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Chapter 22

Siegmund went up to Victoria. He was in no hurry to get down to Wimbledon. London was warm and exhausted after the hot day, but this peculiar lukewarmness was not unpleasant to him. He chose to walk from Victoria to Waterloo.

The streets were like polished gun-metal glistened over with gold. The taxi-cabs, the wild cats of the town, swept over the gleaming floor swiftly, soon lessening in the distance, as if scornful of the other clumsy-footed traffic. He heard the merry click-clock of the swinging hansoms, then the excited whirring of the motor-buses as they charged full-tilt heavily down the road, their hearts, as it seemed, beating with trepidation; they drew up with a sigh of relief by the kerb, and stood there panting - great, nervous, clumsy things. Siegmund was always amused by the headlong, floundering career of the buses. He was pleased with this scampering of the traffic; anything for distraction. He was glad Helena was not with him, for the streets would have irritated her with their coarse noise. She would stand for a long time to watch the rabbits pop and hobble along on the common at night; but the tearing along of the taxis and the charge of a great motor-bus was painful to her. 'Discords,' she said, 'after the trees and sea.' She liked the glistening of the streets; it seemed a fine alloy of gold laid down for pavement, such pavement as drew near to the pure gold streets of Heaven; but this noise could not be endured near any wonderland.

Siegmund did not mind it; it drummed out his own thoughts. He watched the gleaming magic of the road, raced over with shadows, project itself far before him into the night. He watched the people. Soldiers, belted with scarlet, went jauntily on in front. There was a peculiar charm in their movement. There was a soft vividness of life in their carriage; it reminded Siegmund of the soft swaying and lapping of a poised candle-flame. The women went blithely alongside. Occasionally, in passing, one glanced at him; then, in spite of himself, he smiled; he knew not why. The women glanced at him with approval, for he was ruddy; besides, he had that carelessness and abstraction of despair. The eyes of the women said, 'You are comely, you are lovable,' and Siegmund smiled.

When the street opened, at Westminster, he noticed the city sky, a lovely deep purple, and the lamps in the square steaming out a vapour of grey-gold light.

'It is a wonderful night,' he said to himself. 'There are not two such in a year.'

He went forward to the Embankment, with a feeling of elation in his heart. This purple and gold-grey world, with the fluttering flame-warmth of soldiers and the quick brightness of women, like lights that clip sharply in a draught, was a revelation to him.

As he leaned upon the Embankment parapet the wonder did not fade, but rather increased. The trams, one after another, floated loftily over the bridge. They went like great burning bees in an endless file into a hive, past those which were drifting dreamily out, while below, on the black, distorted water, golden serpents flashed and twisted to and fro.

'Ah!' said Siegmund to himself; 'it is far too wonderful for me. Here, as well as by the sea, the night is gorgeous and uncouth. Whatever happens, the world is wonderful.'

So he went on amid all the vast miracle of movement in the city night, the swirling of water to the sea, the gradual sweep of the stars, the floating of many lofty, luminous cars through the bridged darkness, like an army of angels filing past on one of God's campaigns, the purring haste of the taxis, the slightly dancing shadows of people. Siegmund went on slowly, like a slow bullet winging into the heart of life. He did not lose this sense of wonder, not in the train, nor as he walked home in the moonless dark.

When he closed the door behind him and hung up his hat he frowned. He did not think definitely of anything, but his frown meant to him: 'Now for the beginning of Hell!'

He went towards the dining-room, where the light was, and the uneasy murmur. The clock, with its deprecating, suave chime, was striking ten, Siegmund opened the door of the room. Beatrice was sewing, and did not raise her head. Frank, a tall, thin lad of eighteen, was bent over a book. He did not look up. Vera had her fingers thrust in among her hair, and continued to read the magazine that lay on the table before her. Siegmund looked at them all. They gave no sign to show they were aware of his entry; there was only that unnatural tenseness of people who cover their agitation. He glanced round to see where he should go. His wicker arm-chair remained by the fireplace; his slippers were standing under the sideboard, as he had left them. Siegmund sat down in the creaking chair; he began to feel sick and tired.

'I suppose the children are in bed,' he said.

His wife sewed on as if she had not heard him; his daughter noisily turned over a leaf and continued to read, as if she were pleasantly interested and had known no interruption. Siegmund waited, with his slipper dangling from his hand, looking from one to another.

'They've been gone two hours,' said Frank at last, still without raising his eyes from his book. His tone was contemptuous, his voice was jarring, not yet having developed a man's fullness.

Siegmund put on his slipper, and began to unlace the other boot. The slurring of the lace through the holes and the snacking of the tag seemed unnecessarily loud. It annoyed his wife. She took a breath to speak, then refrained, feeling suddenly her daughter's scornful restraint upon her. Siegmund rested his arms upon his knees, and sat leaning forward, looking into the barren fireplace, which was littered with paper, and orange-peel, and a banana-skin.

'Do you want any supper?' asked Beatrice, and the sudden harshness of her voice startled him into looking at her.

She had her face averted, refusing to see him. Siegmund's heart went down with weariness and despair at the sight of her.

'Aren't you having any?' he asked.

The table was not laid. Beatrice's work-basket, a little wicker fruit-skep, overflowed scissors, and pins, and scraps of holland, and reels of cotton on the green serge cloth. Vera leaned both her elbows on the table.

Instead of replying to him, Beatrice went to the sideboard. She took out a table-cloth, pushing her sewing litter aside, and spread the cloth over one end of the table. Vera gave her magazine a little knock with her hand.

'Have you read this tale of a French convent school in here, Mother?' she asked.

'In where?'

In this month's Nash's.'

'No,' replied Beatrice. 'What time have I for reading, much less for anything else?'

'You should think more of yourself, and a little less of other people, then,' said Vera, with a sneer at the 'other people'. She rose. 'Let me do this. You sit down; you are tired, Mother,' she said.

Her mother, without replying, went out to the kitchen. Vera followed her. Frank, left alone with his father, moved uneasily, and bent his thin shoulders lower over his book. Siegmund remained with his arms on his knees, looking into the grate. From the kitchen came the chinking of crockery, and soon the smell of coffee. All the time Vera was heard chatting with affected brightness to her mother, addressing her in fond tones, using all her wits to recall bright little incidents to retail to her. Beatrice answered rarely, and then with utmost brevity.

Presently Vera came in with the tray. She put down a cup of coffee, a plate with boiled ham, pink and thin, such as is bought from a grocer, and some bread-and-butter. Then she sat down, noisily turning over the leaves of her magazine. Frank glanced at the table; it was laid solely for his father. He looked at the bread and the meat, but restrained himself, and went on reading, or pretended to do so. Beatrice came in with the small cruet; it was conspicuously bright.

Everything was correct: knife and fork, spoon, cruet, all perfectly clean, the crockery fine, the bread and butter thin - in fact, it was just as it would have been for a perfect stranger. This scrupulous neatness, in a household so slovenly and easy-going, where it was an established tradition that something should be forgotten or wrong, impressed Siegmund. Beatrice put the serving knife and fork by the little dish of ham, saw that all was proper, then went and sat down. Her face showed no emotion; it was calm and proud. She began to sew.

'What do you say, Mother?' said Vera, as if resuming a conversation. 'Shall it be Hampton Court or Richmond on Sunday?'

'I say, as I said before,' replied Beatrice: 'I cannot afford to go out.'

'But you must begin, my dear, and Sunday shall see the beginning. _Dites donc_!'

'There are other things to think of,' said Beatrice.

'Now, maman, nous avons changé tout cela! We are going out - a jolly little razzle!' Vera, who was rather handsome, lifted up her face and smiled at her mother gaily.

'I am afraid there will be no razzle' - Beatrice accented the word, smiling slightly - 'for me. You are slangy, Vera.'

'Un doux argot, ma mère. You look tired.'

Beatrice glanced at the clock.

'I will go to bed when I have cleared the table,' she said.

Siegmund winced. He was still sitting with his head bent down, looking in the grate. Vera went on to say something more. Presently Frank looked up at the table, and remarked in his grating voice:

'There's your supper, Father.'

The women stopped and looked round at this. Siegmund bent his head lower. Vera resumed her talk. It died out, and there was silence.

Siegmund was hungry.

'Oh, good Lord, good Lord! bread of humiliation tonight!' he said to himself before he could muster courage to rise and go to the table. He seemed to be shrinking inwards. The women glanced swiftly at him and away from him as his chair creaked and he got up. Frank was watching from under his eyebrows.

Siegmund went through the ordeal of eating and drinking in presence of his family. If he had not been hungry, he could not have done it, despite the fact that he was content to receive humiliation this night. He swallowed the coffee with effort. When he had finished he sat irresolute for some time; then he arose and went to the door.

'Good night!' he said.

Nobody made any reply. Frank merely stirred in his chair. Siegmund shut the door and went.

There was absolute silence in the room till they heard him turn on the tap in the bathroom; then Beatrice began to breathe spasmodically, catching her breath as if she would sob. But she restrained herself. The faces of the two children set hard with hate.

'He is not worth the flicking of your little finger, Mother,' said Vera.

Beatrice moved about with pitiful, groping hands, collecting her sewing and her cottons.

'At any rate, he's come back red enough,' said Frank, in his grating tone of contempt. 'He's like boiled salmon.'

Beatrice did not answer anything. Frank rose, and stood with his back to the grate, in his father's characteristic attitude.

'He would come slinking back in a funk!' he said, with a young man's sneer.

Stretching forward, he put a piece of ham between two pieces of bread, and began to eat the sandwich in large bites. Vera came to the table at this, and began to make herself a more dainty sandwich. Frank watched her with jealous eyes.

'There is a little more ham, if you'd like it,' said Beatrice to him. 'I kept you some.'

'All right, Ma,' he replied. 'Fetch it in.'

Beatrice went out to the kitchen.

'And bring the bread and butter, too, will you?' called Vera after her.

'The damned coward! Ain't he a rotten funker?' said Frank, sotto voce, while his mother was out of the room.

Vera did not reply, but she seemed tacitly to agree.

They petted their mother, while she waited on them. At length Frank yawned. He fidgeted a moment or two, then he went over to his mother, and, putting his hand on her arm - the feel of his mother's round arm under the black silk sleeve made his tears rise - he said, more gratefully than ever:

'Ne'er mind, Ma; we'll be all right to you.' Then he bent and kissed her. 'Good night, Mother,' he said awkwardly, and he went out of the room.

Beatrice was crying.

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