

Chapter 26

Helena, Louisa, and Olive climbed the steps to go to the South-Western platform. They were laden with dress-baskets, umbrellas, and little packages. Olive and Louisa, at least, were in high spirits. Olive stopped before the indicator.

'The next train for Waterloo,' she announced, in her contralto voice, 'is 10.30. It is now 10.12.'

'We go by the 10.40; it is a better train,' said Helena.

Olive turned to her with a heavy-arch manner.

'Very well, dear. There is a parting to be got through, I am told. We sympathize, dear, but we regret it. Starting for a holiday is always a prolonged agony. But I am strong to endure it.'

'You look it. You look as if you could tackle a bull,' cried Louisa, skittish.

'My dear Louisa,' rang out Olive's contralto, 'don't judge me by appearances. You're sure to be taken in. With me it's a case of

'''Oh, the gladness of her gladness when she's sad,

And the sadness of her sadness when she's glad!"

She looked round to see the effect of this. Helena, expected to say something, chimed in sarcastically:

"They are nothing to her madness--"

'When she's going for a holiday, dear,' cried Olive.

'Oh, go on being mad,' cried Louisa.

'What, do you like it? I thought you'd be thanking Heaven that sanity was given me in large doses.'

'And holidays in small,' laughed Louisa. 'Good! No, I like your madness, if you call it such. You are always so serious.'

"It's ill talking of halts in the house of the hanged," dear,' boomed Olive.

She looked from side to side. She felt triumphant. Helena smiled, acknowledging the sarcasm.

'But,' said Louisa, smiling anxiously, 'I don't quite see it. What's the point?'

'Well, to be explicit, dear,' replied Olive, 'it is hardly safe to accuse me of sadness and seriousness in this trio.'

Louisa laughed and shook herself.

'Come to think of it, it isn't,' she said.

Helena sighed, and walked down the platform. Her heart was beating thickly; she could hardly breathe. The station lamps hung low, so they made a ceiling of heat and dusty light. She suffocated under them. For a moment she beat with hysteria, feeling, as most of us feel when sick on a hot summer night, as if she must certainly go crazed, smothered under the grey, woolly blanket of heat. Siegmund was late. It was already twenty-five minutes past ten.

She went towards the booking-office. At that moment Siegmund came on to the platform.

'Here I am!' he said. 'Where is Louisa?'

Helena pointed to the seat without answering. She was looking at Siegmund. He was distracted by the excitement of the moment, so she could not read him.

'Olive is there, too,' she explained.

Siegmund stood still, straining his eyes to see the two women seated amidst pale wicker dress-baskets and dark rugs. The stranger made things more complex.

'Does she--your other friend--does she know?' he asked.

'She knows nothing,' replied Helena in a low tone, as she led him forward to be introduced.

'How do you do?' replied Olive in most mellow contralto. 'Behold the dauntless three, with their traps! You will see us forth on our perils?'

'I will, since I may not do more,' replied Siegmund, smiling, continuing: 'And how is Sister Louisa?'

'She is very well, thank you. It is her turn now,' cried Louisa, vindictive, triumphant.

There was always a faint animosity in her bearing towards Siegmund. He understood, and smiled at her enmity, for the two were really good friends.

'It is your turn now,' he repeated, smiling, and he turned away.

He and Helena walked down the platform.

'How did you find things at home?' he asked her.

'Oh, as usual,' she replied indifferently. 'And you?'

'Just the same,' he answered. He thought for a moment or two, then added: 'The children are happier without me.'

'Oh, you mustn't say that kind of thing protested Helena miserably. 'It's not true.'

'It's all right, dear,' he answered. 'So long as they are happy, it's all right.' After a pause he added: 'But I feel pretty bad tonight.'

Helena's hand tightened on his arm. He had reached the end of the platform. There he stood, looking up the line which ran dark under a haze of lights. The high red signal-lamps hung aloft in a scarlet swarm; farther off, like spangles shaking downwards from a burst sky-rocket, was a tangle of brilliant red and green signal-lamps settling. A train with the warm flare on its thick column of smoke came thundering upon the lovers. Dazed, they felt the yellow bar of carriage-windows brush in vibration across their faces. The ground and the air rocked. Then Siegmund turned his head to watch the red and the green lights in the rear of the train swiftly dwindle on the darkness. Still watching the distance where the train had vanished, he said:

'Dear, I want you to promise that, whatever happens to me, you will go

on. Remember, dear, two wrongs don't make a right.'

Helena swiftly, with a movement of terror, faced him, looking into his eyes. But he was in the shadow, she could not see him. The flat sound of his voice, lacking resonance--the dead, expressionless tone--made her lose her presence of mind. She stared at him blankly.

'What do you mean? What has happened? Something has happened to you. What has happened at home? What are you going to do?' she said sharply. She palpitated with terror. For the first time she felt powerless. Siegmund was beyond her grasp. She was afraid of him. He had shaken away her hold over him.

'There is nothing fresh the matter at home,' he replied wearily. He was to be scourged with emotion again. 'I swear it,' he added. 'And I have not made up my mind. But I can't think of life without you--and life must go on.'

'And I swear,' she said wrathfully, turning at bay, 'that I won't live a day after you.'

Siegmund dropped his head. The dead spring of his emotion swelled up scalding hot again. Then he said, almost inaudibly: 'Ah, don't speak to me like that, dear. It is late to be angry. When I have seen your train out tonight there is nothing left.'

Helena looked at him, dumb with dismay, stupid, angry.

They became aware of the porters shouting loudly that the Waterloo train was to leave from another platform.

'You'd better come,' said Siegmund, and they hurried down towards Louisa and Olive.

'We've got to change platforms,' cried Louisa, running forward and excitedly announcing the news.

'Yes,' replied Helena, pale and impassive.

Siegmund picked up the luggage.

'I say,' cried Olive, rushing to catch Helena and Louisa by the arm, 'look--look--both of you--look at that hat!' A lady in front was wearing on her hat a wild and dishevelled array of peacock feathers. 'It's the sight of a lifetime. I wouldn't have you miss it,' added Olive in hoarse sotto voce.

'Indeed not!' cried Helena, turning in wild exasperation to look. 'Get a good view of it, Olive. Let's have a good mental impression of it--one that will last.'

'That's right, dear,' said Olive, somewhat nonplussed by this outburst.

Siegmund had escaped with the heaviest two bags. They could see him ahead, climbing the steps. Olive readjusted herself from the wildly animated to the calmly ironical.

'After all, dear,' she said, as they hurried in the tail of the crowd, 'it's not half a bad idea to get a man on the job.'

Louisa laughed aloud at this vulgar conception of Siegmund.

'Just now, at any rate,' she rejoined.

As they reached the platform the train ran in before them. Helena watched anxiously for an empty carriage. There was not one.

'Perhaps it is as well,' she thought. 'We needn't talk. There will be three-quarters of an hour at Waterloo. If we were alone. Olive would make Siegmund talk.'

She found a carriage with four people, and hastily took possession. Siegmund followed her with the bags. He swung these on the rack, and then quickly received the rugs, umbrellas, and packages from the other two. These he put on the seats or anywhere, while Helena stowed them. She was very busy for a moment or two; the racks were full. Other people entered; their luggage was troublesome to bestow.

When she turned round again she found Louisa and Olive seated, but Siegmund was outside on the platform, and the door was closed. He saw her face move as if she would cry to him. She restrained herself, and immediately called:

'You are coming? Oh, you are coming to Waterloo?'

He shook his head.

'I cannot come,' he said.

She stood looking blankly at him for some moments, unable to reach the door because of the portmanteau thrust through with umbrellas and sticks, which stood on the floor between the knees of the passengers. She was helpless. Siegmund was repeating deliriously in his mind:

'Oh--go--go--go--when will she go?'

He could not bear her piteousness. Her presence made him feel insane.

'Would you like to come to the window?' a man asked of Helena kindly.

She smiled suddenly in his direction, without perceiving him. He pulled the portmanteau under his legs, and Helena edged past. She stood by the door, leaning forward with some of her old protective grace, her 'Hawwa' spirit evident. Benign and shielding, she bent forward, looking at

Siegmund. But her face was blank with helplessness, with misery of helplessness. She stood looking at Siegmund, saying nothing. His forehead was scorched and swollen, she noticed sorrowfully, and beneath one eye the skin was blistered. His eyes were bloodshot and glazed in a kind of apathy; they filled her with terror. He looked up at her because she wished it. For himself, he could not see her; he could only recoil from her. All he wished was to hide himself in the dark, alone. Yet she wanted him, and so far he yielded. But to go to Waterloo he could not yield.

The people in the carriage, made uneasy by this strange farewell, did not speak. There were a few taut moments of silence. No one seems to have strength to interrupt these spaces of irresolute anguish. Finally, the guard's whistle went. Siegmund and Helena clasped hands. A warm flush of love and healthy grief came over Siegmund for the last time. The train began to move, drawing Helena's hand from his.

'Monday,' she whispered--'Monday,' meaning that on Monday she should receive a letter from him. He nodded, turned, hesitated, looked at her, turned and walked away. She remained at the window watching him depart.

'Now, dear, we are manless,' said Olive in a whisper. But her attempt at a joke fell dead. Everybody was silent and uneasy.