

## Chapter 6

Siegmund woke with wonder in the morning. 'It is like the magic tales,' he thought, as he realized where he was; 'and I am transported to a new life, to realize my dream! Fairy-tales are true, after all.'

He had slept very deeply, so that he felt strangely new. He issued with delight from the dark of sleep into the sunshine. Reaching out his hand, he felt for his watch. It was seven o'clock. The dew of a sleep-drenched night glittered before his eyes. Then he laughed and forgot the night.

The creeper was tapping at the window, as a little wind blew up the sunshine. Siegmund put out his hands for the unfolding happiness of the morning. Helena was in the next room, which she kept inviolate. Sparrows in the creeper were shaking shadows of leaves among the sunshine; milk-white shallop of cloud stemmed bravely across the bright sky; the sea would be blossoming with a dewy shimmer of sunshine.

Siegmund rose to look, and it was so. Also the houses, like white, and red, and black cattle, were wandering down the bay, with a mist of sunshine between him and them. He leaned with his hands on the window-ledge looking out of the casement. The breeze ruffled his hair, blew down the neck of his sleeping-jacket upon his chest. He laughed, hastily threw on his clothes, and went out.

There was no sign of Helena. He strode along, singing to himself, and spinning his towel rhythmically. A small path led him across a field and down a zigzag in front of the cliffs. Some nooks, sheltered from the wind, were warm with sunshine, scented of honeysuckle and of thyme. He took a sprig of woodbine that was coloured of cream and butter. The grass wetted his brown shoes and his flannel trousers. Again, a fresh breeze put the scent of the sea in his uncovered hair. The cliff was a tangle of flowers above and below, with poppies at the lip being blown out like red flame, and scabious leaning inquisitively to look down, and pink and white rest-harrow everywhere, very pretty.

Siegmund stood at a bend where heath blossomed in shaggy lilac, where the sunshine but no wind came. He saw the blue bay curl away to the far-off headland. A few birds, white and small, circled, dipped by the thin foam-edge of the water; a few ships dimmed the sea with silent travelling; a few small people, dark or naked-white, moved below the swinging birds.

He chose his bathing-place where the incoming tide had half covered a stretch of fair, bright sand that was studded with rocks resembling square altars, hollowed on top. He threw his clothes on a high rock. It delighted him to feel the fresh, soft fingers of the wind touching him and wandering timidly over his nakedness. He ran laughing over the sand to the sea, where he waded in, thrusting his legs noisily through the heavy green water.

It was cold, and he shrank. For a moment he found himself thigh-deep, watching the horizontal stealing of a ship through the intolerable glitter, afraid to plunge. Laughing, he went under the clear green water.

He was a poor swimmer. Sometimes a choppy wave swamped him, and he rose gasping, wringing the water from his eyes and nostrils, while he heaved and sank with the rocking of the waves that clasped his breast. Then he stooped again to resume his game with the sea. It is splendid to play, even at middle age, and the sea is a fine partner.

With his eyes at the shining level of the water, he liked to peer across, taking a seal's view of the cliffs as they confronted the morning. He liked to see the ships standing up on a bright floor; he liked to see the birds come down.

But in his playing he drifted towards the spur of rock, where, as he swam, he caught his thigh on a sharp, submerged point. He frowned at the pain, at the sudden cruelty of the sea; then he thought no more of it, but ruffled his way back to the clear water, busily continuing his play.

When he ran out on to the fair sand his heart, and brain, and body were in a turmoil. He panted, filling his breast with the air that was sparkled and tasted of the sea. As he shuddered a little, the wilful palpitations of his flesh pleased him, as if birds had fluttered against him. He offered his body to the morning, glowing with the sea's passion.

The wind nestled in to him, the sunshine came on his shoulders like warm breath. He delighted in himself.

The rock before him was white and wet, like himself; it had a pool of clear water, with shells and one rose anemone.

'She would make so much of this little pool,' he thought. And as he smiled, he saw, very faintly, his own shadow in the water. It made him conscious of himself, seeming to look at him. He glanced at himself, at his handsome, white maturity. As he looked he felt the insidious creeping of blood down his thigh, which was marked with a long red slash. Siegmund watched the blood travel over the bright skin. It wound itself redly round the rise of his knee.

'That is I, that creeping red, and this whiteness I pride myself on is I, and my black hair, and my blue eyes are I. It is a weird thing to be a person. What makes me myself, among all these?'

Feeling chill, he wiped himself quickly.

'I am at my best, at my strongest,' he said proudly to himself. 'She ought to be rejoiced at me, but she is not; she rejects me as if I were a baboon under my clothing.'

He glanced at his whole handsome maturity, the firm plating of his breasts, the full thighs, creatures proud in themselves. Only he was

marred by the long raw scratch, which he regretted deeply.

'If I was giving her myself, I wouldn't want that blemish on me,' he thought.

He wiped the blood from the wound. It was nothing.

'She thinks ten thousand times more of that little pool, with a bit of pink anemone and some yellow weed, than of me. But, by Jove! I'd rather see her shoulders and breast than all heaven and earth put together could show.... Why doesn't she like me?' he thought as he dressed. It was his physical self thinking.

After dabbling his feet in a warm pool, he returned home. Helena was in the dining-room arranging a bowl of purple pansies. She looked up at him rather heavily as he stood radiant on the threshold. He put her at her ease. It was a gay, handsome boy she had to meet, not a man, strange and insistent. She smiled on him with tender dignity.

'You have bathed?' she said, smiling, and looking at his damp, ruffled black hair. She shrank from his eyes, but he was quite unconscious.

'You have not bathed!' he said; then bent to kiss her. She smelt the brine in his hair.

'No; I bathe later,' she replied. 'But what--'

Hesitating, she touched the towel, then looked up at him anxiously.

'It is blood?' she said.

'I grazed my thigh--nothing at all,' he replied.

'Are you sure?'

He laughed.

'The towel looks bad enough,' she said.

'It's an alarmist,' he laughed.

She looked in concern at him, then turned aside.

'Breakfast is quite ready,' she said.

'And I for breakfast--but shall I do?'

She glanced at him. He was without a collar, so his throat was bare above the neck-band of his flannel shirt. Altogether she disapproved of his slovenly appearance. He was usually so smart in his dress.

'I would not trouble,' she said almost sarcastically.

Whistling, he threw the towel on a chair.

'How did you sleep?' she asked gravely, as she watched him beginning to eat.

'Like the dead--solid,' he replied'. 'And you?'

'Oh, pretty well, thanks,' she said, rather piqued that he had slept so deeply, whilst she had tossed, and had called his name in a torture of sleeplessness.

'I haven't slept like that for years,' he said enthusiastically. Helena smiled gently on him. The charm of his handsome, healthy zest came over her. She liked his naked throat and his shirt-breast, which suggested the breast of the man beneath it. She was extraordinarily happy, with him so bright. The dark-faced pansies, in a little crowd, seemed gaily winking a golden eye at her.

After breakfast, while Siegmund dressed, she went down to the sea. She dwelled, as she passed, on all tiny, pretty things--on the barbaric yellow ragwort, and pink convolvuli; on all the twinkling of flowers, and dew, and snail-tracks drying in the sun. Her walk was one long lingering. More than the spaces, she loved the nooks, and fancy more than imagination.

She wanted to see just as she pleased, without any of humanity's previous vision for spectacles. So she knew hardly any flower's name, nor perceived any of the relationships, nor cared a jot about an adaptation or a modification. It pleased her that the lowest brownly florets of the clover hung down; she cared no more. She clothed everything in fancy.

'That yellow flower hadn't time to be brushed and combed by the fairies before dawn came. It is tousled ...' so she thought to herself. The pink convolvuli were fairy horns or telephones from the day fairies to the night fairies. The rippling sunlight on the sea was the Rhine maidens spreading their bright hair to the sun. That was her favourite form of thinking. The value of all things was in the fancy they evoked. She did not care for people; they were vulgar, ugly, and stupid, as a rule.

Her sense of satisfaction was complete as she leaned on the low sea-wall, spreading her fingers to warm on the stones, concocting magic out of the simple morning. She watched the indolent chasing of wavelets round the small rocks, the curling of the deep blue water round the water-shadowed reefs.

'This is very good,' she said to herself. 'This is eternally cool, and clean and fresh. It could never be spoiled by satiety.'

She tried to wash herself with the white and blue morning, to clear away the soiling of the last night's passion.



The sea played by itself, intent on its own game. Its aloofness, its self-sufficiency, are its great charm. The sea does not give and take, like the land and the sky. It has no traffic with the world. It spends its passion upon itself. Helena was something like the sea, self-sufficient and careless of the rest.

Siegmund came bareheaded, his black hair ruffling to the wind, his eyes shining warmer than the sea-like cornflowers rather, his limbs swinging backward and forward like the water. Together they leaned on the wall, warming the four white hands upon the grey bleached stone as they watched the water playing.

When Siegmund had Helena near, he lost the ache, the yearning towards something, which he always felt otherwise. She seemed to connect him with the beauty of things, as if she were the nerve through which he received intelligence of the sun, and wind, and sea, and of the moon and the darkness. Beauty she never felt herself came to him through her. It is that makes love. He could always sympathize with the wistful little flowers, and trees lonely in their crowds, and wild, sad seabirds. In these things he recognized the great yearning, the ache outwards towards something, with which he was ordinarily burdened. But with Helena, in this large sea-morning, he was whole and perfect as the day.

'Will it be fine all day?' he asked, when a cloud came over.

'I don't know,' she replied in her gentle, inattentive manner, as if she did not care at all. 'I think it will be a mixed day--cloud and sun--more sun than cloud.'

She looked up gravely to see if he agreed. He turned from frowning at the cloud to smile at her. He seemed so bright, teeming with life.

'I like a bare blue sky,' he said; 'sunshine that you seem to stir about as you walk.'

'It is warm enough here, even for you,' she smiled.

'Ah, here!' he answered, putting his face down to receive the radiation from the stone, letting his fingers creep towards Helena's. She laughed, and captured his fingers, pressing them into her hand. For nearly an hour they remained thus in the still sunshine by the sea-wall, till Helena began to sigh, and to lift her face to the little breeze that wandered down from the west. She fled as soon from warmth as from cold. Physically, she was always so; she shrank from anything extreme. But psychically she was an extremist, and a dangerous one.

They climbed the hill to the fresh-breathing west. On the highest point of land stood a tall cross, railed in by a red iron fence. They read the inscription.

'That's all right--but a vilely ugly railing!' exclaimed Siegmund.

'Oh, they'd have to fence in Lord Tennyson's white marble,' said Helena, rather indefinitely.

He interpreted her according to his own idea.

'Yes, he did belittle great things, didn't he?' said Siegmund.

'Tennyson!' she exclaimed.

'Not peacocks and princesses, but the bigger things.'

'I shouldn't say so,' she declared.

He sounded indeterminate, but was not really so.

They wandered over the downs westward, among the wind. As they followed the headland to the Needles, they felt the breeze from the wings of the sea brushing them, and heard restless, poignant voices screaming below the cliffs. Now and again a gull, like a piece of spume flung up, rose over the cliff's edge, and sank again. Now and again, as the path dipped in a hollow, they could see the low, suspended intertwining of the birds passing in and out of the cliff shelter.

These savage birds appealed to all the poetry and yearning in Helena.

They fascinated her, they almost voiced her. She crept nearer and nearer

the edge, feeling she must watch the gulls thread out in flakes of white above the weed-black rocks. Siegmund stood away back, anxiously. He would not dare to tempt Fate now, having too strong a sense of death to risk it.

'Come back, dear. Don't go so near,' he pleaded, following as close as he might. She heard the pain and appeal in his voice. It thrilled her, and she went a little nearer. What was death to her but one of her symbols, the death of which the sagas talk--something grand, and sweeping, and dark.

Leaning forward, she could see the line of grey sand and the line of foam broken by black rocks, and over all the gulls, stirring round like froth on a pot, screaming in chorus.

She watched the beautiful birds, heard the pleading of Siegmund, and she thrilled with pleasure, toying with his keen anguish.

Helena came smiling to Siegmund, saying:

'They look so fine down there.'

He fastened his hands upon her, as a relief from his pain. He was filled with a keen, strong anguish of dread, like a presentiment. She laughed as he gripped her.

They went searching for a way of descent. At last Siegmund inquired of the coastguard the nearest way down the cliff. He was pointed to the 'Path of the Hundred Steps'.

'When is a hundred not a hundred?' he said sceptically, as they descended the dazzling white chalk. There were sixty-eight steps. Helena laughed at his exactitude.

'It must be a love of round numbers,' he said.

'No doubt,' she laughed. He took the thing so seriously.

'Or of exaggeration,' he added.

There was a shelving beach of warm white sand, bleached soft as velvet. A sounding of gulls filled the dark recesses of the headland; a low chatter of shingle came from where the easy water was breaking; the confused, shell-like murmur of the sea between the folded cliffs. Siegmund and Helena lay side by side upon the dry sand, small as two resting birds, while thousands of gulls whirled in a white-flaked storm above them, and the great cliffs towered beyond, and high up over the cliffs the multitudinous clouds were travelling, a vast caravan en route. Amidst the journeying of oceans and clouds and the circling flight of heavy spheres, lost to sight in the sky, Siegmund and Helena, two grains of life in the vast movement, were travelling a moment side by side.

They lay on the beach like a grey and a white sea-bird together. The lazy ships that were idling down the Solent observed the cliffs and the boulders, but Siegmund and Helena were too little. They lay ignored and insignificant, watching through half-closed fingers the diverse caravan of Day go past. They lay with their latticed fingers over their eyes, looking out at the sailing of ships across their vision of blue water.

'Now, that one with the greyish sails--' Siegmund was saying.

'Like a housewife of forty going placidly round with the duster--yes?' interrupted Helena.

'That is a schooner. You see her four sails, and--'

He continued to classify the shipping, until he was interrupted by the wicked laughter of Helena.

'That is right, I am sure,' he protested.

'I won't contradict you,' she laughed, in a tone which showed him he knew even less of the classifying of ships than she did.

'So you have lain there amusing yourself at my expense all the time?' he said, not knowing in the least why she laughed. They turned and looked at one another, blue eyes smiling and wavering as the beach wavers in

the heat. Then they closed their eyes with sunshine.

Drowsed by the sun, and the white sand, and the foam, their thoughts slept like butterflies on the flowers of delight. But cold shadows startled them up.

'The clouds are coming,' he said regretfully.

'Yes; but the wind is quite strong enough for them,' she answered,

'Look at the shadows--like blots floating away. Don't they devour the sunshine?'

'It is quite warm enough here,' she said, nestling in to him.

'Yes; but the sting is missing. I like to feel the warmth biting in.'

'No, I do not. To be cosy is enough.'

'I like the sunshine on me, real, and manifest, and tangible. I feel like a seed that has been frozen for ages. I want to be bitten by the sunshine.'

She leaned over and kissed him. The sun came bright-footed over the water, leaving a shining print on Siegmund's face. He lay, with half-closed eyes, sprawled loosely on the sand. Looking at his limbs,

she imagined he must be heavy, like the bounders. She sat over him, with her fingers stroking his eyebrows, that were broad and rather arched. He lay perfectly still, in a half-dream.

Presently she laid her head on his breast, and remained so, watching the sea, and listening to his heart-beats. The throb was strong and deep. It seemed to go through the whole island and the whole afternoon, and it fascinated her: so deep, unheard, with its great expulsions of life. Had the world a heart? Was there also deep in the world a great God thudding out waves of life, like a great heart, unconscious? It frightened her. This was the God she knew not, as she knew not this Siegmund. It was so different from the half-shut eyes with black lashes, and the winsome, shapely nose. And the heart of the world, as she heard it, could not be the same as the curling splash of retreat of the little sleepy waves. She listened for Siegmund's soul, but his heart overbeat all other sound, thudding powerfully.