Chapter 23

'I shall never re-establish myself,' said Siegmund as he closed behind him the dining-room door and went upstairs in the dark. 'I am a family criminal. Beatrice might come round, but the children's insolent judgement is too much. And I am like a dog that creeps round the house from which it escaped with joy. I have nowhere else to go. Why did I come back? But I am sleepy. I will not bother tonight.'

He went into the bathroom and washed himself. Everything he did gave him a grateful sense of pleasure, notwithstanding the misery of his position. He dipped his arms deeper into the cold water, that he might feel the delight of it a little farther. His neck he swilled time after time, and it seemed to him he laughed with pleasure as the water caught him and fell away. The towel reminded him how sore were his forehead and his neck, blistered both to a state of rawness by the sun. He touched them very cautiously to dry them, wincing, and smiling at his own childish touch-and-shrink.

Though his bedroom was very dark, he did not light the gas. Instead, he stepped out into the small balcony. His shirt was open at the neck and wrists. He pulled it farther apart, baring his chest to the deliciously soft night. He stood looking out at the darkness for some time. The night was as yet moonless, but luminous with a certain atmosphere of light. The stars were small. Near at hand, large shapes of trees rose

up. Farther, lamps like little mushroom groups shone amid an undergrowth of darkness. There was a vague hoarse noise filling the sky, like the whispering in a shell, and this breathing of the summer night occasionally swelled into a restless sigh as a train roared across the distance.

'What a big night!' thought Siegmund. 'The night gathers everything into a oneness. I wonder what is in it.'

He leaned forward over the balcony, trying to catch something out of the night. He felt his soul like tendrils stretched out anxiously to grasp a hold. What could he hold to in this great, hoarse breathing night? A star fell. It seemed to burst into sight just across his eyes with a yellow flash. He looked up, unable to make up his mind whether he had seen it or not. There was no gap in the sky.

'It is a good sign--a shooting star,' he said to himself. 'It is a good sign for me. I know I am right. That was my sign.'

Having assured himself, he stepped indoors, unpacked his bag, and was soon in bed.

'This is a good bed,' he said. 'And the sheets are very fresh.'

He lay for a little while with his head bending forwards, looking from his pillow out at the stars, then he went to sleep.

At half past six in the morning he suddenly opened his eyes.

'What is it?' he asked, and almost without interruption answered: 'Well, I've got to go through it.'

His sleep had shaped him perfect premonition, which, like a dream, he forgot when he awoke. Only this naïve question and answer betrayed what had taken place in his sleep. Immediately he awoke this subordinate knowledge vanished.

Another fine day was striding in triumphant. The first thing Siegmund did was to salute the morning, because of its brightness. The second thing was to call to mind the aspect of that bay in the Isle of Wight. 'What would it just be like now?' said he to himself. He had to give his heart some justification for the peculiar pain left in it from his sleep activity, so he began poignantly to long for the place which had been his during the last mornings. He pictured the garden with roses and nasturtiums; he remembered the sunny way down the shore, and all the expanse of sea hung softly between the tall white cliffs.

'It is impossible it is gone!' he cried to himself. 'It can't be gone. I looked forward to it as if it never would come. It can't be gone now. Helena is not lost to me, surely.' Then he began a long pining for the departed beauty of his life. He turned the jewel of memory, and facet by facet it wounded him with its brilliant loveliness. This pain, though it

was keen, was half pleasure.

Presently he heard his wife stirring. She opened the door of the room next to his, and he heard her:

'Frank, it's a quarter to eight. You will be late.'

'All right, Mother. Why didn't you call me sooner?' grumbled the lad.

'I didn't wake myself. I didn't go to sleep till morning, and then I slept.'

She went downstairs. Siegmund listened for his son to get out of bed. The minutes passed.

'The young donkey, why doesn't he get out?' said Siegmund angrily to himself. He turned over, pressing himself upon the bed in anger and humiliation, because now he had no authority to call to his son and keep him to his duty. Siegmund waited, writhing with anger, shame, and anxiety. When the suave, velvety 'Pan-n-n! pan-n-n-n!' of the clock was heard striking, Frank stepped with a thud on to the floor. He could be heard dressing in clumsy haste. Beatrice called from the bottom of the stairs:

'Do you want any hot water?'

'You know there isn't time for me to shave now,' answered her son, lifting his voice to a kind of broken falsetto.

The scent of the cooking of bacon filled the house. Siegmund heard his second daughter, Marjory, aged nine, talking to Vera, who occupied the same room with her. The child was evidently questioning, and the elder girl answered briefly. There was a lull in the household noises, broken suddenly by Marjory, shouting from the top of the stairs:

'Mam!' She wailed. 'Mam!' Still Beatrice did not hear her. 'Mam! Mamma!' Beatrice was in the scullery. 'Mamma-a!' The child was getting impatient. She lifted her voice and shouted: 'Mam? Mamma!' Still no answer. 'Mam-mee-e!' she squealed.

Siegmund could hardly contain himself.

'Why don't you go down and ask?' Vera called crossly from the bedroom.

And at the same moment Beatrice answered, also crossly: 'What do you want?'

'Where's my stockings?' cried the child at the top of her voice.

'Why do you ask me? Are they down here?' replied her mother. 'What are you shouting for?'

The child plodded downstairs. Directly she returned, and as she passed into Vera's room, she grumbled: 'And now they're not mended.'

Siegmund heard a sound that made his heart beat. It was the crackling of the sides of the crib, as Gwen, his little girl of five, climbed out.
She was silent for a space. He imagined her sitting on the white rug and pulling on her stockings. Then there came the quick little thud of her feet as she went downstairs.

'Mam,' Siegmund heard her say as she went down the hall, 'has dad come?'

The answer and the child's further talk were lost in the distance of the kitchen. The small, anxious question, and the quick thudding of Gwen's feet, made Siegmund lie still with torture. He wanted to hear no more.
He lay shrinking within himself. It seemed that his soul was sensitive to madness. He felt that he could not, come what might, get up and meet them all.

The front door banged, and he heard Frank's hasty call: 'Good-bye!'
Evidently the lad was in an ill-humour. Siegmund listened for the sound of the train; it seemed an age; the boy would catch it. Then the water from the wash-hand bowl in the bathroom ran loudly out. That, he suggested, was Vera, who was evidently not going up to town. At the thought of this, Siegmund almost hated her. He listened for her to go downstairs. It was nine o'clock.

The footsteps of Beatrice came upstairs. She put something down in the bathroom--his hot water. Siegmund listened intently for her to come to his door. Would she speak? She approached hurriedly, knocked, and waited. Siegmund, startled, for the moment, could not answer. She knocked loudly.

'All right,' said he.

Then she went downstairs.

He lay probing and torturing himself for another half-hour, till Vera's voice said coldly, beneath his window outside:

'You should clear away, then. We don't want the breakfast things on the table for a week.'

Siegmund's heart set hard. He rose, with a shut mouth, and went across to the bathroom. There he started. The quaint figure of Gwen stood at the bowl, her back was towards him; she was sponging her face gingerly. Her hair, all blowsed from the pillow, was tied in a stiff little pigtail, standing out from her slender, childish neck. Her arms were bare to the shoulder. She wore a bodiced petticoat of pink flannelette, which hardly reached her knees. Siegmund felt slightly amused to see her stout little calves planted so firmly close together. She carefully sponged her cheeks, her pursed-up mouth, and her neck, soaping her hair, but not her ears. Then, very deliberately, she squeezed out the sponge

and proceeded to wipe away the soap.

For some reason or other she glanced round. Her startled eyes met his. She, too, had beautiful dark blue eyes. She stood, with the sponge at her neck, looking full at him. Siegmund felt himself shrinking. The child's look was steady, calm, inscrutable.

'Hello!' said her father. 'Are you here!'

The child, without altering her expression in the slightest, turned her back on him, and continued wiping her neck. She dropped the sponge in the water and took the towel from off the side of the bath. Then she turned to look again at Siegmund, who stood in his pyjamas before her, his mouth shut hard, but his eyes shrinking and tender. She seemed to be trying to discover something in him.

'Have you washed your ears?' he said gaily.

She paid no heed to this, except that he noticed her face now wore a slight constrained smile as she looked at him. She was shy. Still she continued to regard him curiously.

'There is some chocolate on my dressing-table,' he said.

'Where have you been to?' she asked suddenly.

'To the seaside,' he answered, smiling.

'To Brighton?' she asked. Her tone was still condemning.

'Much farther than that,' he replied.

'To Worthing?' she asked.

'Farther--in a steamer,' he replied.

'But who did you go with?' asked the child.

'Why, I went all by myself,' he answered.

'Twuly?' she asked.

'Weally and twuly,' he answered, laughing.

'Couldn't you take me?' she asked.

'I will next time,' he replied.

The child still looked at him, unsatisfied.

'But what did you go for?' she asked, goading him suspiciously.

'To see the sea and the ships and the fighting ships with cannons--'

'You might have taken me,' said the child reproachfully.

'Yes, I ought to have done, oughtn't I?' he said, as if regretful.

Gwen still looked full at him.

'You are red,' she said.

He glanced quickly in the glass, and replied:

'That is the sun. Hasn't it been hot?'

'Mm! It made my nose all peel. Vera said she would scrape me like a new potato.' The child laughed and turned shyly away.

'Come here,' said Siegmund. 'I believe you've got a tooth out, haven't you?'

He was very cautious and gentle. The child drew back. He hesitated, and she drew away from him, unwilling.

'Come and let me look,' he repeated.

She drew farther away, and the same constrained smile appeared on her

face, shy, suspicious, condemning.

'Aren't you going to get your chocolate?' he asked, as the child hesitated in the doorway.

She glanced into his room, and answered:

'I've got to go to mam and have my hair done.'

Her awkwardness and her lack of compliance insulted him. She went downstairs without going into his room.

Siegmund, rebuffed by the only one in the house from whom he might have expected friendship, proceeded slowly to shave, feeling sick at heart. He was a long time over his toilet. When he stripped himself for the bath, it seemed to him he could smell the sea. He bent his head and licked his shoulder. It tasted decidedly salt.

'A pity to wash it off,' he said.

As he got up dripping from the cold bath, he felt for the moment exhilarated. He rubbed himself smooth. Glancing down at himself, he thought: 'I look young. I look as young as twenty-six.'

He turned to the mirror. There he saw himself a mature, complete man of forty, with grave years of experience on his countenance.

'I used to think that, when I was forty,' he said to himself, 'I should find everything straight as the nose on my face, walking through my affairs as easily as you like. Now I am no more sure of myself, have no more confidence than a boy of twenty. What can I do? It seems to me a man needs a mother all his life. I don't feel much like a lord of creation.'

Having arrived at this cynicism, Siegmund prepared to go downstairs. His sensitiveness had passed off; his nerves had become callous. When he was dressed he went down to the kitchen without hesitation. He was indifferent to his wife and children. No one spoke to him as he sat to the table. That was as he liked it; he wished for nothing to touch him. He ate his breakfast alone, while his wife bustled about upstairs and Vera bustled about in the dining-room. Then he retired to the solitude of the drawing-room. As a reaction against his poetic activity, he felt as if he were gradually becoming more stupid and blind. He remarked nothing, not even the extravagant bowl of grasses placed where he would not have allowed it--on his piano; nor his fiddle, laid cruelly on the cold, polished floor near the window. He merely sat down in an arm-chair, and felt sick.

All his unnatural excitement, all the poetic stimulation of the past few days, had vanished. He felt flaccid, while his life struggled slowly through him. After an intoxication of passion and love, and beauty, and of sunshine, he was prostrate. Like a plant that blossoms gorgeously and

madly, he had wasted the tissue of his strength, so that now his life struggled in a clogged and broken channel.

Siegmund sat with his head between his hands, leaning upon the table. He would have been stupidly quiescent in his feeling of loathing and sickness had not an intense irritability in all his nerves tormented him into consciousness.

'I suppose this is the result of the sun--a sort of sunstroke,' he said, realizing an intolerable stiffness of his brain, a stunned condition in his head.

'This is hideous!' he said. His arms were quivering with intense irritation. He exerted all his will to stop them, and then the hot irritability commenced in his belly. Siegmund fidgeted in his chair without changing his position. He had not the energy to get up and move about. He fidgeted like an insect pinned down.

The door opened. He felt violently startled; yet there was no movement perceptible. Vera entered, ostensibly for an autograph-album into which she was going to copy a drawing from the London Opinion, really to see what her father was doing. He did not move a muscle. He only longed intensely for his daughter to go out of the room, so that he could let go. Vera went out of the drawing-room humming to herself. Apparently she had not even glanced at her father. In reality, she had observed him closely.

'He is sitting with his head in his hands,' she said to her mother.

Beatrice replied: 'I'm glad he's nothing else to do.'

'I should think he's pitying himself,' said Vera.

'He's a good one at it,' answered Beatrice.

Gwen came forward and took hold of her mother's skirt, looking up anxiously.

'What is he doing, Mam?' she asked.

'Nothing,' replied her mother--'nothing; only sitting in the drawing-room.'

'But what has he been doing?' persisted the anxious child.

'Nothing--nothing that I can tell you. He's only spoilt all our lives.'

The little girl stood regarding her mother In the greatest distress and perplexity.

'But what will he do, Mam?' she asked.

'Nothing. Don't bother. Run and play with Marjory now. Do you want a nice plum?'

She took a yellow plum from the table. Gwen accepted it without a word. She was too much perplexed.

'What do you say?' asked her mother.

'Thank you,' replied the child, turning away.

Siegmund sighed with relief when he was again left alone. He twisted in his chair, and sighed again, trying to drive out the intolerable clawing irritability from his belly.

'Ah, this is horrible!' he said.

He stiffened his muscles to quieten them.

'I've never been like this before. What is the matter?' he asked himself.

But the question died out immediately. It seemed useless and sickening to try and answer it. He began to cast about for an alleviation. If he could only do something, or have something he wanted, it would be better.

'What do I want?' he asked himself, and he anxiously strove to find this out.

Everything he suggested to himself made him sicken with weariness or distaste: the seaside, a foreign land, a fresh life that he had often dreamed of, farming in Canada.

'I should be just the same there,' he answered himself. 'Just the same sickening feeling there that I want nothing.'

'Helena!' he suggested to himself, trembling.

But he only felt a deeper horror. The thought of her made him shrink convulsively.

'I can't endure this,' he said. If this is the case, I had better be dead. To have no want, no desire--that is death, to begin with.'

He rested awhile after this. The idea of death alone seemed entertaining. Then, 'Is there really nothing I could turn to?' he asked himself.

To him, in that state of soul, it seemed there was not.

'Helena!' he suggested again, appealingly testing himself. 'Ah, no!' he

cried, drawing sharply back, as from an approaching touch upon a raw place.

He groaned slightly as he breathed, with a horrid weight of nausea. There was a fumbling upon the door-knob. Siegmund did not start. He merely pulled himself together. Gwen pushed open the door, and stood holding on to the door-knob looking at him.

'Dad, Mam says dinner's ready,' she announced.

Siegmund did not reply. The child waited, at a loss for some moments, before she repeated, in a hesitating tone:

'Dinner's ready.'

'All right,' said Siegmund. 'Go away.'

The little girl returned to the kitchen with tears in her eyes, very crestfallen.

'What did he say?' asked Beatrice.

'He shouted at me,' replied the little one, breaking into tears.

Beatrice flushed. Tears came into her own eyes. She took the child in her arms and pressed her to her, kissing her forehead.

'Did he?' she said very tenderly. 'Never mind, then, dearie--never mind.'

The tears in her mother's voice made the child sob bitterly. Vera and Marjory sat silent at table. The steak and mashed potatoes steamed and grew cold.