little foreigner as she was, in this world, which apologizes when it has done the hurt, too blind to see beforehand? Helena would be left behind; death was no way for her. She could not escape thus with him from this house of strangers which she called 'life'. She had to go on alone, like a foreigner who cannot learn the strange language.

'What will she do?' Siegmund asked himself, 'when her loneliness comes upon her like a horror, and she has no one to go to. She will come to the memory of me for a while, and that will take her over till her strength is established. But what then?'

Siegmund could find no answer. He tried to imagine her life. It would go on, after his death, just in the same way, for a while, and then? He had not the faintest knowledge of how she would develop. What would she do when she was thirty-eight, and as old as himself? He could not conceive. Yet she would not die, of that he was certain.

Siegmund suddenly realized that he knew nothing of her life, her real inner life. She was a book written in characters unintelligible to him and to everybody. He was tortured with the problem of her till it became acute, and he felt as if his heart would burst inside him. As a boy he had experienced the same sort of feeling after wrestling for an hour with a problem in Euclid, for he was capable of great concentration.

He felt Helena looking at him. Turning, he found her steady, unswerving eyes fixed on him, so that he shrank confused from them. She smiled: by an instinctive movement she made him know that she wanted him to hold her hand. He leaned forward and put his hand over hers. She had peculiar hands, small, with a strange, delightful silkiness. Often they were cool or cold; generally they lay unmoved within his clasp, but then they were instinct with life, not inert. Sometimes he would feel a peculiar jerking in his pulse, very much like electricity, when he held her hand. Occasionally it was almost painful, and felt as if a little virtue were passing out of his blood. But that he dismissed as nonsense.

The Germans were still rattling away, perspiring freely, wiping their faces with their handkerchiefs as they laughed, moving inside their clothing, which was sticking to their sides. Siegmund had not noticed them for some time, he was so much absorbed. But Helena, though she sympathized with her fellow-passengers, was tormented almost beyond endurance by the noise, the heat of her neighbour's body, the atmosphere of the crowded carriage, and her own emotion. The only thing that could relieve her was the hand of Siegmund soothing her in its hold.

She looked at him with the same steadiness which made her eyes feel heavy upon him, and made him shrink. She wanted his strength of nerve to support her, and he submitted at once, his one aim being to give her out of himself whatever she wanted.

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