

Chapter 13

In the morning, after bathing, Siegmund leaned upon the seawall in a kind of reverie. It was late, towards nine o'clock, yet he lounged, dreamily looking out on the turquoise blue water, and the white haze of morning, and the small, fair shadows of ships slowly realizing before him. In the bay were two battleships, uncouth monsters, lying as naïve and curious as sea-lions strayed afar.

Siegmund was gazing oversea in a half-stupid way, when he heard a voice beside him say:

'Where have they come from; do you know, sir?'

He turned, saw a fair, slender man of some thirty-five years standing beside him and smiling faintly at the battleships.

'The men-of-war? There are a good many at Spithead,' said Siegmund.

The other glanced negligently into his face.

'They look rather incongruous, don't you think? We left the sea empty and shining, and when we come again, behold, these objects keeping their eye on us!'

Siegmund laughed.

'You are not an Anarchist, I hope?' he said jestingly.

'A Nihilist, perhaps,' laughed the other. 'But I am quite fond of the Czar, if pity is akin to love. No; but you can't turn round without finding some policeman or other at your elbow--look at them, abominable ironmongery!--ready to put his hand on your shoulder.'

The speaker's grey-blue eyes, always laughing with mockery, glanced from the battleships and lit on the dark blue eyes of Siegmund. The latter felt his heart lift in a convulsive movement. This stranger ran so quickly to a perturbing intimacy.

'I suppose we are in the hands of--God,' something moved Siegmund to say. The stranger contracted his eyes slightly as he gazed deep at the speaker.

'Ah!' he drawled curiously. Then his eyes wandered over the wet hair, the white brow, and the bare throat of Siegmund, after which they returned again to the eyes of his interlocutor. 'Does the Czar sail this way?' he asked at last.

'I do not know,' replied Siegmund, who, troubled by the other's penetrating gaze, had not expected so trivial a question.

'I suppose the newspaper will tell us?' said the man.

Sure to,' said Siegmund.

'You haven't seen it this morning?'

'Not since Saturday.'

The swift blue eyes of the man dilated. He looked curiously at Siegmund.

'You are not alone on your holiday?'

'No.' Siegmund did not like this--he gazed over the sea in displeasure.

'I live here--at least for the present--name, Hampson--'

'Why, weren't you one of the first violins at the Savoy fifteen years back?' asked Siegmund.

They chatted awhile about music. They had known each other, had been fairly intimate, and had since become strangers. Hampson excused himself for having addressed Siegmund:

'I saw you with your nose flattened against the window,' he said, 'and as I had mine in the same position too, I thought we were fit to be re-acquainted.'

Siegmund looked at the man in astonishment.

'I only mean you were staring rather hard at nothing. It's a pity to try and stare out of a beautiful blue day like this, don't you think?'

'Stare beyond it, you mean?' asked Siegmund.

'Exactly!' replied the other, with a laugh of intelligence. 'I call a day like this "the blue room". It's the least draughty apartment in all the confoundedly draughty House of Life.'

Siegmund looked at him very intently. This Hampson seemed to express something in his own soul.

'I mean,' the man explained, 'that after all, the great mass of life that washes unidentified, and that we call death, creeps through the blue envelope of the day, and through our white tissue, and we can't stop it, once we've begun to leak.'

'What do you mean by "leak"?' asked Siegmund.

'Goodness knows--I talk through my hat. But once you've got a bit tired of the house, you glue your nose to the windowpane, and stare for the dark--as you were doing.'

'But, to use your metaphor, I'm not tired of the House--if you mean Life,' said Siegmund.

'Praise God! I've met a poet who's not afraid of having his pocket picked--or his soul, or his brain!' said the stranger, throwing his head back in a brilliant smile, his eyes dilated.

'I don't know what you mean, sir,' said Siegmund, very quietly, with a strong fear and a fascination opposing each other in his heart.

'You're not tired of the House, but of your own particular room--say, suite of rooms--'

'Tomorrow I am turned out of this "blue room",' said Siegmund with a wry smile. The other looked at him seriously.

'Dear Lord!' exclaimed Hampson; then: 'Do you remember Flaubert's saint, who laid naked against a leper? I could not do it.'

'Nor I,' shuddered Siegmund.

'But you've got to--or something near it!'

Siegmund looked at the other with frightened, horrified eyes.

'What of yourself?' he said, resentfully.

'I've funk-ed-ran away from my leper, and now am eating my heart out, and staring from the window at the dark.'

'But can't you do something?' said Siegmund.

The other man laughed with amusement, throwing his head back and showing his teeth.

'I won't ask you what your intentions are,' he said, with delicate irony in his tone. 'You know, I am a tremendously busy man. I earn five hundred a year by hard work; but it's no good. If you have acquired a liking for intensity in life, you can't do without it. I mean vivid soul experience. It takes the place, with us, of the old adventure, and physical excitement.'

Siegmund looked at the other man with baffled, anxious eyes.

'Well, and what then?' he said.

'What then? A craving for intense life is nearly as deadly as any other craving. You become a concentr e, you feed your normal flame with oxygen, and it devours your tissue. The soulful ladies of romance are always semi-transparent.'

Siegmund laughed.

'At least, I am quite opaque,' he said.

The other glanced over his easy, mature figure and strong throat.

'Not altogether,' said Hampson. 'And you, I should think, are one whose flame goes nearly out, when the stimulant is lacking.'

Siegmund glanced again at him, startled.

'You haven't much reserve. You're like a tree that'll flower till it kills itself,' the man continued. 'You'll run till you drop, and then you won't get up again. You've no dispassionate intellect to control you and economize.'

'You're telling me very plainly what I am and am not,' said Siegmund, laughing rather sarcastically. He did not like it.

'Oh, it's only what I think,' replied Hampson. 'We're a good deal alike, you see, and have gone the same way. You married and I didn't; but women have always done as they liked with me.'

'That's hardly so in my case,' said Siegmund.

Hampson eyed him critically.

'Say one woman; it's enough,' he replied.

Siegmund gazed, musing, over the sea.

'The best sort of women--the most interesting--are the worst for us,' Hampson resumed. 'By instinct they aim at suppressing the gross and animal in us. Then they are supersensitive--refined a bit beyond humanity. We, who are as little gross as need be, become their instruments. Life is grounded in them, like electricity in the earth; and we take from them their unrealized life, turn it into light or warmth or power for them. The ordinary woman is, alone, a great potential force, an accumulator, if you like, charged from the source of life. In us her force becomes evident.

'She can't live without us, but she destroys us. These deep, interesting women don't want us; they want the flowers of the spirit they can gather of us. We, as natural men, are more or less degrading to them and to their love of us; therefore they destroy the natural man in us--that is, us altogether.'

'You're a bit downright are you not?' asked Siegmund, deprecatingly. He did not disagree with what his friend said, nor tell him such statements were arbitrary.

'That's according to my intensity,' laughed Hampson. 'I can open the blue heaven with looking, and push back the doors of day a little, and

see--God knows what! One of these days I shall slip through. Oh, I am perfectly sane; I only strive beyond myself!

'Don't you think it's wrong to get like it?' asked Siegmund.

'Well, I do, and so does everybody; but the crowd profits by us in the end. When they understand my music, it will be an education to them; and the whole aim of mankind is to render life intelligible.'

Siegmund pondered a little....

'You make me feel--as if I were loose, and a long way off from myself,' he said slowly.

The young man smiled, then looked down at the wall, where his own hands lay white and fragile, showing the blue veins.

'I can scarcely believe they are me,' he said. 'If they rose up and refused me, I should not be surprised. But aren't they beautiful?'

He looked, with a faint smile, at Siegmund.

Siegmund glanced from the stranger's to his own hands, which lay curved on the sea-wall as if asleep. They were small for a man of his stature, but, lying warm in the sun, they looked particularly secure in life. Instinctively, with a wave of self-love, he closed his fists over

his thumbs.

'I wonder,' said Hampson softly, with strange bitterness, 'that she can't see it; I wonder she doesn't cherish you. You are full and beautiful enough in the flesh--why will she help to destroy you, when she loved you to such extremity?'

Siegmund looked at him with awe-stricken eyes. The frail, swift man, with his intensely living eyes, laughed suddenly.

'Fools--the fools, these women!' he said. 'Either they smash their own crystal, or it revolts, turns opaque, and leaps out of their hands. Look at me, I am whittled down to the quick; but your neck is thick with compressed life; it is a stem so tense with life that it will hold up by itself. I am very sorry.'

All at once he stopped. The bitter despair in his tone was the voice of a heavy feeling of which Siegmund had been vaguely aware for some weeks. Siegmund felt a sense of doom. He laughed, trying to shake it off.

'I wish I didn't go on like this,' said Hampson piteously. 'I wish I could be normal. How hot it is already! You should wear a hat. It is really hot.' He pulled open his flannel shirt.

'I like the heat,' said Siegmund.

'So do I.'

Directly, the young man dashed the long hair on his forehead into some sort of order, bowed, and smiling in his gay fashion, walked leisurely to the village.

Siegmund stood awhile as if stunned. It seemed to him only a painful dream. Sighing deeply to relieve himself of the pain, he set off to find Helena.