Chapter 29

Helena was dozing down in the cove at Tintagel. She and Louisa and Olive lay on the cool sands in the shadow, and steeped themselves in rest, in a cool, sea-fragrant tranquillity.

The journey down had been very tedious. After waiting for half an hour in the midnight turmoil of an August Friday in Waterloo station, they had seized an empty carriage, only to be followed by five north-countrymen, all of whom were affected by whisky. Olive, Helena, Louisa, occupied three corners of the carriage. The men were distributed between them. The three women were not alarmed. Their tipsy travelling companions promised to be tiresome, but they had a frank honesty of manner that placed them beyond suspicion. The train drew out westward. Helena began to count the miles that separated her from Siegmund. The north-countrymen began to be jolly: they talked loudly in their uncouth English; they sang the music-hall songs of the day; they furtively drank whisky. Through all this they were polite to the girls. As much could hardly be said in return of Olive and Louisa. They leaned forward whispering one to another. They sat back in their seats laughing, hiding their laughter by turning their backs on the men, who were a trifle disconcerted by this amusement.

The train spun on and on. Little homely clusters of lamps, suggesting the quiet of country life, turned slowly round through the darkness. The

men dropped into a doze. Olive put a handkerchief over her face and went to sleep. Louisa gradually nodded and jerked into slumber. Helena sat weariedly and watched the rolling of the sleeping travellers and the dull blank of the night sheering off outside. Neither the men nor the women looked well asleep. They lurched and nodded stupidly. She thought of Bazarof in Fathers and Sons, endorsing his opinion on the appearance of sleepers: all but Siegmund. Was Siegmund asleep? She imagined him breathing regularly on the pillows; she could see the under arch of his eyebrows, the fine shape of his nostrils, the curve of his lips, as she bent in fancy over his face.

The dawn came slowly. It was rather cold. Olive wrapped herself in rugs and went to sleep again. Helena shivered, and stared out of the window. There appeared a wanness in the night, and Helena felt inexpressibly dreary. A rosiness spread out far away. It was like a flock of flamingoes hovering over a dark lake. The world vibrated as the sun came up.

Helena waked the tipsy men at Exeter, having heard them say that there they must change. Then she walked the platform, very jaded. The train rushed on again. It was a most, most wearisome journey. The fields were very flowery, the morning was very bright, but what were these to her? She wanted dimness, sleep, forgetfulness. At eight o'clock, breakfast-time, the 'dauntless three' were driving in a waggonette amid blazing, breathless sunshine, over country naked of shelter, ungracious and harsh.

'Why am I doing this?' Helena asked herself.

The three friends, washed, dressed, and breakfasted. It was too hot to rest in the house, so they trudged to the coast, silently, each feeling in an ill humour.

When Helena was really rested, she took great pleasure in Tintagel. In the first place, she found that the cove was exactly, almost identically the same as the Walhalla scene in Walküre; in the second place, Tristan was here, in the tragic country filled with the flowers of a late Cornish summer, an everlasting reality; in the third place, it was a sea of marvellous, portentous sunsets, of sweet morning baths, of pools blossomed with life, of terrible suave swishing of foam which suggested the Anadyomene. In sun it was the enchanted land of divided lovers. Helena for ever hummed fragments of Tristan. As she stood on the rocks she sang, in her little, half-articulate way, bits of Isolde's love, bits of Tristan's anguish, to Siegmund.

She had not received her letter on Sunday. That had not very much disquieted her, though she was disappointed. On Monday she was miserable because of Siegmund's silence, but there was so much of enchantment in Tintagel, and Olive and Louisa were in such high spirits, that she forgot most whiles.

On Monday night, towards two o'clock, there came a violent storm of

thunder and lightning. Louisa started up in bed at the first clap, waking Helena. The room palpitated with white light for two seconds; the mirror on the dressing-table glared supernaturally. Louisa clutched her friend. All was dark again, the thunder clapping directly.

'There, wasn't that lovely!' cried Louisa, speaking of the lightning. 'Oo, wasn't it magnificent!--glorious!'

The door clicked and opened: Olive entered in her long white nightgown. She hurried to the bed.

'I say, dear!' she exclaimed, 'may I come into the fold? I prefer the shelter of your company, dear, during this little lot.'

'Don't you like it?' cried Louisa. 'I think it's lovely--lovely!'

There came another slash of lightning. The night seemed to open and shut. It was a pallid vision of a ghost-world between the clanging shutters of darkness. Louisa and Olive clung to each other spasmodically.

'There!' exclaimed the former, breathless. 'That was fine! Helena, did you see that?'

She clasped ecstatically the hand of her friend, who was lying down. Helena's answer was extinguished by the burst of thunder.

'There's no accounting for tastes,' said Olive, taking a place in the bed. 'I can't say I'm struck on lightning. What about you, Helena?'

'I'm not struck yet,' replied Helena, with a sarcastic attempt at a jest.

'Thank you, dear,' said Olive; 'you do me the honour of catching hold.'

Helena laughed ironically.

'Catching what?' asked Louisa, mystified.

'Why, dear,' answered Olive, heavily condescending to explain, 'I offered Helena the handle of a pun, and she took it. What a flash! You know, it's not that I'm afraid....'

The rest of her speech was overwhelmed in thunder.

Helena lay on the edge of the bed, listening to the ecstatics of one friend and to the impertinences of the other. In spite of her ironical feeling, the thunder impressed her with a sense of fatality. The night opened, revealing a ghostly landscape, instantly to shut again with blackness. Then the thunder crashed. Helena felt as if some secret were being disclosed too swiftly and violently for her to understand. The thunder exclaimed horribly on the matter. She was sure something

had happened.

Gradually the storm, drew away. The rain came down with a rush, persisted with a bruising sound upon the earth and the leaves.

'What a deluge!' exclaimed Louisa.

No one answered her. Olive was falling asleep, and Helena was in no mood to reply. Louisa, disconsolate, lay looking at the black window, nursing a grievance, until she, too, drifted into sleep. Helena was awake; the storm had left her with a settled sense of calamity. She felt bruised. The sound of the heavy rain bruising the ground outside represented her feeling; she could not get rid of the bruised sense of disaster.

She lay wondering what it was, why Siegmund had not written, what could have happened to him. She imagined all of them terrible, and endued with grandeur, for she had kinship with Hedda Gabler.

'But no,' she said to herself, 'it is impossible anything should have happened to him--I should have known. I should have known the moment his spirit left his body; he would have come to me. But I slept without dreams last night, and today I am sure there has been no crisis. It is impossible it should have happened to him: I should have known.'

She was very certain that in event of Siegmund's death, she would have received intelligence. She began to consider all the causes which might

arise to prevent his writing immediately to her.

'Nevertheless,' she said at last, 'if I don't hear tomorrow I will go and see.'

She had written to him on Monday. If she should receive no answer by Wednesday morning she would return to London. As she was deciding this she went to sleep.

The next day passed without news. Helena was in a state of distress. Her wistfulness touched the other two women very keenly. Louisa waited upon her, was very tender and solicitous. Olive, who was becoming painful by reason of her unsatisfied curiosity, had to be told in part of the state of affairs.

Helena looked up a train. She was quite sure by this time that something fatal awaited her.

The next morning she bade her friends a temporary good-bye, saying she would return in the evening. Immediately the train had gone, Louisa rushed into the little waiting-room of the station and wept. Olive shed tears for sympathy and self-pity. She pitied herself that she should be let in for so dismal a holiday. Louisa suddenly stopped crying and sat up:

'Oh, I know I'm a pig, dear, am I not?' she exclaimed. 'Spoiling your

holiday. But I couldn't help it, dear, indeed I could not.'

'My dear Lou!' cried Olive in tragic contralto. 'Don't refrain for my sake. The bargain's made; we can't help what's in the bundle.'

The two unhappy women trudged the long miles back from the station to their lodging. Helena sat in the swinging express revolving the same thought like a prayer-wheel. It would be difficult to think of anything more trying than thus sitting motionless in the train, which itself is throbbing and bursting its heart with anxiety, while one waits hour after hour for the blow which falls nearer as the distance lessens. All the time Helena's heart and her consciousness were with Siegmund in London, for she believed he was ill and needed her.

'Promise me,' she had said, 'if ever I were sick and wanted you, you would come to me.'

'I would come to you from hell!' Siegmund had replied.

'And if you were ill--you would let me come to you?' she had added.

'I promise,' he answered.

Now Helena believed he was ill, perhaps very ill, perhaps she only could be of any avail. The miles of distance were like hot bars of iron across her breast, and against them it was impossible to strive. The train did

what it could.

That day remains as a smear in the record of Helena's life. In it there is no spacing of hours, no lettering of experience, merely a smear of suspense.

Towards six o'clock she alighted, at Surbiton station, deciding that this would be the quickest way of getting to Wimbledon. She paced the platform slowly, as if resigned, but her heart was crying out at the great injustice of delay. Presently the local train came in. She had planned to buy a local paper at Wimbledon, and if from that source she could learn nothing, she would go on to his house and inquire. She had prearranged everything minutely.

After turning the newspaper several times she found what she sought.

'The funeral took place, at two o'clock today at Kingston Cemetery, of ----. Deceased was a professor of music, and had just returned from a holiday on the South Coast....'

The paragraph, in a bald twelve lines, told her everything.

'Jury returned a verdict of suicide during temporary insanity. Sympathy was expressed for the widow and children.'

Helena stood still on the station for some time, looking at the print.

Then she dropped the paper and wandered into the town, not knowing where she was going.

'That was what I got,' she said, months afterwards; 'and it was like a brick, it was like a brick.'

She wandered on and on, until suddenly she found herself in the grassy lane with only a wire fence bounding her from the open fields on either side, beyond which fields, on the left, she could see Siegmund's house standing florid by the road, catching the western sunlight. Then she stopped, realizing where she had come. For some time she stood looking at the house. It was no use her going there; it was of no use her going anywhere; the whole wide world was opened, but in it she had no destination, and there was no direction for her to take. As if marooned in the world, she stood desolate, looking from the house of Siegmund over the fields and the hills. Siegmund was gone; why had he not taken her with him?

The evening was drawing on; it was nearly half past seven when Helena looked at her watch, remembering Louisa, who would be waiting for her to return to Cornwall.

'I must either go to her, or wire to her. She will be in a fever of suspense,' said Helena to herself, and straightway she hurried to catch a tramcar to return to the station. She arrived there at a quarter to eight; there was no train down to Tintagel that night. Therefore she

wired the news:

'Siegmund dead. No train tonight. Am going home.'

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This done, she took her ticket and sat down to wait. By the strength of her will everything she did was reasonable and accurate. But her mind was chaotic.

'It was like a brick,' she reiterated, and that brutal simile was the only one she could find, months afterwards, to describe her condition. She felt as if something had crashed into her brain, stunning and maiming her.

As she knocked at the door of home she was apparently quite calm. Her mother opened to her.

'What, are you alone?' cried Mrs. Verden.

'Yes. Louisa did not come up,' replied Helena, passing into the dining-room. As if by instinct she glanced on the mantelpiece to see if there was a letter. There was a newspaper cutting. She went forward and took it. It was from one of the London papers.

'Inquest was held today upon the body of ----.'

Helena read it, read it again, folded it up and put it in her purse. Her mother stood watching her, consumed with distress and anxiety.

'How did you get to know?' she asked.

'I went to Wimbledon and bought a local paper,' replied the daughter, in her muted, toneless voice.

'Did you go to the house?' asked the mother sharply.

'No,' replied Helena.

'I was wondering whether to send you that paper,' said her mother hesitatingly.

Helena did not answer her. She wandered about the house mechanically, looking for something. Her mother followed her, trying very gently to help her.

For some time Helena sat at table in the dining-room staring before her. Her parents moved restlessly in silence, trying not to irritate her by watching her, praying for something to change the fixity of her look. They acknowledged themselves helpless; like children, they felt powerless and forlorn, and were very quiet.

'Won't you go to rest, Nellie?' asked the father at last. He was an unobtrusive, obscure man, whose sympathy was very delicate, whose ordinary attitude was one of gentle irony.

'Won't you go to rest, Nellie?' he repeated.

Helena shivered slightly.

'Do, my dear,' her mother pleaded. 'Let me take you to bed.'

Helena rose. She had a great horror of being fussed or petted, but this night she went dully upstairs, and let her mother help her to undress. When she was in bed the mother stood for some moments looking at her, yearning to beseech her daughter to pray to God; but she dared not. Helena moved with a wild impatience under her mother's gaze.

'Shall I leave you the candle?' said Mrs Verden.

'No, blow it out,' replied the daughter. The mother did so, and immediately left the room, going downstairs to her husband. As she entered the dining-room he glanced up timidly at her. She was a tall, erect woman. Her brown eyes, usually so swift and searching, were haggard with tears that did not fall. He bowed down, obliterating himself. His hands were tightly clasped.

'Will she be all right if you leave her?' he asked.

'We must listen,' replied the mother abruptly.

The parents sat silent in their customary places. Presently Mrs. Verden cleared the supper table, sweeping together a few crumbs from the floor in the place where Helena had sat, carefully putting her pieces of broken bread under the loaf to keep moist. Then she sat down again. One could see she was keenly alert to every sound. The father had his hand to his head; he was thinking and praying.

Mrs. Verden suddenly rose, took a box of matches from the mantelpiece, and hurrying her stately, heavy tread, went upstairs. Her husband followed in much trepidation, hovering near the door of his daughter's room. The mother tremblingly lit the candle. Helena's aspect distressed and alarmed her. The girl's face was masked as if in sleep, but occasionally it was crossed by a vivid expression of fear or horror. Her wide eyes showed the active insanity of her brain. From time to time she uttered strange, inarticulate sounds. Her mother held her hands and soothed her. Although she was hardly aware of the mother's presence, Helena was more tranquil. The father went downstairs and turned out the light. He brought his wife a large shawl, which he put on the bed-rail, and silently left the room. Then he went and kneeled down by his own bedside, and prayed.

Mrs Verden watched her daughter's delirium, and all the time, in a kind of mental chant, invoked the help of God. Once or twice the girl came to

herself, drew away her hand on recognizing the situation, and turned from her mother, who patiently waited until, upon relapse, she could soothe her daughter again. Helena was glad of her mother's presence, but she could not bear to be looked at.

Towards morning the girl fell naturally asleep. The mother regarded her closely, lightly touched her forehead with her lips, and went away, having blown out the candle. She found her husband kneeling in his nightshirt by the bed. He muttered a few swift syllables, and looked up as she entered.

'She is asleep,' whispered the wife hoarsely.

'Is it a--a natural sleep?' hesitated the husband.

'Yes. I think it is. I think she will be all right.'

'Thank God!' whispered the father, almost inaudibly.

He held his wife's hand as she lay by his side. He was the comforter. She felt as if now she might cry and take comfort and sleep. He, the quiet, obliterated man, held her hand, taking the responsibility upon himself.