

Chapter 18

Siegmund had shaved and dressed, and come down to breakfast. Mrs Curtiss brought in the coffee. She was a fragile little woman, of delicate, gentle manner.

'The water would be warm this morning,' she said, addressing no one in particular.

Siegmund stood on the hearth-rug with his hands behind him, swaying from one leg to the other. He was embarrassed always by the presence of the amiable little woman; he could not feel at ease before strangers, in his capacity of accepted swain of Helena.

'It was,' assented Helena. 'It was as warm as new milk.'

'Ay, it would be,' said the old lady, looking in admiration upon the experience of Siegmund and his beloved. 'And did ye see the ships of war?' she asked.

'No, they had gone,' replied Helena.

Siegmund swayed from foot to foot, rhythmically.

'You'll be coming in to dinner today?' asked the old lady.

Helena arranged the matter.

'I think ye both look better,' Mrs. Curtiss said. She glanced at Siegmund.

He smiled constrainedly.

'I thought ye looked so worn when you came,' she said sympathetically.

'He had been working hard,' said Helena, also glancing at him.

He bent his head, and was whistling without making any sound.

'Ay,' sympathized the little woman. 'And it's a very short time for you. What a pity ye can't stop for the fireworks at Cowes on Monday. They are grand, so they say.'

Helena raised her eyebrows in polite interest. 'Have you never seen them?' she asked.

'No,' replied Mrs. Curtiss. 'I've never been able to get; but I hope to go yet.'

'I hope you may,' said Siegmund.

The little woman beamed on him. Having won a word from him, she was quite satisfied.

'Well,' she said brightly, 'the eggs must be done by now.'

She tripped out, to return directly.

'I've brought you,' she said, 'some of the Island cream, and some white currants, if ye'll have them. You must think well of the Island, and come back.'

'How could we help?' laughed Helena.

'We will,' smiled Siegmund.

When finally the door was closed on her, Siegmund sat down in relief. Helena looked in amusement at him. She was perfectly self-possessed in presence of the delightful little lady.

'This is one of the few places that has ever felt like home to me,' she said. She lifted a tangled bunch of fine white currants.

'Ah!' exclaimed Siegmund, smiling at her.

'One of the few places where everything is friendly,' she said. 'And everybody.'

'You have made so many enemies?' he asked, with gentle irony.

'Strangers,' she replied. 'I seem to make strangers of all the people I meet.'

She laughed in amusement at this mot. Siegmund looked at her intently. He was thinking of her left alone amongst strangers.

'Need we go--need we leave this place of friends?' he said, as if ironically. He was very much afraid of tempting her.

She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece and counted: 'One, two, three, four, five hours, thirty-five minutes. It is an age yet,' she laughed.

Siegmund laughed too, as he accepted the particularly fine bunch of currants she had extricated for him.