

Chapter 7

Siegmund woke to the muffled firing of guns on the sea. He looked across at the shaggy grey water in wonder. Then he turned to Helena.

'I suppose,' he said, 'they are saluting the Czar. Poor beggar!'

'I was afraid they would wake you,' she smiled.

They listened again to the hollow, dull sound of salutes from across the water and the downs.

The day had gone grey. They decided to walk, down below, to the next bay.

'The tide is coming in,' said Helena.

'But this broad strip of sand hasn't been wet for months. It's as soft as pepper,' he replied.

They laboured along the shore, beside the black, sinuous line of shrivelled fucus. The base of the cliff was piled with chalk debris. On the other side was the level plain of the sea. Hand in hand, alone and overshadowed by huge cliffs, they toiled on. The waves staggered in, and fell, overcome at the end of the race.

Siegmund and Helena neared a headland, sheer as the side of a house, its base weighted with a tremendous white mass of boulders, that the green sea broke amongst with a hollow sound, followed by a sharp hiss of withdrawal. The lovers had to cross this desert of white boulders, that glistened in smooth skins uncannily. But Siegmund saw the waves were almost at the wall of the headland. Glancing back, he saw the other headland white-dashed at the base with foam. He and Helena must hurry, or they would be prisoned on the thin crescent of strand still remaining between the great wall and the water.

The cliffs overhead oppressed him--made him feel trapped and helpless. He was caught by them in a net of great boulders, while the sea fumbled for him. But he and Helena. She laboured strenuously beside him, blinded by the skin-like glisten of the white rock.

'I think I will rest awhile,' she said.

'No, come along,' he begged.

'My dear,' she laughed, 'there is tons of this shingle to buttress us from the sea.'

He looked at the waves curving and driving maliciously at the boulders. It would be ridiculous to be trapped.

'Look at this black wood,' she said. 'Does the sea really char it?'

'Let us get round the corner,' he begged.

'Really, Siegmund, the sea is not so anxious to take us,' she said ironically.

When they rounded the first point, they found themselves in a small bay jutting out to sea; the front of the headland was, as usual, grooved. This bay was pure white at the base, from its great heaped mass of shingle. With the huge concave of the cliff behind, the foothold of massed white boulders, and the immense arc of the sea in front, Helena was delighted.

'This is fine, Siegmund!' she said, halting and facing west.

Smiling ironically, he sat down on a boulder. They were quite alone, in this great white niche thrust out to sea. Here, he could see, the tide would beat the base of the wall. It came plunging not far from their feet.

'Would you really like to travel beyond the end?' he asked.

She looked round quickly, thrilled, then answered as if in rebuke:

'This is a fine place. I should like to stay here an hour.'

'And then where?'

'Then? Oh, then, I suppose, it would be tea-time.'

'Tea on brine and pink anemones, with Daddy Neptune.'

She looked sharply at the outjutting capes. The sea did foam perilously near their bases.

'I suppose it is rather risky,' she said; and she turned, began silently to clamber forwards.

He followed; she should set the pace.

'I have no doubt there's plenty of room, really,' he said. 'The sea only looks near.'

But she toiled on intently. Now it was a question of danger, not of inconvenience, Siegmund felt elated. The waves foamed up, as it seemed, against the exposed headland, from which the massive shingle had been swept back. Supposing they could not get by? He began to smile curiously. He became aware of the tremendous noise of waters, of the slight shudder of the shingle when a wave struck it, and he always laughed to himself. Helena laboured on in silence; he kept just behind her. The point seemed near, but it took longer than they thought. They

had against them the tremendous cliff, the enormous weight of shingle, and the swinging sea. The waves struck louder, booming fearfully; wind, sweeping round the corner, wet their faces. Siegmund hoped they were cut off, and hoped anxiously the way was clear. The smile became set on his face.

Then he saw there was a ledge or platform at the base of the cliff, and it was against this the waves broke. They climbed the side of this ridge, hurried round to the front. There the wind caught them, wet and furious; the water raged below. Between the two Helena shrank, wilted. She took hold of Siegmund. The great, brutal wave flung itself at the rock, then drew back for another heavy spring. Fume and spray were spun on the wind like smoke. The roaring thud of the waves reminded Helena of a beating heart. She clung closer to him, as her hair was blown out damp, and her white dress flapped in the wet wind. Always, against the rock, came the slow thud of the waves, like a great heart beating under the breast. There was something brutal about it that she could not bear. She had no weapon against brute force.

She glanced up at Siegmund. Tiny drops of mist greyed his eyebrows. He was looking out to sea, screwing up his eyes, and smiling brutally. Her face became heavy and sullen. He was like the heart and the brute sea, just here; he was not her Siegmund. She hated the brute in him.

Turning suddenly, she plunged over the shingle towards the wide, populous bay. He remained alone, grinning at the smashing turmoil,

careless of her departure. He would easily catch her.

When at last he turned from the wrestling water, he had spent his savagery, and was sad. He could never take part in the great battle of action. It was beyond him. Many things he had let slip by. His life was whittled down to only a few interests, only a few necessities. Even here, he had but Helena, and through her the rest. After this week--well, that was vague. He left it in the dark, dreading it.

And Helena was toiling over the rough beach alone. He saw her small figure bowed as she plunged forward. It smote his heart with the keenest tenderness. She was so winsome, a playmate with beauty and fancy. Why was he cruel to her because she had not his own bitter wisdom of experience? She was young and naïve, and should he be angry with her for that? His heart was tight at the thought of her. She would have to suffer also, because of him.

He hurried after her. Not till they had nearly come to a little green mound, where the downs sloped, and the cliffs were gone, did he catch her up. Then he took her hand as they walked.

They halted on the green hillock beyond the sand, and, without a word, he folded her in his arms. Both were put of breath. He clasped her close, seeming to rock her with his strong panting. She felt his body lifting into her, and sinking away. It seemed to force a rhythm, a new pulse, in her. Gradually, with a fine, keen thrilling, she melted down

on him, like metal sinking on a mould. He was sea and sunlight mixed, heaving, warm, deliciously strong.

Siegmund exulted. At last she was moulded to him in pure passion.

They stood folded thus for some time. Then Helena raised her burning face, and relaxed. She was throbbing with strange elation and satisfaction.

'It might as well have been the sea as any other way, dear,' she said, startling both of them. The speech went across their thoughtfulness like a star flying into the night, from nowhere. She had no idea why she said it. He pressed his mouth on hers. 'Not for you,' he thought, by reflex. 'You can't go that way yet.' But he said nothing, strained her very tightly, and kept her lips.

They were roused by the sound of voices. Unclasping, they went to walk at the fringe of the water. The tide was creeping back. Siegmund stooped, and from among the water's combings picked up an electric-light bulb. It lay in some weed at the base of a rock. He held it in his hand to Helena. Her face lighted with a curious pleasure. She took the thing delicately from his hand, fingered it with her exquisite softness.

'Isn't it remarkable!' she exclaimed joyously. 'The sea must be very, very gentle--and very kind.'

'Sometimes,' smiled Siegmund.

'But I did not think it could be so fine-fingered,' she said. She breathed on the glass bulb till it looked like a dim magnolia bud; she inhaled its fine savour.

'It would not have treated you so well,' he said. She looked at him with heavy eyes. Then she returned to her bulb. Her fingers were very small and very pink. She had the most delicate touch in the world, like a faint feel of silk. As he watched her lifting her fingers from off the glass, then gently stroking it, his blood ran hot. He watched her, waited upon her words and movements attentively.

'It is a graceful act on the sea's part,' she said. 'Wotan is so clumsy--he knocks over the bowl, and flap-flap-flap go the gasping fishes, pizzicato!--but the sea--'

Helena's speech was often difficult to render into plain terms. She was not lucid.

'But life's so full of anti-climax,' she concluded. Siegmund smiled softly at her. She had him too much in love to disagree or to examine her words.

'There's no reckoning with life, and no reckoning with the sea. The only way to get on with both is to be as near a vacuum as possible, and

float,' he jested. It hurt her that he was flippant. She proceeded to forget he had spoken.

There were three children on the beach. Helena had handed him back the senseless bauble, not able to throw it away. Being a father:

'I will give it to the children,' he said.

She looked up at him, loved him for the thought.

Wandering hand in hand, for it pleased them both to own each other publicly, after years of conventional distance, they came to a little girl who was bending over a pool. Her black hair hung in long snakes to the water. She stood up, flung back her locks to see them as they approached. In one hand she clasped some pebbles.

'Would you like this? I found it down there,' said Siegmund, offering her the bulb.

She looked at him with grave blue eyes and accepted his gift. Evidently she was not going to say anything.

'The sea brought it all the way from the mainland without breaking it,' said Helena, with the interesting intonation some folk use to children.

The girl looked at her.

'The waves put it out of their lap on to some seaweed with such careful fingers--'

The child's eyes brightened.

'The tide-line is full of treasures,' said Helena, smiling.

The child answered her smile a little.

Siegmund had walked away.

'What beautiful eyes she had!' said Helena.

'Yes,' he replied.

She looked up at him. He felt her searching him tenderly with her eyes. But he could not look back at her. She took his hand and kissed it, knowing he was thinking of his own youngest child.