Chapter 15

The afternoon of the blazing day passed drowsily. Lying close together on the beach, Siegmund and Helena let the day exhale its hours like perfume, unperceived. Siegmund slept, a light evanescent sleep irised with dreams and with suffering: nothing definite, the colour of dreams without shape. Helena, as usual, retained her consciousness much more clearly. She watched the far-off floating of ships, and the near wading of children through the surf. Endless trains of thoughts, like little waves, rippled forward and broke on the shore of her drowsiness. But each thought-ripple, though it ran lightly, was tinged with copper-coloured gleams as from a lurid sunset. Helena felt that the sun was setting on her and Siegmund. The hour was too composed, spell-bound, for grief or anxiety or even for close perception. She was merely aware that the sun was wheeling down, tangling Siegmund and her in the traces, like overthrown charioteers. So the hours passed.

After tea they went eastwards on the downs. Siegmund was animated, so that Helena caught his mood. It was very rare that they spoke of the time preceding their acquaintance, Helena knew little or nothing of Siegmund's life up to the age of thirty, whilst he had never learned anything concerning her childhood. Somehow she did not encourage him to self-discovery. Today, however, the painful need of lovers for self-revelation took hold on him.

'It is awfully funny,' he said. 'I was so gone on Beatrice when I married her. She had only just come back from Egypt. Her father was an army officer, a very handsome man, and, I believe, a bit of a rake. Beatrice is really well connected, you know. But old FitzHerbert ran through all his money, and through everything else. He was too hot for the rest of the family, so they dropped him altogether.

'He came to live at Peckham when I was sixteen. I had just left school, and was to go into father's business. Mrs FitzHerbert left cards, and very soon we were acquainted. Beatrice had been a good time in a French convent school. She had only knocked about with the army a little while, but it had brought her out. I remember I thought she was miles above me--which she was. She wasn't bad-looking, either, and you know men all like her. I bet she'd marry again, in spite of the children.

'At first I fluttered round her. I remember I'd got a little, silky moustache. They all said I looked older than sixteen. At that time I was mad on the violin, and she played rather well. Then FitzHerbert went off abroad somewhere, so Beatrice and her mother half lived at our house. The mother was an invalid.

'I remember I nearly stood on my head one day. The conservatory opened off the smoking-room, so when I came in the room, I heard my two sisters and Beatrice talking about good-looking men.

'"I consider Bertram will make a handsome man," said my younger sister.

'"He's got beautiful eyes," said my other sister.

'"And a real darling nose and chin!" cried Beatrice. "If only he was more solide! He is like a windmill, all limbs."

'"He will fill out. Remember, he's not quite seventeen," said my elder sister.

'"Ah, he is doux--he is câlin," said Beatrice.

'"I think he is rather too spoony for his age," said my elder sister.

'"But he's a fine boy for all that. See how thick his knees are," my younger sister chimed in.

'"Ah, si, si!" cried Beatrice.

'I made a row against the door, then walked across.

'"Hello, is somebody in here?" I said, as I pushed into the little conservatory.

'I looked straight at Beatrice, and she at me. We seemed to have formed an alliance in that look: she was the other half of my consciousness, I of hers. Ha! Ha! there were a lot of white narcissus, and little white

hyacinths, Roman hyacinths, in the conservatory. I can see them now, great white stars, and tangles of little ones, among a bank of green; and I can recall the keen, fresh scent on the warm air; and the look of Beatrice ... her great dark eyes.

'It's funny, but Beatrice is as dead--ay, far more dead--than Dante's. And I am not that young fool, not a bit.

'I was very romantic, fearfully emotional, and the soul of honour. Beatrice said nobody cared a thing about her. FitzHerbert was always jaunting off, the mother was a fretful invalid. So I was seventeen, earning half a guinea a week, and she was eighteen, with no money, when we ran away to Brighton and got married. Poor old Pater, he took it awfully well, I have been a frightful drag on him, you know.

'There's the romance. I wonder how it will all end.'

Helena laughed, and he did not detect her extreme bitterness of spirit.

They walked on in silence for some time. He was thinking back, before Helena's day. This left her very much alone, and forced on her the idea that, after all, love, which she chose to consider as single and wonderful a thing in a man's life as birth, or adolescence, or death, was temporary, and formed only an episode. It was her hour of disillusion.

'Come to think of it,' Siegmund continued, 'I have always shirked. Whenever I've been in a tight corner I've gone to Pater.'

'I think,' she said, 'marriage has been a tight corner you couldn't get out of to go to anybody.'

'Yet I'm here,' he answered simply.

The blood suffused her face and neck.

'And some men would have made a better job of it. When it's come to sticking out against Beatrice, and sailing the domestic ship in spite of her, I've always funked. I tell you I'm something of a moral coward.'

He had her so much on edge she was inclined to answer, 'So be it.' Instead, she ran back over her own history: it consisted of petty discords in contemptible surroundings, then of her dreams and fancies, finally--Siegmund.

'In my life,' she said, with the fine, grating discord in her tones, 'I might say always, the real life has seemed just outside--brownies running and fairies peeping--just beyond the common, ugly place where I am. I seem to have been hedged in by vulgar circumstances, able to glimpse outside now and then, and see the reality.'

'You are so hard to get at,' said Siegmund. 'And so scornful of familiar

things.'

She smiled, knowing he did not understand. The heat had jaded her, so that physically she was full of discord, of dreariness that set her teeth on edge. Body and soul, she was out of tune.

A warm, noiseless twilight was gathering over the downs and rising darkly from the sea. Fate, with wide wings, was hovering just over her. Fate, ashen grey and black, like a carrion crow, had her in its shadow. Yet Siegmund took no notice. He did not understand. He walked beside her whistling to himself, which only distressed her the more.

They were alone on the smooth hills to the east. Helena looked at the day melting out of the sky, leaving the permanent structure of the night. It was her turn to suffer the sickening detachment which comes after moments of intense living.

The rosiness died out of the sunset as embers fade into thick ash. In herself, too, the ruddy glow sank and went out. The earth was a cold dead heap, coloured drearily, the sky was dark with flocculent grey ash, and she herself an upright mass of soft ash.

She shuddered slightly with horror. The whole face of things was to her livid and ghastly. Being a moralist rather than an artist, coming of fervent Wesleyan stock, she began to scourge herself. She had done wrong again. Looking back, no one had she touched without hurting. She had a

destructive force; anyone she embraced she injured. Faint voices echoed back from her conscience. The shadows were full of complaint against her. It was all true, she was a harmful force, dragging Fate to petty, mean conclusions.

Life and hope were ash in her mouth. She shuddered with discord. Despair grated between her teeth. This dreariness was worse than any her dreary, lonely life had known. She felt she could bear it no longer.

Siegmund was there. Surely he could help? He would rekindle her. But he was straying ahead, carelessly whistling the Spring Song from Die Walküre. She looked at him, and again shuddered with horror. Was that really Siegmund, that stooping, thick-shouldered, indifferent man? Was that the Siegmund who had seemed to radiate joy into his surroundings, the Siegmund whose coming had always changed the whole weather of her soul? Was that the Siegmund whose touch was keen with bliss for her, whose face was a panorama of passing God? She looked at him again. His radiance was gone, his aura had ceased. She saw him a stooping man, past the buoyancy of youth, walking and whistling rather stupidly--in short, something of the 'clothed animal on end', like the rest of men.

She suffered an agony of disillusion. Was this the real Siegmund, and her own only a projection of her soul? She took her breath sharply. Was he the real clay, and that other, her beloved, only the breathing of her soul upon this. There was an awful blank before her.

'Siegmund!' she said in despair.

He turned sharply at the sound of her voice. Seeing her face pale and distorted in the twilight, he was filled with dismay. She mutely lifted her arms to him, watching him in despair. Swiftly he took her in his arms, and asked in a troubled voice:

'What is it, dear? Is something wrong?'

His voice was nothing to her--it was stupid. She felt his arms round her, felt her face pressed against the cloth of his coat, against the beating of his heart. What was all this? This was not comfort or love. He was not understanding or helping, only chaining her, hurting. She did not want his brute embrace--she was most utterly alone, gripped so in his arms. If he could not save her from herself, he must leave her free to pant her heart out in free air. The secret thud, thud of his heart, the very self of that animal in him she feared and hated, repulsed her. She struggled to escape.

'What is it? Won't you tell me what is the matter?' he pleaded.

She began to sob, dry wild sobs, feeling as if she would go mad. He tried to look at her face, for which she hated him. And all the time he held her fast, all the time she was imprisoned in the embrace of this brute, blind creature, whose heart confessed itself in thud, thud, thud.

'Have you heard anything against us? Have I done anything? Have I said anything? Tell me--at any rate tell me, Helena.'

Her sobbing was like the chattering of dry leaves. She grew frantic to be free. Stifled in that prison any longer, she would choke and go mad. His coat chafed her face; as she struggled she could see the strong working of his throat. She fought against him; she struggled in panic to be free.

'Let me go!' she cried. 'Let me go! Let me go!' He held her in bewilderment and terror. She thrust her hands in his chest and pushed him apart. Her face, blind to him, was very much distorted by her suffering. She thrust him furiously away with great strength.

His heart stood still with wonder. She broke from him and dropped down, sobbing wildly, in the shelter of the tumuli. She was bunched in a small, shaken heap. Siegmund could not bear it. He went on one knee beside her, trying to take her hand in his, and pleading:

'Only tell me, Helena, what it is. Tell me what it is. At least tell me, Helena; tell me what it is. Oh, but this is dreadful!'

She had turned convulsively from him. She shook herself, as if beside herself, and at last covered her ears with her hands, to shut out this unreasoning pleading of his voice.

Seeing her like this, Siegmund at last gave in. Quite still, he knelt on one knee beside her, staring at the late twilight. The intense silence was crackling with the sound of Helena's dry, hissing sobs. He remained silenced, stunned by the unnatural conflict. After waiting a while, he put his hand on her. She winced convulsively away.

Then he rose, saying in his heart, 'It is enough,' He went behind the small hill, and looked at the night. It was all exposed. He wanted to hide, to cover himself from the openness, and there was not even a bush under which he could find cover.

He lay down flat on the ground, pressing his face into the wiry turf, trying to hide. Quite stunned, with a death taking place in his soul, he lay still, pressed against the earth. He held his breath for a long time before letting it go, then again he held it. He could scarcely bear, even by breathing, to betray himself. His consciousness was dark.

Helena had sobbed and struggled the life animation back into herself. At length, weary but comfortable, she lay still to rest. Almost she could have gone to sleep. But she grew chilly, and a ground insect tickled her face. Was somebody coming?

It was dark when she rose. Siegmund was not in sight. She tidied herself, and rather frightened, went to look for him. She saw him like a thick shadow on the earth. Now she was heavy with tears good to shed. She stood in silent sorrow, looking at him.

Suddenly she became aware of someone passing and looking curiously at them.

'Dear!' she said softly, stooping and touching his hair. He began to struggle with himself to respond. At that minute he would rather have died than face anyone. His soul was too much uncovered.

'Dear, someone is looking,' she pleaded.

He drew himself up from cover. But he kept his face averted. They walked on.

'Forgive me, dear,' she said softly.

'Nay, it's not you,' he answered, and she was silenced. They walked on till the night seemed private. She turned to him, and 'Siegmund!' she said, in a voice of great sorrow and pleading.

He took her in his arms, but did not kiss her, though she lifted her face. He put his mouth against her throat, below the ear, as she offered it, and stood looking out through the ravel of her hair, dazed, dreamy.

The sea was smoking with darkness under half-luminous heavens. The stars, one after another, were catching alight. Siegmund perceived first one, and then another dimmer one, flicker out in the darkness over the

sea. He stood perfectly still, watching them. Gradually he remembered how, in the cathedral, the tapers of the choir-stalls would tremble and set steadily to burn, opening the darkness point after point with yellow drops of flame, as the acolyte touched them, one by one, delicately with his rod. The night was religious, then, with its proper order of worship. Day and night had their ritual, and passed in uncouth worship.

Siegmund found himself in an abbey. He looked up the nave of the night, where the sky came down on the sea-like arches, and he watched the stars catch fire. At least it was all sacred, whatever the God might be. Helena herself, the bitter bread, was stuff of the ceremony, which he touched with his lips as part of the service.

He had Helena in his arms, which was sweet company, but in spirit he was quite alone. She would have drawn him back to her, and on her woman's breast have hidden him from Fate, and saved him from searching the unknown. But this night he did not want comfort. If he were 'an infant crying in the night', it was crying that a woman could not still. He was abroad seeking courage and faith for his own soul. He, in loneliness, must search the night for faith.

'My fate is finely wrought out,' he thought to himself. 'Even damnation may be finely imagined for me in the night. I have come so far. Now I must get clarity and courage to follow out the theme. I don't want to botch and bungle even damnation.'

But he needed to know what was right, what was the proper sequence of his acts. Staring at the darkness, he seemed to feel his course, though he could not see it. He bowed in obedience. The stars seemed to swing softly in token of submission.