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Chapter 25

Siegmund passed the afternoon in a sort of stupor. At tea-time Beatrice, who had until then kept herself in restraint, gave way to an outburst of angry hysteria.

'When does your engagement at the Comedy Theatre commence?' she had asked him coldly.

He knew she was wondering about money.

'Tomorrow - if ever,' he had answered.

She was aware that he hated the work. For some reason or other her anger flashed out like sudden lightning at his 'if ever'.

'What do you think you can do?' she cried. 'For I think you have done enough. We can't do as we like altogether - indeed, indeed we cannot. You have had your fling, haven't you? You have had your fling, and you want to keep on. But there's more than one person in the world. Remember that. But there are your children, let me remind you. Whose are they? You talk about shirking the engagement, but who is going to be responsible for your children, do you think?'

'I said nothing about shirking the engagement,' replied Siegmund, very coldly.

'No, there was no need to say. I know what it means. You sit there sulking all day. What do you think I do? I have to see to the children, I have to work and slave, I go on from day to day. I tell you I stop, I tell you I do as I like. I go as well. No, I wouldn't be such a coward, you know that. You know I wouldn't leave little children - to the workhouse or anything. They're my children; they mightn't be yours.'

'There is no need for this,' said Siegmund contemptuously.

The pressure in his temples was excruciating, and he felt loathsomely sick.

Beatrice's dark eyes flashed with rage.

'Isn't there!' she cried. 'Oh, isn't there? No, there is need for a great deal more. I don't know what you think I am. How much farther do you think you can go? No, you don't like reminding of us. You sit moping, sulking, because you have to come back to your own children. I wonder how much you think I shall stand? What do you think I am, to put up with it? What do you think I am? Am I a servant to eat out of your hand?'

'Be quiet!' shouted Siegmund. 'Don't I know what you are? Listen to yourself!'

Beatrice was suddenly silenced. It was the stillness of white-hot wrath. Even Siegmund was glad to hear her voice again. She spoke low and trembling.

'You coward - you miserable coward! It is I, is it, who am wrong? It is I who am to blame, is it? You miserable thing! I have no doubt you know what I am.'

Siegmund looked up at her as her words died off. She looked back at him with dark eyes loathing his cowed, wretched animosity. His eyes were bloodshot and furtive, his mouth was drawn back in a half-grin of hate and misery. She was goading him, in his darkness whither he had withdrawn himself like a sick dog, to die or recover as his strength should prove. She tortured him till his sickness was swallowed by anger, which glared redly at her as he pushed back his chair to rise. He trembled too much, however. His chin dropped again on his chest. Beatrice sat down in her place, hearing footsteps. She was shuddering slightly, and her eyes were fixed.

Vera entered with the two children. All three immediately, as if they found themselves confronted by something threatening, stood arrested. Vera tackled the situation.

'Is the table ready to be cleared yet?' she asked in an unpleasant tone.

Her father's cup was half emptied. He had come to tea late, after the others had left the table. Evidently he had not finished, but he made no reply, neither did Beatrice. Vera glanced disgustedly at her father. Gwen sidled up to her mother, and tried to break the tension.

'Mam, there was a lady had a dog, and it ran into a shop, and it licked a sheep, Mam, what was hanging up.'

Beatrice sat fixed, and paid not the slightest attention. The child looked up at her, waited, then continued softly.

'Mam, there was a lady had a dog - '

'Don't bother!' snapped Vera sharply.

The child looked, wondering and resentful, at her sister. Vera was taking the things from the table, snatching them, and thrusting them on the tray. Gwen's eyes rested a moment or two on the bent head of her father; then deliberately she turned again to her mother, and repeated in her softest and most persuasive tones:

'Mam, I saw a dog, and it ran in a butcher's shop and licked a piece of meat. Mam, Mam!'

There was no answer. Gwen went forward and put her hand on her mother's knee.

'Mam!' she pleaded timidly.

No response.

'Mam!' she whispered.

She was desperate. She stood on tiptoe, and pulled with little hands at her mother's breast.

'Mam!' she whispered shrilly.

Her mother, with an effort of self-denial, put off her investment of tragedy, and, laying her arm round the child's shoulders, drew her close. Gwen was somewhat reassured, but not satisfied. With an earnest face upturned to the impassive countenance of her mother, she began to whisper, sibilant, coaxing, pleading.

'Mam, there was a lady, she had a dog - '

Vera turned sharply to stop this whispering, which was too much for her nerves, but the mother forestalled her. Taking the child in her arms, she averted her face, put her cheek against the baby cheek, and let the tears run freely. Gwen was too much distressed to cry. The tears gathered very slowly in her eyes, and fell without her having moved a muscle in her face. Vera remained in the scullery, weeping tears of rage, and pity, and shame into the towel. The only sound in the room was the occasional sharp breathing of Beatrice. Siegmund sat without the trace of a movement, almost without breathing. His head was ducked low; he dared never lift it, he dared give no sign of his presence.

Presently Beatrice put down the child, and went to join Vera in the scullery. There came the low sound of women's talking - an angry, ominous sound. Gwen followed her mother. Her little voice could be heard cautiously asking:

'Mam, is dad cross - is he? What did he do?'

'Don't bother!' snapped Vera. 'You are a little nuisance! Here, take this into the dining-room, and don't drop it.'

The child did not obey. She stood looking from her mother to her sister. The latter pushed a dish into her hand.

'Go along,' she said, gently thrusting the child forth.

Gwen departed. She hesitated in the kitchen. Her father still remained unmoved. The child wished to go to him, to speak to him, but she was afraid. She crossed the kitchen slowly, hugging the dish; then she came slowly back, hesitating. She sidled into the kitchen; she crept round the table inch by inch, drawing nearer her father. At about a yard from the chair she stopped. He, from under his bent brows, could see her small feet in brown slippers, nearly kicked through at the toes, waiting and moving nervously near him. He pulled himself together, as a man does who watches the surgeon's lancet suspended over his wound. Would the child speak to him? Would she touch him with her small hands? He held his breath, and, it seemed, held his heart from beating. What he should do he did not know.

He waited in a daze of suspense. The child shifted from one foot to another. He could just see the edge of her white-frilled drawers. He wanted, above all things, to take her in his arms, to have something against which to hide his face. Yet he was afraid. Often, when all the world was hostile, he had found her full of love, he had hidden his face against her, she had gone to sleep in his arms, she had been like a piece of apple-blossom in his arms. If she should come to him now - his heart halted again in suspense - he knew not what he would do. It would open, perhaps, the tumour of his sickness. He was quivering too fast with suspense to know what he feared, or wanted, or hoped.

'Gwen!' called Vera, wondering why she did not return. 'Gwen!'

'Yes,' answered the child, and slowly Siegmund saw her feet lifted, hesitate, move, then turn away.

She had gone. His excitement sank rapidly, and the sickness returned stronger, more horrible and wearying than ever. For a moment it was so bad that he was afraid of losing consciousness. He recovered slightly, pulled himself up, and went upstairs. His fists were tightly clenched, his fingers closed over his thumbs, which were pressed bloodless. He lay down on the bed.

For two hours he lay in a dazed condition resembling sleep. At the end of that time the knowledge that he had to meet Helena was actively at work - an activity quite apart from his will or his consciousness, jogging and pulling him awake. At eight o'clock he sat up. A cramped pain in his thumbs made him wonder. He looked at them, and mechanically shut them again under his fingers into the position they sought after two hours of similar constraint. Siegmund opened his hands again, smiling.

'It is said to be the sign of a weak, deceitful character,' he said to himself.

His head was peculiarly numbed; at the back it felt heavy, as if weighted with lead. He could think only one detached sentence at intervals. Between-whiles there was a blank, grey sleep or swoon.

'I have got to go and meet Helena at Wimbledon,' he said to himself, and instantly he felt a peculiar joy, as if he had laughed somewhere. 'But I must be getting ready. I can't disappoint her,' said Siegmund.

The idea of Helena woke a craving for rest in him. If he should say to her, 'Do not go away from me; come with me somewhere,' then he might lie down somewhere beside her, and she might put her hands on his head. If she could hold his head in her hands - for she had fine, silken hands that adjusted themselves with a rare pressure, wrapping his weakness up in life - then his head would gradually grow healed, and he could rest. This was the one thing that remained for his restoration - that she should with long, unwearied gentleness put him to rest. He longed for it utterly - for the hands and the restfulness of Helena.

'But it is no good,' he said, staring like a drunken man from sleep. 'What time is it?'

It was ten minutes to nine. She would be in Wimbledon by 10.10. It was time he should be getting ready. Yet he remained sitting on the bed.

'I am forgetting again,' he said. 'But I do not want to go. What is the good? I have only to tie a mask on for the meeting. It is too much.'

He waited and waited; his head dropped forward in a sort of sleep. Suddenly he started awake. The back of his head hurt severely.

'Goodness,' he said, 'it's getting quite dark!'

It was twenty minutes to ten. He went bewildered into the bathroom to wash in cold water and bring back his senses. His hands were sore, and his face blazed with sun inflammation. He made himself neat as usual. It was ten minutes to ten. He would be very late. It was practically dark, though these bright days were endless. He wondered whether the children were in bed. It was too late, however, to wonder.

Siegmund hurried downstairs and took his hat. He was walking down the path when the door was snatched open behind him, and Vera ran out crying:

'Are you going out? Where are you going?'

Siegmund stood still and looked at her.

'She is frightened,' he said to himself, smiling ironically.

'I am only going a walk. I have to go to Wimbledon. I shall not be very long.'

'Wimbledon, at this time!' said Vera sharply, full of suspicion.

'Yes, I am late. I shall be back in an hour.'

He was sorry for her. She knew he gave her an honourable promise.

'You need not keep us sitting up,' she said.

He did not answer, but hurried to the station.