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Chapter 24

When Helena arrived home on the Thursday evening she found everything repulsive. All the odours of the sordid street through which she must pass hung about the pavement, having crept out in the heat. The house was bare and narrow. She remembered children sometimes to have brought her moths shut up in matchboxes. As she knocked at the door she felt like a numbed moth which a boy is pushing off its leaf-rest into his box.

The door was opened by her mother. She was a woman whose sunken mouth, ruddy cheeks, and quick brown eyes gave her the appearance of a bird which walks about pecking suddenly here and there. As Helena reluctantly entered the mother drew herself up, and immediately relaxed, seeming to peck forwards as she said:

'Well?'

'Well, here we are!' replied the daughter in a matter-of-fact tone.

Her mother was inclined to be affectionate, therefore she became proportionately cold.

'So I see,' exclaimed Mrs Verden, tossing her head in a peculiar jocular manner. 'And what sort of a time have you had?'

'Oh, very good,' replied Helena, still more coolly.

'H'm!'

Mrs Verden looked keenly at her daughter. She recognized the peculiar sulky, childish look she knew so well, therefore, making an effort, she forbore to question.

'You look well,' she said.

Helena smiled ironically.

'And are you ready for your supper?' she asked, in the playful, affectionate manner she had assumed.

'If the supper is ready I will have it,' replied her daughter.

'Well, it's not ready.' The mother shut tight her sunken mouth, and regarded her daughter with playful challenge. 'Because,' she continued, 'I didn't know when you were coming.' She gave a jerk with her arm, like an orator who utters the incontrovertible. 'But,' she added, after a tedious dramatic pause, 'I can soon have it ready. What will you have?'

'The full list of your capacious larder,' replied Helena.

Mrs Verden looked at her again, and hesitated.

'Will you have cocoa or lemonade?' she asked, coming to the point curtly.

'Lemonade,' said Helena.

Presently Mr Verden entered - a small, white-bearded man with a gentle voice.

'Oh, so you are back, Nellie!' he said, in his quiet, reserved manner.

'As you see, Pater,' she answered.

'H'm!' he murmured, and he moved about at his accounts.

Neither of her parents dared to question Helena. They moved about her on tiptoe, stealthily. Yet neither subserved her. Her father's quiet 'H'm!' her mother's curt question, made her draw inwards like a snail which can never retreat far enough from condemning eyes. She made a careless pretence of eating. She was like a child which has done wrong, and will not be punished, but will be left with the humiliating smear of offence upon it.

There was a quick, light palpitating of the knocker. Mrs Verden went to the door.

'Has she come?'

And there were hasty steps along the passage. Louisa entered. She flung herself upon Helena and kissed her.

'How long have you been in?' she asked, in a voice trembling with affection.

'Ten minutes,' replied Helena.

'Why didn't you send me the time of the train, so that I could come and meet you?' Louisa reproached her.

'Why?' drawled Helena.

Louisa looked at her friend without speaking. She was deeply hurt by this sarcasm.

As soon as possible Helena went upstairs. Louisa stayed with her that night. On the next day they were going to Cornwall together for their usual midsummer holiday. They were to be accompanied by a third girl - a minor friend of Louisa, a slight acquaintance of Helena.

During the night neither of the two friends slept much. Helena made confidences to Louisa, who brooded on these, on the romance and tragedy which enveloped the girl she loved so dearly. Meanwhile, Helena's thoughts went round and round, tethered amid the five days by the sea, pulling forwards as far as the morrow's meeting with Siegmund, but reaching no further.

Friday was an intolerable day of silence, broken by little tender advances and playful, affectionate sallies on the part of the mother, all of which were rapidly repulsed. The father said nothing, and avoided his daughter with his eyes. In his humble reserve there was a dignity which made his disapproval far more difficult to bear than the repeated flagrant questionings of the mother's eyes. But the day wore on. Helena pretended to read, and sat thinking. She played her violin a little, mechanically. She went out into the town, and wandered about.

At last the night fell.

'Well,' said Helena to her mother, 'I suppose I'd better pack.'

'Haven't you done it?' cried Mrs Verden, exaggerating her surprise. 'You'll never have it done. I'd better help you. What times does the train go?'

Helena smiled.

'Ten minutes to ten.'

Her mother glanced at the clock. It was only half-past eight. There was ample time for everything.

'Nevertheless, you'd better look sharp,' Mrs Verden said.

Helena turned away, weary of this exaggeration.

'I'll come with you to the station,' suggested Mrs Verden. 'I'll see the last of you. We shan't see much of you just now.'

Helena turned round in surprise.

'Oh, I wouldn't bother,' she said, fearing to make her disapproval too evident.

'Yes - I will - I'll see you off.'

Mrs Verden's animation and indulgence were remarkable. Usually she was curt and undemonstrative. On occasions like these, however, when she was reminded of the ideal relations between mother and daughter, she played the part of the affectionate parent, much to the general distress.

Helena lit a candle and went to her bedroom. She quickly packed her dress-basket. As she stood before the mirror to put on her hat, her eyes, gazing heavily, met her heavy eyes in the mirror. She glanced away swiftly as if she had been burned.

'How stupid I look!' she said to herself. 'And Siegmund, how is he, I wonder?'

She wondered how Siegmund had passed the day, what had happened to him, how he felt, how he looked. She thought of him protectively.

Having strapped her basket, she carried it downstairs. Her mother was ready, with a white lace scarf round her neck. After a short time Louisa came in. She dropped her basket in the passage, and then sank into a chair.

'I don't want to go, Nell,' she said, after a few moments of silence.

'Why, how is that?' asked Helena, not surprised, but condescending, as to a child.

'Oh, I don't know; I'm tired,' said the other petulantly.

'Of course you are. What do you expect, after a day like this?' said Helena.

'And rushing about packing,' exclaimed Mrs Verden, still in an exaggerated manner, this time scolding playfully.

'Oh, I don't know. I don't think I want to go, dear,' repeated Louisa dejectedly.

'Well, it is time we set out,' replied Helena, rising. 'Will you carry the basket or the violin, Mater?'

Louisa rose, and with a forlorn expression took up her light luggage.

The west opposite the door was smouldering with sunset. Darkness is only smoke that hangs suffocatingly over the low red heat of the sunken day. Such was Helena's longed-for night. The tramcar was crowded. In one corner Olive, the third friend, rose excitedly to greet them. Helena sat mute, while the car swung through the yellow, stale lights of a third-rate street of shops. She heard Olive remarking on her sunburned face and arms; she became aware of the renewed inflammation in her blistered arms; she heard her own curious voice answering. Everything was in a maze. To the beat of the car, while the yellow blur of the shops passed over her eyes, she repeated: 'Two hundred and forty miles - two hundred and forty miles.'