Chapter 27

He hurried down the platform, wincing at every stride, from the memory of Helena's last look of mute, heavy yearning. He gripped his fists till they trembled; his thumbs were again closed under his fingers. Like a picture on a cloth before him he still saw Helena's face, white, rounded, in feature quite mute and expressionless, just made terrible by the heavy eyes, pleading dumbly. He thought of her going on and on, still at the carriage window looking out; all through the night rushing west and west to the land of Isolde. Things began to haunt Siegmund like a delirium. He knew not where he was hurrying. Always in front of him, as on a cloth, was the face of Helena, while somewhere behind the cloth was Cornwall, a far-off lonely place where darkness came on intensely. Sometimes he saw a dim, small phantom in the darkness of Cornwall, very far off. Then the face of Helena, white, inanimate as a mask, with heavy eyes, came between again.

He was almost startled to find himself at home, in the porch of his house. The door opened. He remembered to have heard the quick thud of feet. It was Vera. She glanced at him, but said nothing. Instinctively she shrank from him. He passed without noticing her. She stood on the door-mat, fastening the door, striving to find something to say to him.

'You have been over an hour,' she said, still more troubled when she found her voice shaking. She had no idea what alarmed her.

'Ay,' returned Siegmund.

He went into the dining-room and dropped into his chair, with his head between his hands. Vera followed him nervously.

'Will you have anything to eat?' she asked.

He looked up at the table, as if the supper laid there were curious and incomprehensible. The delirious lifting of his eyelids showed the whole of the dark pupils and the bloodshot white of his eyes. Vera held her breath with fear. He sank his head again and said nothing. Vera sat down and waited. The minutes ticked slowly off. Siegmund neither moved nor spoke. At last the clock struck midnight. She was weary with sleep, querulous with trouble.

'Aren't you going to bed?' she asked.

Siegmund heard her without paying any attention. He seemed only to half hear. Vera waited awhile, then repeated plaintively:

'Aren't you going to bed, Father?'

Siegmund lifted his head and looked at her. He loathed the idea of having to move. He looked at her confusedly.

'Yes, I'm going,' he said, and his head dropped again. Vera knew he was not asleep. She dared not leave him till he was in his bedroom. Again she sat waiting.

'Father!' she cried at last.

He started up, gripping the arms of his chair, trembling.

'Yes, I'm going,' he said.

He rose, and went unevenly upstairs. Vera followed him close behind.

'If he reels and falls backwards he will kill me,' she thought, but he did not fall. From habit he went into the bathroom. While trying to brush his teeth he dropped the tooth-brush on to the floor.

'I'll pick it up in the morning,' he said, continuing deliriously: 'I must go to bed--I must go to bed--I am very tired.' He stumbled over the door mat into his own room.

Vera was standing behind the unclosed door of her room. She heard the sneck of his lock. She heard the water still running in the bathroom, trickling with the mysterious sound of water at dead of night. Screwing up her courage, she went and turned off the tap. Then she stood again in her own room, to be near the companionable breathing of her sleeping sister, listening. Siegmund undressed quickly. His one thought was to

get into bed.

'One must sleep,' he said as he dropped his clothes on the floor. He could not find the way to put on his sleeping-jacket, and that made him pant. Any little thing that roused or thwarted his mechanical action aggravated his sickness till his brain seemed to be bursting. He got things right at last, and was in bed.

Immediately he lapsed into a kind of unconsciousness. He would have called it sleep, but such it was not. All the time he could feel his brain working ceaselessly, like a machine running with unslackening rapidity. This went on, interrupted by little flickerings of consciousness, for three or four hours. Each time he had a glimmer of consciousness he wondered if he made any noise.

'What am I doing? What is the matter? Am I unconscious? Do I make any noise? Do I disturb them?' he wondered, and he tried to cast back to find the record of mechanical sense impression. He believed he could remember the sound of inarticulate murmuring in his throat. Immediately he remembered, he could feel his throat producing the sounds. This frightened him. Above all things, he was afraid of disturbing the family. He roused himself to listen. Everything was breathing in silence. As he listened to this silence he relapsed into his sort of sleep.

He was awakened finally by his own perspiration. He was terribly hot.

The pillow, the bedclothes, his hair, all seemed to be steaming with hot vapour, whilst his body was bathed in sweat. It was coming light. Immediately he shut his eyes again and lay still. He was now conscious, and his brain was irritably active, but his body was a separate thing, a terrible, heavy, hot thing over which he had slight control.

Siegmund lay still, with his eyes closed, enduring the exquisite torture of the trickling of drops of sweat. First it would be one gathering and running its irregular, hesitating way into the hollow of his neck. His every nerve thrilled to it, yet he felt he could not move more than to stiffen his throat slightly. While yet the nerves in the track of this drop were quivering, raw with sensitiveness, another drop would start from off the side of his chest, and trickle downwards among the little muscles of his side, to drip on to the bed. It was like the running of a spider over his sensitive, moveless body. Why he did not wipe himself he did not know. He lay still and endured this horrible tickling, which seemed to bite deep into him, rather than make the effort to move, which he loathed to do. The drops ran off his forehead down his temples. Those he did not mind: he was blunt there. But they started again, in tiny, vicious spurts, down the sides of his chest, from under his armpits, down the inner sides of his thighs, till he seemed to have a myriad quivering tracks of a myriad running insects over his hot, wet, highly-sensitized body. His nerves were trembling, one and all, with outrage and vivid suspense. It became unbearable. He felt that, if he endured it another moment, he would cry out, or suffocate and burst.

He sat up suddenly, threw away the bedclothes, from which came a puff of hot steam, and began to rub his pyjamas against his sides and his legs. He rubbed madly for a few moments. Then he sighed with relief. He sat on the side of the bed, moving from the hot dampness of the place where he had lain. For a moment he thought he would go to sleep. Then, in an instant his brain seemed to click awake. He was still as loath as ever to move, but his brain was no longer clouded in hot vapour: it was clear. He sat, bowing forward on the side of the bed, his sleeping-jacket open, the dawn stealing into the room, the morning air entering fresh through the wide-flung window-door. He felt a peculiar sense of guilt, of wrongness, in thus having jumped out of bed. It seemed to him as if he ought to have endured the heat of his body, and the infernal trickling of the drops of sweat. But at the thought of it he moved his hands gratefully over his sides, which now were dry, and soft, and smooth; slightly chilled on the surface perhaps, for he felt a sudden tremor of shivering from the warm contact of his hands.

Siegmund sat up straight: his body was re-animated. He felt the pillow and the groove where he had lain. It was quite wet and clammy. There was a scent of sweat on the bed, not really unpleasant, but he wanted something fresh and cool.

Siegmund sat in the doorway that gave on to the small veranda. The air was beautifully cool. He felt his chest again to make sure it was not clammy. It was smooth as silk. This pleased him very much. He looked out on the night again, and was startled. Somewhere the moon was shining

duskily, in a hidden quarter of sky; but straight in front of him, in the northwest, silent lightning was fluttering. He waited breathlessly to see if it were true. Then, again, the pale lightning jumped up into the dome of the fading night. It was like a white bird stirring restlessly on its nest. The night was drenching thinner, greyer. The lightning, like a bird that should have flown before the arm of day, moved on its nest in the boughs of darkness, raised itself, flickered its pale wings rapidly, then sank again, loath to fly. Siegmund watched it with wonder and delight.

The day was pushing aside the boughs of darkness, hunting. The poor moon would be caught when the net was flung. Siegmund went out on the balcony to look at it. There it was, like a poor white mouse, a half-moon, crouching on the mound of its course. It would run nimbly over to the western slope, then it would be caught in the net, and the sun would laugh, like a great yellow cat, as it stalked behind playing with its prey, flashing out its bright paws. The moon, before making its last run, lay crouched, palpitating. The sun crept forth, laughing to itself as it saw its prey could not escape. The lightning, however, leaped low off the nest like a bird decided to go, and flew away. Siegmund no

longer saw it opening and shutting its wings in hesitation amid the disturbance of the dawn. Instead there came a flush, the white lightning gone. The brief pink butterflies of sunrise and sunset rose up from the mown fields of darkness, and fluttered low in a cloud. Even in the west they flew in a narrow, rosy swarm. They separated, thinned, rising

higher. Some, flying up, became golden. Some flew rosy gold across the moon, the mouse-moon motionless with fear. Soon the pink butterflies had gone, leaving a scarlet stretch like a field of poppies in the fens. As a wind, the light of day blew in from the east, puff after puff filling with whiteness the space which had been the night. Siegmund sat watching the last morning blowing in across the mown darkness, till the whole field of the world was exposed, till the moon was like a dead mouse which floats on water.

When the few birds had called in the August morning, when the cocks had finished their crowing, when the minute sounds of the early day were astir, Siegmund shivered disconsolate. He felt tired again, yet he knew he could not sleep. The bed was repulsive to him. He sat in his chair at the open door, moving uneasily. What should have been sleep was an ache and a restlessness. He turned and twisted in his chair.

'Where is Helena?' he asked himself, and he looked out on the morning.

Everything out of doors was unreal, like a show, like a peepshow. Helena was an actress somewhere in the brightness of this view. He alone was out of the piece. He sighed petulantly, pressing back his shoulders as if they ached. His arms, too, ached with irritation, while his head seemed to be hissing with angry irritability. For a long time he sat with clenched teeth, merely holding himself in check. In his present state of irritability everything that occurred to his mind stirred him with dislike or disgust. Helena, music, the pleasant company of friends,

the sunshine of the country, each, as it offered itself to his thoughts, was met by an angry contempt, was rejected scornfully. As nothing could please or distract him, the only thing that remained was to support the discord. He felt as if he were a limb out of joint from the body of life: there occurred to his imagination a disjointed finger, swollen and discoloured, racked with pains. The question was, How should he reset himself into joint? The body of life for him meant Beatrice, his children, Helena, the Comic Opera, his friends of the orchestra. How could he set himself again into joint with these? It was impossible. Towards his family he would henceforward have to bear himself with humility. That was a cynicism. He would have to leave Helena, which he could not do. He would have to play strenuously, night after night, the music of The Saucy Little Switzer which was absurd. In fine, it was all absurd and impossible. Very well, then, that being so, what remained possible? Why, to depart. 'If thine hand offend thee, cut it off.' He could cut himself off from life. It was plain and straightforward.

But Beatrice, his young children, without him! He was bound by an agreement which there was no discrediting to provide for them. Very well, he must provide for them. And then what? Humiliation at home, Helena forsaken, musical comedy night after night. That was insufferable--impossible! Like a man tangled up in a rope, he was not strong enough to free himself. He could not break with Helena and return to a degrading life at home; he could not leave his children and go to Helena.

Very well, it was impossible! Then there remained only one door which he could open in this prison corridor of life. Siegmund looked round the room. He could get his razor, or he could hang himself. He had thought of the two ways before. Yet now he was unprovided. His portmanteau stood at the foot of the bed, its straps flung loose. A portmanteau strap would do. Then it should be a portmanteau strap!

'Very well!' said Siegmund, 'it is finally settled. I had better write to Helena, and tell her, and say to her she must go on. I'd better tell her.'

He sat for a long time with his notebook and a pencil, but he wrote nothing. At last he gave up.

'Perhaps it is just as well,' he said to himself. 'She said she would come with me--perhaps that is just as well. She will go to the sea. When she knows, the sea will take her. She must know.'

He took a card, bearing her name and her Cornwall address, from his pocket-book, and laid it on the dressing-table.

'She will come with me,' he said to himself, and his heart rose with elation.

'That is a cowardice,' he added, looking doubtfully at the card, as if wondering whether to destroy it.

'It is in the hands of God. Beatrice may or may not send word to her at Tintagel. It is in the hands of God,' he concluded.

Then he sat down again.

'"But for that fear of something after-death,"' he quoted to himself.

'It is not fear,' he said. 'The act itself will be horrible and fearsome, but the after-death--it's no more than struggling awake when you're sick with a fright of dreams. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on."'

Siegmund sat thinking of the after-death, which to him seemed so wonderfully comforting, full of rest, and reassurance, and renewal. He experienced no mystical ecstasies. He was sure of a wonderful kindness in death, a kindness which really reached right through life, though here he could not avail himself of it. Siegmund had always inwardly held faith that the heart of life beat kindly towards him. When he was cynical and sulky he knew that in reality it was only a waywardness of his.

The heart of life is implacable in its kindness. It may not be moved to fluttering of pity; it swings on uninterrupted by cries of anguish or of hate.

Siegmund was thankful for this unfaltering sternness of life. There was no futile hesitation between doom and pity. Therefore, he could submit and have faith. If each man by his crying could swerve the slow, sheer universe, what a doom of guilt he might gain. If Life could swerve from its orbit for pity, what terror of vacillation; and who would wish to bear the responsibility of the deflection?

Siegmund thanked God that life was pitiless, strong enough to take his treasures out of his hands, and to thrust him out of the room; otherwise, how could he go with any faith to death; otherwise, he would have felt the helpless disillusion of a youth who finds his infallible parents weaker than himself.

'I know the heart of life is kind,' said Siegmund, 'because I feel it. Otherwise I would live in defiance. But Life is greater than me or anybody. We suffer, and we don't know why, often. Life doesn't explain. But I can keep faith in it, as a dog has faith in his master. After all, Life is as kind to me as I am to my dog. I have, proportionally, as much zest. And my purpose towards my dog is good. I need not despair of Life.'

It occurred to Siegmund that he was meriting the old gibe of the atheists. He was shirking the responsibility of himself, turning it over to an imaginary god.

'Well,' he said, 'I can't help it. I do not feel altogether

self-responsible.'

The morning had waxed during these investigations. Siegmund had been vaguely aware of the rousing of the house. He was finally startled into a consciousness of the immediate present by the calling of Vera at his door.

'There are two letters for you. Father.'

He looked about him in bewilderment; the hours had passed in a trance, and he had no idea of his time or place.

'Oh, all right,' he said, too much dazed to know what it meant. He heard his daughter going downstairs. Then swiftly returned over him the throbbing ache of his head and his arms, the discordant jarring of his body.

'What made her bring me the letters?' he asked himself. It was a very unusual attention. His heart replied, very sullen and shameful: 'She wanted to know; she wanted to make sure I was all right.'

Siegmund forgot all his speculations on a divine benevolence. The discord of his immediate situation overcame every harmony. He did not fetch in the letters.

'Is it so late?' he said. 'Is there no more time for me?'

He went to look at his watch. It was a quarter to nine. As he walked across the room he trembled, and a sickness made his bones feel rotten. He sat down on the bed.

'What am I going to do?' he asked himself.

By this time he was shuddering rapidly. A peculiar feeling, as if his belly were turned into nothingness, made him want to press his fists into his abdomen. He remained shuddering drunkenly, like a drunken man who is sick, incapable of thought or action.

A second knock came at the door. He started with a jolt.

'Here is your shaving-water,' said Beatrice in cold tones. 'It's half past nine.'

'All right,' said Siegmund, rising from the bed, bewildered.

'And what time shall you expect dinner?' asked Beatrice. She was still contemptuous.

'Any time. I'm not going out,' he answered.

He was surprised to hear the ordinary cool tone of his own voice, for he was shuddering uncontrollably, and was almost sobbing. In a shaking,

bewildered, disordered condition he set about fulfilling his purpose. He was hardly conscious of anything he did; try as he would, he could not keep his hands steady in the violent spasms of shuddering, nor could he call his mind to think. He was one shuddering turmoil. Yet he performed his purpose methodically and exactly. In every particular he was thorough, as if he were the servant of some stern will. It was a mesmeric performance, in which the agent trembled with convulsive sickness.