Chapter 31

In the same month of July, not yet a year after Siegmund's death, Helena sat on the top of the tramcar with Cecil Byrne. She was dressed in blue linen, for the day had been hot. Byrne was holding up to her a yellow-backed copy of Einsame Menschen, and she was humming the air of the Russian folk-song printed on the front page, frowning, nodding with her head, and beating time with her hand to get the rhythm of the song. She turned suddenly to him, and shook her head, laughing.

'I can't get it--it's no use. I think it's the swinging of the car prevents me getting the time,' she said.

'These little outside things always come a victory over you,' he laughed.

'Do they?' she replied, smiling, bending her head against the wind. It was six o'clock in the evening. The sky was quite overcast, after a dim, warm day. The tramcar was leaping along southwards. Out of the corners of his eyes Byrne watched the crisp morsels of hair shaken on her neck by the wind.

'Do you know,' she said, 'it feels rather like rain.'

'Then,' said he calmly, but turning away to watch the people below on

the pavement, 'you certainly ought not to be out.'

'I ought not,' she said, 'for I'm totally unprovided.'

Neither, however, had the slightest intention of turning back.

Presently they descended from the car, and took a road leading uphill off the highway. Trees hung over one side, whilst on the other side stood a few villas with lawns upraised. Upon one of these lawns two great sheep-dogs rushed and stood at the brink of the, grassy declivity, at some height above the road, barking and urging boisterously. Helena and Byrne stood still to watch them. One dog was grey, as is usual, the other pale fawn. They raved extravagantly at the two pedestrians. Helena laughed at them.

'They are--' she began, in her slow manner.

'Villa sheep-dogs baying us wolves,' he continued.

'No,' she said, 'they remind me of Fafner and Fasolt.'

'Fasolt? They are like that. I wonder if they really dislike us.'

'It appears so,' she laughed.

'Dogs generally chum up to me,' he said.

Helena began suddenly to laugh. He looked at her inquiringly.

'I remember,' she said, still laughing, 'at Knockholt--you--a half-grown lamb--a dog--in procession.' She marked the position of the three with her finger.

'What an ass I must have looked!' he said.

'Sort of silent Pied Piper,' she laughed.

'Dogs do follow me like that, though,' he said.

'They did Siegmund,' she said.

'Ah!' he exclaimed.

'I remember they had for a long time a little brown dog that followed him home.'

'Ah!' he exclaimed.

'I remember, too,' she said, 'a little black-and-white kitten that followed me. Mater would not have it in--she would not. And I remember finding it, a few days after, dead in the road. I don't think I ever quite forgave my mater that.'

'More sorrow over one kitten brought to destruction than over all the sufferings of men,' he said.

She glanced at him and laughed. He was smiling ironically.

'For the latter, you see,' she replied, 'I am not responsible.'

As they neared the top of the hill a few spots of rain fell.

'You know,' said Helena, 'if it begins it will continue all night. Look at that!'

She pointed to the great dark reservoir of cloud ahead.

'Had we better go back?' he asked.

'Well, we will go on and find a thick tree; then we can shelter till we see how it turns out. We are not far from the cars here.'

They walked on and on. The raindrops fell more thickly, then thinned away.

'It is exactly a year today,' she said, as they-walked on the round shoulder of the down with an oak-wood on the left hand. 'Exactly!'

'What anniversary is it, then?' he inquired.

'Exactly a year today, Siegmund and I walked here--by the day, Thursday. We went through the larch-wood. Have you ever been through the larch-wood?'

'No.'

'We will go, then,' she said.

'History repeats itself,' he remarked.

'How?' she asked calmly.

He was pulling at the heads of the cocksfoot grass as he walked.

'I see no repetition,' she added.

'No,' he exclaimed bitingly; 'you are right!'

They went on in silence. As they drew near a farm they saw the men unloading a last wagon of hay on to a very brown stack. He sniffed the air. Though he was angry, he spoke.

'They got that hay rather damp,' he said. 'Can't you smell it--like hot tobacco and sandal-wood?'

'What, is that the stack?' she asked.

'Yes, it's always like that when it's picked damp.'

The conversation was restarted, but did not flourish. When they turned on to a narrow path by the side of the field he went ahead. Leaning over the hedge, he pulled three sprigs of honeysuckle, yellow as butter, full of scent; then he waited for her. She was hanging her head, looking in the hedge-bottom. He presented her with the flowers without speaking. She bent forward, inhaled the rich fragrance, and looked up at him over the blossoms with her beautiful, beseeching blue eyes. He smiled gently to her.

'Isn't it nice?' he said. 'Aren't they fine bits?'

She took them without answering, and put one piece carefully in her dress. It was quite against her rule to wear a flower. He took his place by her side.

'I always like the gold-green of cut fields,' he said. 'They seem to give off sunshine even when the sky's greyer than a tabby cat.'

She laughed, instinctively putting out her hand towards the glowing field on her right.

They entered the larch-wood. There the chill wind was changed into sound. Like a restless insect he hovered about her, like a butterfly whose antennae flicker and twitch sensitively as they gather intelligence, touching the aura, as it were, of the female. He was exceedingly delicate in his handling of her.

The path was cut windingly through the lofty, dark, and closely serried trees, which vibrated like chords under the soft bow of the wind. Now and again he would look down passages between the trees--narrow pillared corridors, dusky as if webbed across with mist. All round was a twilight, thickly populous with slender, silent trunks. Helena stood still, gazing up at the tree-tops where the bow of the wind was drawn, causing slight, perceptible quivering. Byrne walked on without her. At a bend in the path he stood, with his hand on the roundness of a larch-trunk, looking back at her, a blue fleck in the brownness of congregated trees. She moved very slowly down the path.

'I might as well not exist, for all she is aware of me,' he said to himself bitterly. Nevertheless, when she drew near he said brightly:

'Have you noticed how the thousands of dry twigs between the trunks make a brown mist, a brume?'

She looked at him suddenly as if interrupted.

'H'm? Yes, I see what you mean.'

She smiled at him, because of his bright boyish tone and manner.

'That's the larch fog,' he laughed.

'Yes,' she said, 'you see it in pictures. I had not noticed it before.'

He shook the tree on which his hand was laid.

'It laughs through its teeth,' he said, smiling, playing with everything he touched.

As they went along she caught swiftly at her hat; then she stooped, picking up a hat-pin of twined silver. She laughed to herself as if pleased by a coincidence.

'Last year,' she said, 'the larch-fingers stole both my pins--the same ones.'

He looked at her, wondering how much he was filling the place of a ghost with warmth. He thought of Siegmund, and seemed to see him swinging down the steep bank out of the wood exactly as he himself was doing at the moment, with Helena stepping carefully behind. He always felt a deep sympathy and kinship with Siegmund; sometimes he thought he hated Helena.

They had emerged at the head of a shallow valley--one of those wide hollows in the North Downs that are like a great length of tapestry held loosely by four people. It was raining. Byrne looked at the dark blue dots rapidly appearing on the sleeves of Helena's dress. They walked on a little way. The rain increased. Helena looked about for shelter.

'Here,' said Byrne--'here is our tent--a black tartar's--ready pitched.'

He stooped under the low boughs of a very large yew tree that stood just back from the path. She crept after him. It was really a very good shelter. Byrne sat on the ledge of a root, Helena beside him. He looked under the flap of the black branches down the valley. The grey rain was falling steadily; the dark hollow under the tree was immersed in the monotonous sound of it. In the open, where the bright young corn shone intense with wet green, was a fold of sheep. Exposed in a large pen on the hillside, they were moving restlessly; now and again came the 'tong-ting-tong' of a sheep-bell. First the grey creatures huddled in the high corner, then one of them descended and took shelter by the growing corn lowest down. The rest followed, bleating and pushing each other in their anxiety to reach the place of desire, which was no whit better than where they stood before.

'That's like us all,' said Byrne whimsically. 'We're all penned out on a wet evening, but we think, if only we could get where someone else is, it would be deliciously cosy.'

Helena laughed swiftly, as she always did when he became whimsical and fretful. He sat with his head bent down, smiling with his lips, but his eyes melancholy. She put her hand out to him. He took it without apparently observing it, folding his own hand over it, and unconsciously increasing the pressure.

'You are cold,' he said.

'Only my hands, and they usually are,' she replied gently.

'And mine are generally warm.'

'I know that,' she said. 'It's almost the only warmth I get now--your hands. They really are wonderfully warm and close-touching.'

'As good as a baked potato,' he said.

She pressed his hand, scolding him for his mockery.

'So many calories per week--isn't that how we manage it?' he asked. 'On credit?'

She put her other hand on his, as if beseeching him to forgo his irony, which hurt her. They sat silent for some time. The sheep broke their cluster, and began to straggle back to the upper side of the pen.

'Tong-tong, tong,' went the forlorn bell. The rain waxed louder.

Byrne was thinking of the previous week. He had gone to Helena's home to read German with her as usual. She wanted to understand Wagner in his own language.

In each of the arm-chairs, reposing across the arms, was a violin-case. He had sat down on the edge of one seat in front of the sacred fiddle. Helena had come quickly and removed the violin.

'I shan't knock it--it is all right,' he had said, protesting.

This was Siegmund's violin, which Helena had managed to purchase, and Byrne was always ready to yield its precedence.

'It was all right,' he repeated.

'But you were not,' she had replied gently.

Since that time his heart had beat quick with excitement. Now he sat in a little storm of agitation, of which nothing was betrayed by his gloomy, pondering expression, but some of which was communicated to Helena by the increasing pressure of his hand, which adjusted itself delicately in a stronger and stronger stress over her fingers and palm. By some movement he became aware that her hand was uncomfortable. He relaxed. She sighed, as if restless and dissatisfied. She wondered what

he was thinking of. He smiled quietly.

'The Babes in the Wood,' he teased.

Helena laughed, with a sound of tears. In the tree overhead some bird began to sing, in spite of the rain, a broken evening song.

'That little beggar sees it's a hopeless case, so he reminds us of heaven. But if he's going to cover us with yew-leaves, he's set himself a job.'

Helena laughed again, and shivered. He put his arm round her, drawing her nearer his warmth. After this new and daring move neither spoke for a while.

'The rain continues,' he said.

'And will do,' she added, laughing.

'Quite content,' he said.

The bird overhead chirruped loudly again.

'"Strew on us roses, roses,"' quoted Byrne, adding after a while, in wistful mockery: '"And never a sprig of yew"--eh?'

Helena made a small sound of tenderness and comfort for him, and weariness for herself. She let herself sink a little closer against him.

'Shall it not be so--no yew?' he murmured.

He put his left hand, with which he had been breaking larch-twigs, on her chilled wrist. Noticing that his fingers were dirty, he held them up.

'I shall make marks on you,' he said.

'They will come off,' she replied.

'Yes, we come clean after everything. Time scrubs all sorts of scars off us.'

'Some scars don't seem to go,' she smiled.

And she held out her other arm, which had been pressed warm against his side. There, just above the wrist, was the red sun-inflammation from last year. Byrne regarded it gravely.

'But it's wearing off--even that,' he said wistfully.

Helena put her arms found him under his coat. She was cold. He felt a hot wave of joy suffuse him. Almost immediately she released him, and

took off her hat.

'That is better,' he said.

'I was afraid of the pins,' said she.

'I've been dodging them for the last hour,' he said, laughing, as she put her arms under his coat again for warmth.

She laughed, and, making a small, moaning noise, as if of weariness and helplessness, she sank her head on his chest. He put down his cheek against hers.

'I want rest and warmth,' she said, in her dull tones.

'All right!' he murmured.