

Chapter 28

Siegmund's lying late in bed made Beatrice very angry. The later it became, the more wrathful she grew. At half past nine she had taken up his shaving-water. Then she proceeded to tidy the dining-room, leaving the breakfast spread in the kitchen.

Vera and Frank were gone up to town; they would both be home for dinner at two o'clock. Marjory was despatched on an errand, taking Gwen with her. The children had no need to return home immediately, therefore it was highly probable they would play in the field or in the lane for an hour or two. Beatrice was alone downstairs. It was a hot, still morning, when everything outdoors shone brightly, and all indoors was dusked with coolness and colour. But Beatrice was angry. She moved rapidly and determinedly about the dining-room, thrusting old newspapers and magazines between the cupboard and the wall, throwing the litter in the grate, which was clear, Friday having been charwoman's day, passing swiftly, lightly over the front of the furniture with the duster. It was Saturday, when she did not spend much time over the work. In the afternoon she was going out with Vera. That was not, however, what occupied her mind as she brushed aside her work. She had determined to have a settlement with Siegmund, as to how matters should continue. She was going to have no more of the past three years' life; things had come to a crisis, and there must be an alteration. Beatrice was going to do battle, therefore she flew at her work, thus stirring herself up to a

proper heat of blood. All the time, as she thrust things out of sight, or straightened a cover, she listened for Siegmund to come downstairs.

He did not come, so her anger waxed.

'He can lie skulking in bed!' she said to herself. 'Here I've been up since seven, broiling at it. I should think he's pitying himself. He ought to have something else to do. He ought to have to go out to work every morning, like another man, as his son has to do. He has had too little work. He has had too much his own way. But it's come to a stop now. I'll servant-housekeeper him no longer.'

Beatrice went to clean the step of the front door. She clanged the bucket loudly, every minute becoming more and more angry. That piece of work finished, she went into the kitchen. It was twenty past ten. Her wrath was at ignition point. She cleared all the things from the table and washed them up. As she was so doing, her anger, having reached full intensity without bursting into flame, began to dissipate in uneasiness. She tried to imagine what Siegmund would do and say to her. As she was wiping a cup, she dropped it, and the smash so unnerved her that her hands trembled almost too much to finish drying the things and putting them away. At last it was done. Her next piece of work was to make the beds. She took her pail and went upstairs. Her heart was beating so heavily in her throat that she had to stop on the landing to recover breath. She dreaded the combat with him. Suddenly controlling herself, she said loudly at Siegmund's door, her voice coldly hostile:

'Aren't you going to get up?'

There was not the faintest sound in the house. Beatrice stood in the gloom of the landing, her heart thudding in her ears.

'It's after half past ten--aren't you going to get up?' she called.

She waited again. Two letters lay unopened on a small table. Suddenly she put down her pail and went into the bathroom. The pot of shaving-water stood untouched on the shelf, just as she had left it. She returned and knocked swiftly at her husband's door, not speaking. She waited, then she knocked again, loudly, a long time. Something in the sound of her knocking made her afraid to try again. The noise was dull and thudding: it did not resound through the house with a natural ring, so she thought. She ran downstairs in terror, fled out into the front garden, and there looked up at his room. The window-door was open--everything seemed quiet.

Beatrice stood vacillating. She picked up a few tiny pebbles and flung them in a handful at his door. Some splattered on the panes sharply; some dropped dully in the room. One clinked on the wash-hand bowl. There was no response. Beatrice was terribly excited. She ran, with her black eyes blazing, and wisps of her black hair flying about her thin temples, out on to the road. By a mercy she saw the window-cleaner just pushing his ladder out of the passage of a house a little farther down the road. She

hurried to him.

'Will you come and see if there's anything wrong with my husband?' she asked wildly.

'Why, mum?' answered the window-cleaner, who knew her, and was humbly familiar. 'Is he taken bad or something? Yes, I'll come.'

He was a tall thin man with a brown beard. His clothes were all so loose, his trousers so baggy, that he gave one the impression his limbs must be bone, and his body a skeleton. He pushed at his ladders with a will.

'Where is he, Mum?' he asked officiously, as they slowed down at the side passage.

'He's in his bedroom, and I can't get an answer from him.'

'Then I s'll want a ladder,' said the window-cleaner, proceeding to lift one off his trolley. He was in a very great bustle. He knew which was Siegmund's room: he had often seen Siegmund rise from some music he was studying and leave the drawing-room when the window-cleaning began, and afterwards he had found him in the small front bedroom. He also knew there were matrimonial troubles: Beatrice was not reserved.

'Is it the least of the front rooms he's in?' asked the window-cleaner.

'Yes, over the porch,' replied Beatrice.

The man bustled with his ladder.

'It's easy enough,' he said. 'The door's open, and we're soon on the balcony.'

He set the ladder securely. Beatrice cursed him for a slow, officious fool. He tested the ladder, to see it was safe, then he cautiously clambered up. At the top he stood leaning sideways, bending over the ladder to peer into the room. He could see all sorts of things, for he was frightened.

'I say there!' he called loudly.

Beatrice stood below in horrible suspense.

'Go in!' she cried. 'Go in! Is he there?'

The man stepped very cautiously with one foot on to the balcony, and peered forward. But the glass door reflected into his eyes. He followed slowly with the other foot, and crept forward, ready at any moment to take flight.

'Hie, hie!' he suddenly cried in terror, and he drew back.

Beatrice was opening her mouth to scream, when the window-cleaner exclaimed weakly, as if dubious:

'I believe 'e's 'anged 'imself from the door-'ooks!'

'No!' cried Beatrice. 'No, no, no!'

'I believe 'e 'as!' repeated the man.

'Go in and see if he's dead!' cried Beatrice.

The man remained in the doorway, peering fixedly.

'I believe he is,' he said doubtfully.

'No--go and see!' screamed Beatrice.

The man went into the room, trembling, hesitating. He approached the body as if fascinated. Shivering, he took it round the loins and tried to lift it down. It was too heavy.

'I know!' he said to himself, once more bustling now he had something to do. He took his clasp-knife from his pocket, jammed the body between himself and the door so that it should not drop, and began to saw his way through the leathern strap. It gave. He started, and clutched the

body, dropping his knife. Beatrice, below in the garden, hearing the scuffle and the clatter, began to scream in hysteria. The man hauled the body of Siegmund, with much difficulty, on to the bed, and with trembling fingers tried to unloose the buckle in which the strap ran. It was bedded in Siegmund's neck. The window-cleaner tugged at it frantically, till he got it loose. Then he looked at Siegmund. The dead man lay on the bed with swollen, discoloured face, with his sleeping-jacket pushed up in a bunch under his armpits, leaving his side naked. Beatrice was screaming below. The window-cleaner, quite unnerved, ran from the room and scrambled down the ladder. Siegmund lay heaped on the bed, his sleeping-suit twisted and bunched up about him, his face hardly recognizable.