

Chapter 9

The day waxed hot. A few little silver tortoises of cloud had crawled across the desert of sky, and hidden themselves. The chalk roads were white, quivering with heat. Helena and Siegmund walked eastward bareheaded under the sunshine. They felt like two insects in the niche of a hot hearth as they toiled along the deep road. A few poppies here and there among the wild rye floated scarlet in sunshine like blood-drops on green water. Helena recalled Francis Thompson's poems, which Siegmund had never read. She repeated what she knew, and laughed, thinking what an ineffectual pale shadow of a person Thompson must have been. She looked at Siegmund, walking in large easiness beside her.

'Artists are supremely unfortunate persons,' she announced.

'Think of Wagner,' said Siegmund, lifting his face to the hot bright heaven, and drinking the heat with his blinded face. All states seemed meagre, save his own. He recalled people who had loved, and he pitied them--dimly, drowsily, without pain.

They came to a place where they might gain access to the shore by a path down a landslip. As they descended through the rockery, yellow with ragwort, they felt themselves dip into the inert, hot air of the bay. The living atmosphere of the uplands was left overhead. Among the rocks of the sand, white as if smelted, the heat glowed and quivered. Helena

sat down and took off her shoes. She walked on the hot, glistening sand till her feet were delightfully, almost intoxicatingly scorched. Then she ran into the water to cool them. Siegmund and she paddled in the light water, pensively watching the haste of the ripples, like crystal beetles, running over the white outline of their feet; looking out on the sea that rose so near to them, dwarfing them by its far reach.

For a short time they flitted silently in the water's edge. Then there settled down on them a twilight of sleep, the little hush that closes the doors and draws the blinds of the house after a festival. They wandered out across the beach above high-water mark, where they sat down together on the sand, leaning back against a flat brown stone, Siegmund with the sunshine on his forehead, Helena drooping close to him, in his shadow. Then the hours ride by unnoticed, making no sound as they go. The sea creeps nearer, nearer, like a snake which watches two birds asleep. It may not disturb them, but sinks back, ceasing to look at them with its bright eyes.

Meanwhile the flowers of their passion were softly shed, as poppies fall at noon, and the seed of beauty ripened rapidly within them. Dreams came like a wind through, their souls, drifting off with the seed-dust of beautiful experience which they had ripened, to fertilize the souls of others withal. In them the sea and the sky and ships had mingled and bred new blossoms of the torrid heat of their love. And the seed of such blossoms was shaken as they slept, into the hand of God, who held it in His palm precious; then scattered it again, to produce new splendid

blooms of beauty.

A little breeze came down the cliffs. Sleep lightened the lovers of their experience; new buds were urged in their souls as they lay in a shadowed twilight, at the porch of death. The breeze fanned the face of Helena; a coolness wafted on her throat. As the afternoon wore on she revived. Quick to flag, she was easy to revive, like a white pansy flung into water. She shivered lightly and rose.

Strange, it seemed to her, to rise from the brown stone into life again. She felt beautifully refreshed. All around was quick as a garden wet in the early morning of June. She took her hair and loosened it, shook it free from sand, spread, and laughed like a fringed poppy that opens itself to the sun. She let the wind comb through its soft fingers the tangles of her hair. Helena loved the wind. She turned to it, and took its kisses on her face and throat.

Siegmund lay still, looking up at her. The changes in him were deeper, like alteration in his tissue. His new buds came slowly, and were of a fresh type. He lay smiling at her. At last he said:

'You look now as if you belonged to the sea.'

'I do; and some day I shall go back to it,' she replied.

For to her at that moment the sea was a great lover, like Siegmund, but

more impersonal, who would receive her when Siegmund could not. She rejoiced momentarily in the fact. Siegmund looked at her and continued smiling. His happiness was budding firm and secure.

'Come!' said Helena, holding out her hand.

He rose somewhat reluctantly from his large, fruitful inertia.