

Chapter 3

In the miles of morning sunshine, Siegmund's shadows, his children, Beatrice, his sorrow, dissipated like mist, and he was elated as a young man setting forth to travel. When he had passed Portsmouth Town everything had vanished but the old gay world of romance. He laughed as he looked out of the carriage window.

Below, in the street, a military band passed glittering. A brave sound floated up, and again he laughed, loving the tune, the clash and glitter of the band, the movement of scarlet, blithe soldiers beyond the park. People were drifting brightly from church. How could it be Sunday! It was no time; it was Romance, going back to Tristan.

Women, like crocus flowers, in white and blue and lavender, moved gaily. Everywhere fluttered the small flags of holiday. Every form danced lightly in the sunshine.

And beyond it all were the silent hillsides of the island, with Helena. It was so wonderful, he could bear to be patient. She would be all in white, with her cool, thick throat left bare to the breeze, her face shining, smiling as she dipped her head because of the sun, which glistened on her uncovered hair.

He breathed deeply, stirring at the thought. But he would not grow

impatient. The train had halted over the town, where scarlet soldiers, and ludicrous blue sailors, and all the brilliant women from church shook like a kaleidoscope down the street. The train crawled on, drawing near to the sea, for which Siegmund waited breathless. It was so like Helena, blue, beautiful, strong in its reserve.

Another moment they were in the dirty station. Then the day flashed out, and Siegmund mated with joy. He felt the sea heaving below him. He looked round, and the sea was blue as a periwinkle flower, while gold and white and blood-red sails lit here and there upon the blueness. Standing on the deck, he gave himself to the breeze and to the sea, feeling like one of the ruddy sails--as if he were part of it all. All his body radiated amid the large, magnificent sea-moon like a piece of colour.

The little ship began to pulse, to tremble. White with the softness of a bosom, the water rose up frothing and swaying gently. Ships drew near the inquisitive birds; the old Victory shook her myriad pointed flags of yellow and scarlet; the straight old houses of the quay passed by.

Outside the harbour, like fierce creatures of the sea come wildly up to look, the battleships laid their black snouts on the water. Siegmund laughed at them. He felt the foam on his face like a sparkling, felt the blue sea gathering round.

On the left stood the round fortress, quaintly chequered, and solidly

alone in the walk of water, amid the silent flight of the golden-and crimson-winged boats.

Siegmund watched the bluish bulk of the island. Like the beautiful women in the myths, his love hid in its blue haze. It seemed impossible.

Behind him, the white wake trailed myriads of daisies. On either hand the grim and wicked battleships watched along their sharp noses. Beneath him the clear green water swung and puckered as if it were laughing. In front, Sieglinde's island drew near and nearer, creeping towards him, bringing him Helena.

Meadows and woods appeared, houses crowded down to the shore to meet him; he was in the quay, and the ride was over. Siegmund regretted it.

But Helena was on the island, which rode like an anchored ship under the fleets of cloud that had launched whilst Siegmund was on water. As he watched the end of the pier loom higher, large ponderous trains of cloud cast over him the shadows of their bulk, and he shivered in the chill wind.

His travelling was very slow. The sky's dark shipping pressed closer and closer, as if all the clouds had come to harbour. Over the flat lands near Newport the wind moaned like the calling of many violoncellos. All the sky was grey. Siegmund waited drearily on Newport station, where the wind swept coldly. It was Sunday, and the station and the island were desolate, having lost their purposes.

Siegmund put on his overcoat and sat down. All his morning's blaze of elation was gone, though there still glowed a great hope. He had slept only two hours of the night. An empty man, he had drunk joy, and now the intoxication was dying out.

At three o'clock of the afternoon he sat alone in the second-class carriage, looking out. A few raindrops struck the pane, then the blurred dazzle of a shower came in a burst of wind, and hid the downs and the reeds that shivered in the marshy places. Siegmund sat in a chilly torpor. He counted the stations. Beneath his stupor his heart was thudding heavily with excitement, surprising him, for his brain felt dead.

The train slowed down: Yarmouth! One more station, then. Siegmund watched the platform, shiny with rain, slide past. On the dry grey under the shelter, one white passenger was waiting. Suddenly Siegmund's heart leaped up, wrenching wildly. He burst open the door, and caught hold of Helena. She dilated, gave a palpitating cry as he dragged her into the carriage.

'You here!' he exclaimed, in a strange tone. She was shivering with cold. Her almost naked arms were blue. She could not answer Siegmund's question, but lay clasped against him, shivering away her last chill as his warmth invaded her. He laughed in his heart as she nestled in to him.

'Is it a dream now, dear?' he whispered. Helena clasped him tightly, shuddering because of the delicious suffusing of his warmth through her.

Almost immediately they heard the grinding of the brakes.

'Here we are, then!' exclaimed Helena, dropping into her conventional, cheerful manner at once. She put straight her hat, while he gathered his luggage.

Until tea-time there was a pause in their progress. Siegmund was tingling with an exquisite vividness, as if he had taken some rare stimulant. He wondered at himself. It seemed that every fibre in his body was surprised with joy, as each tree in a forest at dawn utters astonished cries of delight.

When Helena came back, she sat opposite to him to see him. His naïve look of joy was very sweet to her. His eyes were dark blue, showing the fibrils, like a purple-veined flower at twilight, and somehow, mysteriously, joy seemed to quiver in the iris. Helena appreciated him, feature by feature. She liked his clear forehead, with its thick black hair, and his full mouth, and his chin. She loved his hands, that were small, but strong and nervous, and very white. She liked his breast, that breathed so strong and quietly, and his arms, and his thighs, and his knees.

For him, Helena was a presence. She was ambushed, fused in an aura of

his love. He only saw she was white, and strong, and full fruited, he only knew her blue eyes were rather awful to him.

Outside, the sea-mist was travelling thicker and thicker inland. Their lodging was not far from the bay. As they sat together at tea, Siegmund's eyes dilated, and he looked frowning at Helena.

'What is it?' he asked, listening uneasily.

Helena looked up at him, from pouring out the tea. His little anxious look of distress amused her.

'The noise, you mean? Merely the fog-horn, dear--not Wotan's wrath, nor Siegfried's dragon....'

The fog was white at the window. They sat waiting. After a few seconds the sound came low, swelling, like the mooing of some great sea animal, alone, the last of the monsters. The whole fog gave off the sound for a second or two, then it died down into an intense silence. Siegmund and Helena looked at each other. His eyes were full of trouble. To see a big, strong man anxious-eyed as a child because of a strange sound amused her. But he was tired.

'I assure you, it is only a fog-horn,' she laughed.

'Of course. But it is a depressing sort of sound.'

'Is it?' she said curiously. 'Why? Well--yes--I think I can understand its being so to some people. It's something like the call of the horn across the sea to Tristan.'

She hummed softly, then three times she sang the horn-call. Siegmund, with his face expressionless as a mask, sat staring out at the mist. The boom of the siren broke in upon them. To him, the sound was full of fatality. Helena waited till the noise died down, then she repeated her horn-call.

'Yet it is very much like the fog-horn,' she said, curiously interested.

'This time next week, Helena!' he said.

She suddenly went heavy, and stretched across to clasp his hand as it lay upon the table.

'I shall be calling to you from Cornwall,' she said.

He did not reply. So often she did not take his meaning, but left him alone with his sense of tragedy. She had no idea how his life was wrenched from its roots, and when he tried to tell her, she balked him, leaving him inwardly quite lonely.

'There is no next week,' she declared, with great cheerfulness. 'There

is only the present.'

At the same moment she rose and slipped across to him. Putting her arms round his neck, she stood holding his head to her bosom, pressing it close, with her hand among his hair. His nostrils and mouth were crushed against her breast. He smelled the silk of her dress and the faint, intoxicating odour of her person. With shut eyes he owned heavily to himself again that she was blind to him. But some other self urged with gladness, no matter how blind she was, so that she pressed his face upon her.

She stroked and caressed his hair, tremblingly clasped his head against her breast, as if she would never release him; then she bent to kiss his forehead. He took her in his arms, and they were still for awhile.

Now he wanted to blind himself with her, to blaze up all his past and future in a passion worth years of living.

After tea they rested by the fire, while she told him all the delightful things she had found. She had a woman's curious passion for details, a woman's peculiar attachment to certain dear trifles. He listened, smiling, revived by her delight, and forgetful of himself. She soothed him like sunshine, and filled him with pleasure; but he hardly attended to her words.

'Shall we go out, or are you too tired? No, you are tired--you are very

tired,' said Helena.

She stood by his chair, looking down on him tenderly.

'No,' he replied, smiling brilliantly at her, and stretching his handsome limbs in relief--'no, not at all tired now.'

Helena continued to look down on him in quiet, covering tenderness. But she quailed before the brilliant, questioning gaze of his eyes.

'You must go to bed early tonight,' she said, turning aside her face, ruffling his soft black hair. He stretched slightly, stiffening his arms, and smiled without answering. It was a very keen pleasure to be thus alone with her and in her charge. He rose, bidding her wrap herself up against the fog.

'You are sure you're not too tired?' she reiterated.

He laughed.

Outside, the sea-mist was white and woolly. They went hand in hand. It was cold, so she thrust her hand with his into the pocket of his overcoat, while they walked together.

'I like the mist,' he said, pressing her hand in his pocket.

'I don't dislike it,' she replied, shrinking nearer to him.

'It puts us together by ourselves,' he said. She plodded alongside, bowing her head, not replying. He did not mind her silence.

'It couldn't have happened better for us than this mist,' he said.

She laughed curiously, almost with a sound of tears.

'Why?' she asked, half tenderly, half bitterly.

'There is nothing else but you, and for you there is nothing else but me--look!'

He stood still. They were on the downs, so that Helena found herself quite alone with the man in a world of mist. Suddenly she flung herself sobbing against his breast. He held her closely, tenderly, not knowing what it was all about, but happy and unafraid.

In one hollow place the siren from the Needles seemed to bellow full in their ears. Both Siegmund and Helena felt their emotion too intense. They turned from it.

'What is the pitch?' asked Helena.

'Where it is horizontal? It slides up a chromatic scale,' said Siegmund.

'Yes, but the settled pitch--is it about E?'

'E!' exclaimed Siegmund. 'More like F.'

'Nay, listen!' said Helena.

They stood still and waited till there came the long booning of the fog-horn.

'There!' exclaimed Siegmund, imitating the sound. 'That is not E.' He repeated the sound. 'It is F.'

'Surely it is E,' persisted Helena.

'Even F sharp,' he rejoined, humming the note.

She laughed, and told him to climb the chromatic scale.

'But you agree?' he said.

'I do not,' she replied.

The fog was cold. It seemed to rob them of their courage to talk.

'What is the note in Tristan?' Helena made an effort to ask.

'That is not the same,' he replied.

'No, dear, that is not the same,' she said in low, comforting tones. He quivered at the caress. She put her arms round him reached up her face yearningly for a kiss. He forgot they were standing in the public footpath, in daylight, till she drew hastily away. She heard footsteps down the fog.

As they climbed the path the mist grew thinner, till it was only a grey haze at the top. There they were on the turfy lip of the land. The sky was fairly clear overhead. Below them the sea was singing hoarsely to itself.

Helena drew him to the edge of the cliff. He crushed her hand, drawing slightly back. But it pleased her to feel the grip on her hand becoming unbearable. They stood right on the edge, to see the smooth cliff slope into the mist, under which the sea stirred noisily.

'Shall we walk over, then?' said Siegmund, glancing downwards. Helena's heart stood still a moment at the idea, then beat heavily. How could he play with the idea of death, and the five great days in front? She was afraid of him just then.

'Come away, dear,' she pleaded.

He would, then, forgo the few consummate days! It was bitterness to her to think so.

'Come away, dear!' she repeated, drawing him slowly to the path.

'You are not afraid?' he asked.

'Not afraid, no....' Her voice had that peculiar, reedy, harsh quality that made him shiver.

'It is too easy a way,' he said satirically.

She did not take in his meaning.

'And five days of our own before us, Siegmund!' she scolded. 'The mist is Lethe. It is enough for us if its spell lasts five days.'

He laughed, and took her in his arms, kissing her very closely.

They walked on joyfully, locking behind them the doors of forgetfulness.

As the sun set, the fog dispersed a little. Breaking masses of mist went flying from cliff to cliff, and far away beyond the cliffs the western sky stood dimmed with gold. The lovers wandered aimlessly over the golf-links to where green mounds and turfed banks suggested to Helena that she was tired, and would sit down. They faced the lighted chamber

of the west, whence, behind the torn, dull-gold curtains of fog, the sun was departing with pomp.

Siegmund sat very still, watching the sunset. It was a splendid, flaming bridal chamber where he had come to Helena. He wondered how to express it; how other men had borne this same glory.

'What is the music of it?' he asked.

She glanced at him. His eyelids were half lowered, his mouth slightly open, as if in ironic rhapsody.

'Of what, dear?'

'What music do you think holds the best interpretation of sunset?'

His skin was gold, his real mood was intense. She revered him for a moment.

'I do not know,' she said quietly; and she rested her head against his shoulder, looking out west.

There was a space of silence, while Siegmund dreamed on.

'A Beethoven symphony--the one--' and he explained to her.

She was not satisfied, but leaned against him, making her choice. The sunset hung steady, she could scarcely perceive a change.

'The Grail music in Lohengrin,' she decided.

'Yes,' said Siegmund. He found it quite otherwise, but did not trouble to dispute. He dreamed by himself. This displeased her. She wanted him for herself. How could he leave her alone while he watched the sky? She almost put her two hands over his eyes.