Chapter 30

Beatrice was careful not to let the blow of Siegmund's death fall with full impact upon her. As it were, she dodged it. She was afraid to meet the accusation of the dead Siegmund, with the sacred jury of memories. When the event summoned her to stand before the bench of her own soul's understanding, she fled, leaving the verdict upon herself eternally suspended.

When the neighbours had come, alarmed by her screaming, she had allowed herself to be taken away from her own house into the home of a neighbour. There the children were brought to her. There she wept, and stared wildly about, as if by instinct seeking to cover her mind with confusion. The good neighbour controlled matters in Siegmund's house, sending for the police, helping to lay out the dead body. Before Vera and Frank came home, and before Beatrice returned to her own place, the bedroom of Siegmund was locked.

Beatrice avoided seeing the body of her husband; she gave him one swift glance, blinded by excitement; she never saw him after his death. She was equally careful to avoid thinking of him. Whenever her thoughts wandered towards a consideration of how he must have felt, what his inner life must have been, during the past six years, she felt herself dilate with terror, and she hastened to invoke protection.

'The children!' she said to herself--'the children. I must live for the children; I must think for the children.'

This she did, and with much success. All her tears and her wildness rose from terror and dismay rather than from grief. She managed to fend back a grief that would probably have broken her. Vera was too practical-minded, she had too severe a notion of what ought to be and what ought not, ever to put herself in her father's place and try to understand him. She concerned herself with judging him sorrowfully, exonerating him in part because Helena, that other, was so much more to blame. Frank, as a sentimentalist, wept over the situation, not over the personae. The children were acutely distressed by the harassing behaviour of the elders, and longed for a restoration of equanimity. By common consent no word was spoken of Siegmund. As soon as possible after the funeral Beatrice moved from South London to Harrow. The memory of Siegmund began to fade rapidly.

Beatrice had had all her life a fancy for a more open, public form of living than that of a domestic circle. She liked strangers about the house; they stimulated her agreeably. Therefore, nine months after the death of her husband, she determined to carry out the scheme of her heart, and take in boarders. She came of a well-to-do family, with whom she had been in disgrace owing to her early romantic but degrading marriage with a young lad who had neither income nor profession. In the tragic, but also sordid, event of his death, the Waltons returned again to the aid of Beatrice. They came hesitatingly, and kept their gloves

on. They inquired what she intended to do. She spoke highly and hopefully of her future boarding-house. They found her a couple of hundred pounds, glad to salve their consciences so cheaply. Siegmund's father, a winsome old man with a heart of young gold, was always ready further to diminish his diminished income for the sake of his grandchildren. So Beatrice was set up in a fairly large house in Highgate, was equipped with two maids, and gentlemen were invited to come and board in her house. It was a huge adventure, wherein Beatrice was delighted. Vera was excited and interested; Frank was excited, but doubtful and grudging; the children were excited, elated, wondering. The world was big with promise.

Three gentlemen came, before a month was out, to Beatrice's establishment. She hoped shortly to get a fourth or a fifth. Her plan was to play hostess, and thus bestow on her boarders the inestimable blessing of family life. Breakfast was at eight-thirty, and everyone attended. Vera sat opposite Beatrice, Frank sat on the maternal right hand; Mr MacWhirter, who was superior, sat on the left hand; next him sat Mr Allport, whose opposite was Mr Holiday. All were young men of less than thirty years. Mr MacWhirter was tall, fair, and stoutish; he was very quietly spoken, was humorous and amiable, yet extraordinarily learned. He never, by any chance, gave himself away, maintaining always an absolute reserve amid all his amiability. Therefore Frank would have done anything to win his esteem, while Beatrice was deferential to him. Mr Allport was tall and broad, and thin as a door; he had also a remarkably small chin. He was naïve, inclined to suffer in the first

pangs of disillusionment; nevertheless, he was waywardly humorous, sometimes wistful, sometimes petulant, always gallant. Therefore Vera liked him, whilst Beatrice mothered him. Mr Holiday was short, very stout, very ruddy, with black hair. He had a disagreeable voice, was vulgar in the grain, but officiously helpful if appeal were made to him. Therefore Frank hated him. Vera liked his handsome, lusty appearance, but resented bitterly his behaviour. Beatrice was proud of the superior and skilful way in which she handled him, clipping him into shape without hurting him.

One evening in July, eleven months after the burial of Siegmund, Beatrice went into the dining-room and found Mr Allport sitting with his elbow on the window-sill, looking out on the garden. It was half-past seven. The red rents between the foliage of the trees showed the sun was setting; a fragrance of evening-scented stocks filtered into the room through the open window; towards the south the moon was budding out of the twilight.

'What, you here all alone!' exclaimed Beatrice, who had just come from putting the children to bed. 'I thought you had gone out.'

'No--o! What's the use,' replied Mr Allport, turning to look at his landlady, 'of going out? There's nowhere to go.'

'Oh, come! There's the Heath, and the City--and you must join a tennis club. Now I know just the thing--the club to which Vera belongs.'

'Ah, yes! You go down to the City--but there's nothing there--what I mean to say--you want a pal--and even then--well'--he drawled the word--'we-ell, it's merely escaping from yourself--killing time.'

'Oh, don't say that!' exclaimed Beatrice. 'You want to enjoy life.'

'Just so! Ah, just so!' exclaimed Mr Allport. 'But all the same--it's like this--you only get up to the same thing tomorrow. What I mean to say--what's the good, after all? It's merely living because you've got to.'

'You are too pessimistic altogether for a young man. I look at it differently myself; yet I'll be bound I have more cause for grumbling. What's the trouble now?'

'We-ell--you can't lay your finger on a thing like that! What I mean to say--it's nothing very definite. But, after all--what is there to do but to hop out of life as quickly as possible? That's the best way.'

Beatrice became suddenly grave.

'You talk in that way, Mr. Allport,' she said. 'You don't think of the others.'

'I don't know,' he drawled. 'What does it matter? Look here--who'd care?

What I mean to say--for long?'

'That's all very easy, but it's cowardly,' replied Beatrice gravely.

'Nevertheless,' said Mr. Allport, 'it's true--isn't it?'

'It is not--and I should know,' replied Beatrice, drawing a cloak of reserve ostentatiously over her face. Mr. Allport looked at her and waited. Beatrice relaxed toward the pessimistic young man.

'Yes,' she said, 'I call it very cowardly to want to get out of your difficulties in that way. Think what you inflict on other people. You men, you're all selfish. The burden is always left for the women.'

'Ah, but then,' said Mr. Allport very softly and sympathetically, looking at Beatrice's black dress, 'I've no one depending on me.'

'No--you haven't--but you've a mother and sister. The women always have to bear the brunt.'

Mr. Allport looked at Beatrice, and found her very pathetic.

'Yes, they do rather,' he replied sadly, tentatively waiting.

'My husband--' began Beatrice. The young man waited. 'My husband was one of your sort: he ran after trouble, and when he'd found it--he couldn't

carry it off--and left it--to me.'

Mr. Allport looked at her very sympathetically.

'You don't mean it!' he exclaimed softly. 'Surely he didn't--?'

Beatrice nodded, and turned aside her face.

'Yes,' she said. 'I know what it is to bear that kind of thing--and it's no light thing, I can assure you.'

There was a suspicion of tears in her voice.

'And when was this, then--that he--?' asked Mr. Allport, almost with reverence.

'Only last year,' replied Beatrice.

Mr. Allport made a sound expressing astonishment and dismay. Little by little Beatrice told him so much: 'Her husband had got entangled with another woman. She herself had put up with it for a long time. At last she had brought matters to a crisis, declaring what she should do. He had killed himself--hanged himself--and left her penniless. Her people, who were very wealthy, had done for her as much as she would allow them. She and Frank and Vera had done the rest. She did not mind for herself; it was for Frank and Vera, who should be now enjoying their careless

youth, that her heart was heavy.'

There was silence for a while. Mr. Allport murmured his sympathy, and sat overwhelmed with respect for this little woman who was unbroken by tragedy. The bell rang in the kitchen. Vera entered.

'Oh, what a nice smell! Sitting in the dark, Mother?'

'I was just trying to cheer up Mr. Allport; he is very despondent.'

'Pray do not overlook me,' said Mr. Allport, rising and bowing.

'Well! I did not see you! Fancy your sitting in the twilight chatting with the mater. You must have been an unscrupulous bore, maman.'

'On the contrary,' replied Mr. Allport, 'Mrs. MacNair has been so good as to bear with me making a fool of myself.'

'In what way?' asked Vera sharply.

'Mr. Allport is so despondent. I think he must be in love,' said Beatrice playfully.

'Unfortunately, I am not--or at least I am not yet aware of it,' said Mr. Allport, bowing slightly to Vera.

She advanced and stood in the bay of the window, her skirt touching the young man's knees. She was tall and graceful. With her hands clasped behind her back she stood looking up at the moon, now white upon the richly darkening sky.

'Don't look at the moon, Miss MacNair, it's all rind,' said Mr Allport in melancholy mockery. 'Somebody's bitten all the meat out of our slice of moon, and left us nothing but peel.'

'It certainly does look like a piece of melon-shell--one portion,' replied Vera.

'Never mind, Miss MacNair,' he said, 'Whoever got the slice found it raw, I think.'

'Oh, I don't know,' she said. 'But isn't it a beautiful evening? I will just go and see if I can catch the primroses opening.'

'What primroses?' he exclaimed.

'Evening primroses--there are some.'

'Are there?' he said in surprise. Vera smiled to herself.

'Yes, come and look,' she said.

The young man rose with alacrity.

Mr Holiday came into the dining-room whilst they were down the garden.

'What, nobody in!' they heard him exclaim.

'There is Holiday,' murmured Mr Allport resentfully.

Vera did not answer. Holiday came to the open window, attracted by the fragrance.

'Ho! that's where you are!' he cried in his nasal tenor, which annoyed Vera's trained ear. She wished she had not been wearing a white dress to betray herself.

'What have you got?' he asked.

'Nothing in particular,' replied Mr Allport.

Mr Holiday sniggered.

'Oh, well, if it's nothing particular and private--' said Mr Holiday, and with that he leaped over the window-sill and went to join them.

'Curst fool!' muttered Mr Allport. 'I beg your pardon,' he added swiftly to Vera.

'Have you ever noticed, Mr Holiday,' asked Vera, as if very friendly, 'how awfully tantalizing these flowers are? They won't open while you're looking.'

'No,' sniggered he, I don't blame 'em. Why should they give themselves away any more than you do? You won't open while you're watched.' He nudged Allport facetiously with his elbow.

After supper, which was late and badly served, the young men were in poor spirits. Mr MacWhirter retired to read. Mr Holiday sat picking his teeth; Mr. Allport begged Vera to play the piano.

'Oh, the piano is not my instrument; mine was the violin, but I do not play now,' she replied.

'But you will begin again,' pleaded Mr. Allport.

'No, never!' she said decisively. Allport looked at her closely. The family tragedy had something to do with her decision, he was sure. He watched her interestedly.

'Mother used to play--' she began.

'Vera!' said Beatrice reproachfully.

'Let us have a song,' suggested Mr. Holiday.

'Mr. Holiday wishes to sing, Mother,' said Vera, going to the music-rack.

'Nay--I--it's not me,' Holiday began.

'"The Village Blacksmith",' said Vera, pulling out the piece. Holiday advanced. Vera glanced at her mother.

'But I have not touched the piano for--for years, I am sure,' protested Beatrice.

'You can play beautifully,' said Vera.

Beatrice accompanied the song. Holiday sang atrociously. Allport glared at him. Vera remained very calm.

At the end Beatrice was overcome by the touch of the piano. She went out abruptly.

'Mother has suddenly remembered that tomorrow's jellies are not made,' laughed Vera.

Allport looked at her, and was sad.

When Beatrice returned, Holiday insisted she should play again. She would have found it more difficult to refuse than to comply.

Vera retired early, soon to be followed by Allport and Holiday. At half past ten Mr. MacWhirter came in with his ancient volume. Beatrice was studying a cookery-book.

'You, too, at the midnight lamp!' exclaimed MacWhirter politely.

'Ah, I am only looking for a pudding for tomorrow,' Beatrice replied.

'We shall feel hopelessly in debt if you look after us so well,' smiled the young man ironically.

'I must look after you,' said Beatrice.

'You do--wonderfully. I feel that we owe you large debts of gratitude.' The meals were generally late, and something was always wrong.

'Because I scan a list of puddings?' smiled Beatrice uneasily.

'For the puddings themselves, and all your good things. The piano, for instance. That was very nice indeed.' He bowed to her.

'Did it disturb you? But one does not hear very well in the study.'

'I opened the door,' said MacWhirter, bowing again.

'It is not fair,' said Beatrice. 'I am clumsy now--clumsy. I once could play.'

'You play excellently. Why that "once could"?' said MacWhirter.

'Ah, you are amiable. My old master would have said differently,' she replied.

'We,' said MacWhirter, 'are humble amateurs, and to us you are more than excellent.'

'Good old Monsieur Fannière, how he would scold me! He said I would not take my talent out of the napkin. He would quote me the New Testament. I always think Scripture false in French, do not you?'

'Er--my acquaintance with modern languages is not extensive, I regret to say.'

'No? I was brought up at a convent school near Rouen.'

'Ah--that would be very interesting.'

'Yes, but I was there six years, and the interest wears off everything.'

'Alas!' assented MacWhirter, smiling.

'Those times were very different from these,' said Beatrice.

'I should think so,' said MacWhirter, waxing grave and sympathetic.