

Chapter 5

They found the fire burning brightly in their room. The only other person in the pretty, stiffly-furnished cottage was their landlady, a charming old lady, who let this sitting-room more for the change, for the sake of having visitors, than for gain.

Helena introduced Siegmund as 'My friend'. The old lady smiled upon him. He was big, and good-looking, and embarrassed. She had had a son years back.... And the two were lovers. She hoped they would come to her house for their honeymoon.

Siegmund sat in his great horse-hair chair by the fire, while Helena attended to the lamp. Glancing at him over the glowing globe, she found him watching her with a small, peculiar smile of irony, and anger, and bewilderment. He was not quite himself. Her hand trembled so, she could scarcely adjust the wicks.

Helena left the room to change her dress.

'I shall be back before Mrs Curtiss brings in the tray. There is the Nietzsche I brought--'

He did not answer as he watched her go. Left alone, he sat with his arms along his knees, perfectly still. His heart beat heavily, and all his

being felt sullen, watchful, aloof, like a balked animal. Thoughts came up in his brain like bubbles--random, hissing out aimlessly. Once, in the startling inflammability of his blood, his veins ran hot, and he smiled.

When Helena entered the room his eyes sought hers swiftly, as sparks lighting on the tinder. But her eyes were only moist with tenderness. His look instantly changed. She wondered at his being so silent, so strange.

Coming to him in her unhesitating, womanly way--she was only twenty-six to his thirty-eight--she stood before him, holding both his hands and looking down on him with almost gloomy tenderness. She wore a white dress that showed her throat gathering like a fountain-jet of solid foam to balance her head. He could see the full white arms passing clear through the dripping spume of lace, towards the rise of her breasts. But her eyes bent down upon him with such gloom of tenderness that he dared not reveal the passion burning in him. He could not look at her. He strove almost pitifully to be with her sad, tender, but he could not put out his fire. She held both his hands firm, pressing them in appeal for her dream love. He glanced at her wistfully, then turned away. She waited for him. She wanted his caresses and tenderness. He would not look at her.

'You would like supper now, dear?' she asked, looking where the dark hair ended, and his neck ran smooth, under his collar, to the strong

setting of his shoulders.

'Just as you will,' he replied.

Still she waited, and still he would not look at her. Something troubled him, she thought. He was foreign to her.

'I will spread the cloth, then,' she said, in deep tones of resignation. She pressed his hands closely, and let them drop. He took no notice, but, still with his arms on his knees, he stared into the fire.

In the golden glow of lamplight she set small bowls of white and lavender sweet-peas, and mignonette, upon the round table. He watched her moving, saw the stir of her white, sloping shoulders under the lace, and the hollow of her shoulders firm as marble, and the slight rise and fall of her loins as she walked. He felt as if his breast were scalded.

It was a physical pain to him.

Supper was very quiet. Helena was sad and gentle; he had a peculiar, enigmatic look in his eyes, between suffering and mockery and love. He was quite intractable; he would not soften to her, but remained there aloof. He was tired, and the look of weariness and suffering was evident to her through his strangeness. In her heart she wept.

At last she tinkled the bell for supper to be cleared. Meanwhile, restlessly, she played fragments of Wagner on the piano.

'Will you want anything else?' asked the smiling old landlady.

'Nothing at all, thanks,' said Helena, with decision.

'Oh! then I think I will go to bed when I've washed the dishes. You will put the lamp out, dear?'

'I am well used to a lamp,' smiled Helena. 'We use them always at home.'

She had had a day before Siegmund's coming, in which to win Mrs Curtiss' heart, and she had been successful. The old lady took the tray.

'Good-night, dear--good-night, sir. I will leave you. You will not be long, dear?'

'No, we shall not be long. Mr MacNair is very evidently tired out.'

'Yes--yes. It is very tiring, London.'

When the door was closed, Helena stood a moment undecided, looking at Siegmund. He was lying in his arm-chair in a dispirited way, and looking in the fire. As she gazed at him with troubled eyes, he happened to glance to her, with the same dark, curiously searching, disappointed eyes.

'Shall I read to you?' she asked bitterly.

'If you will,' he replied.

He sounded so indifferent, she could scarcely refrain from crying. She went and stood in front of him, looking down on him heavily.

'What is it, dear?' she said.

'You,' he replied, smiling with a little grimace.

'Why me?'

He smiled at her ironically, then closed his eyes. She slid into his arms with a little moan. He took her on his knee, where she curled up like a heavy white cat. She let him caress her with his mouth, and did not move, but lay there curled up and quiet and luxuriously warm.

He kissed her hair, which was beautifully fragrant of itself, and time after time drew between his lips one long, keen thread, as if he would ravel out with his mouth her vigorous confusion of hair. His tenderness of love was like a soft flame lapping her voluptuously.

After a while they heard the old lady go upstairs. Helena went very still, and seemed to contract. Siegmund himself hesitated in his love-making. All was very quiet. They could hear the faint breathing of

the sea. Presently the cat, which had been sleeping in a chair, rose and went to the door.

'Shall I let her out?' said Siegmund.

'Do!' said Helena, slipping from his knee. 'She goes out when the nights are fine.'

Siegmund rose to set free the tabby. Hearing the front door open, Mrs Curtiss called from upstairs: 'Is that you, dear?'

'I have just let Kitty out,' said Siegmund.

'Ah, thank you. Good night!' They heard the old lady lock her bedroom door.

Helena was kneeling on the hearth. Siegmund softly closed the door, then waited a moment. His heart was beating fast.

'Shall we sit by firelight?' he asked tentatively.

'Yes--If you wish,' she replied, very slowly, as if against her will. He carefully turned down the lamp, then blew out the light. His whole body was burning and surging with desire.

The room was black and red with firelight. Helena shone ruddily as she

knelt, a bright, bowed figure, full in the glow. Now and then red stripes of firelight leapt across the walls. Siegmund, his face ruddy, advanced out of the shadows.

He sat in the chair beside her, leaning forward, his hands hanging like two scarlet flowers listless in the fire glow, near to her, as she knelt on the hearth, with head bowed down. One of the flowers awoke and spread towards her. It asked for her mutely. She was fascinated, scarcely able to move.

'Come,' he pleaded softly.

She turned, lifted her hands to him. The lace fell back, and her arms, bare to the shoulder, shone rosily. He saw her breasts raised towards him. Her face was bent between her arms as she looked up at him afraid. Lit by the firelight, in her white, clinging dress, cowering between her uplifted arms, she seemed to be offering him herself to sacrifice.

In an instant he was kneeling, and she was lying on his shoulder, abandoned to him. There was a good deal of sorrow in his joy.

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It was eleven o'clock when Helena at last loosened Siegmund's arms, and rose from the armchair where she lay beside him. She was very hot, feverish, and restless. For the last half-hour he had lain absolutely

still, with his heavy arms about her, making her hot. If she had not seen his eyes blue and dark, she would have thought him asleep. She tossed in restlessness on his breast.

'Am I not uneasy?' she had said, to make him speak. He had smiled gently.

'It is wonderful to be as still as this,' he said. She had lain tranquil with him, then, for a few moments. To her there was something sacred in his stillness and peace. She wondered at him; he was so different from an hour ago. How could he be the same! Now he was like the sea, blue and hazy in the morning, musing by itself. Before, he was burning, volcanic, as if he would destroy her.

She had given him this new soft beauty. She was the earth in which his strange flowers grew. But she herself wondered at the flowers produced of her. He was so strange to her, so different from herself. What next would he ask of her, what new blossom would she rear in him then. He seemed to grow and flower involuntarily. She merely helped to produce him.

Helena could not keep still; her body was full of strange sensations, of involuntary recoil from shock. She was tired, but restless. All the time Siegmund lay with his hot arms over her, himself so incomprehensible in his base of blue, open-eyed slumber, she grew more breathless and unbearable to herself.

At last she lifted his arm, and drew herself out of the chair. Siegmund looked at her from his tranquillity. She put the damp hair from her forehead, breathed deep, almost panting. Then she glanced hauntingly at her flushed face in the mirror. With the same restlessness, she turned to look at the night. The cool, dark, watery sea called to her. She pushed back the curtain.

The moon was wading deliciously through shallows of white cloud. Beyond the trees and the few houses was the great concave of darkness, the sea, and the moonlight. The moon was there to put a cool hand of absolution on her brow.

'Shall we go out a moment, Siegmund?' she asked fretfully.

'Ay, if you wish to,' he answered, altogether willing. He was filled with an easiness that would comply with her every wish.

They went out softly, walked in silence to the bay. There they stood at the head of the white, living moonpath, where the water whispered at the casement of the land seductively.

'It's the finest night I have seen,' said Siegmund. Helena's eyes suddenly filled with tears, at his simplicity of happiness.

'I like the moon on the water,' she said.

'I can hardly tell the one from the other,' he replied simply. 'The sea seems to be poured out of the moon, and rocking in the hands of the coast. They are all one, just as your eyes and hands and what you say, are all you.'

'Yes,' she answered, thrilled. This was the Siegmund of her dream, and she had created him. Yet there was a quiver of pain. He was beyond her now, and did not need her.

'I feel at home here,' he said; 'as if I had come home where I was bred.'

She pressed his hand hard, clinging to him.

'We go an awful long way round, Helena,' he said, 'just to find we're all right.' He laughed pleasantly. 'I have thought myself such an outcast! How can one be outcast in one's own night, and the moon always naked to us, and the sky half her time in rags? What do we want?'

Helena did not know. Nor did she know what he meant. But she felt something of the harmony.

'Whatever I have or haven't from now,' he continued, 'the darkness is a sort of mother, and the moon a sister, and the stars children, and sometimes the sea is a brother: and there's a family in one house,

you see.'

'And I, Siegmund?' she said softly, taking him in all seriousness. She looked up at him piteously. He saw the silver of tears among the moonlit ivory of her face. His heart tightened with tenderness, and he laughed, then bent to kiss her.

'The key of the castle,' he said. He put his face against hers, and felt on his cheek the smart of her tears.

'It's all very grandiose,' he said comfortably, 'but it does for tonight, all this that I say.'

'It is true for ever,' she declared.

'In so far as tonight is eternal,' he said.

He remained, with the wetness of her cheek smarting on his, looking from under his brows at the white transport of the water beneath the moon. They stood folded together, gazing into the white heart of the night.