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Chapter 12

Siegmund made a great effort to keep the control of his body. The hill-side, the gorse, when he stood up, seemed to have fallen back into shadowed vagueness about him. They were meaningless dark heaps at some distance, very great, it seemed.

'I can't get hold of them,' he said distractedly to himself. He felt detached from the earth, from all the near, concrete, beloved things; as if these had melted away from him, and left him, sick and unsupported, somewhere alone on the edge of an enormous space. He wanted to lie down again, to relieve himself of the sickening effort of supporting and controlling his body. If he could lie down again perfectly still he need not struggle to animate the cumbersome matter of his body, and then he would not feel thus sick and outside himself.

But Helena was speaking to him, telling him they would see the moon-path. They must set off downhill. He felt her arm clasped firmly, joyously, round his waist. Therein was his stability and warm support. Siegmund felt a keen flush of pitiful tenderness for her as she walked with buoyant feet beside him, clasping him so happily, all unconscious. This pity for her drew him nearer to life.

He shuddered lightly now and again, as they stepped lurching down the hill. He set his jaws hard to suppress this shuddering. It was not in his limbs, or even on the surface of his body, for Helena did not notice it. Yet he shuddered almost in anguish internally.

'What is it?' he asked himself in wonder.

His thought consisted of these detached phrases, which he spoke verbally to himself. Between-whiles he was conscious only of an almost insupportable feeling of sickness, as a man feels who is being brought from under an anaesthetic; also he was vaguely aware of a teeming stir of activity, such as one may hear from a closed hive, within him.

They swung rapidly downhill. Siegmund still shuddered, but not so uncontrollably. They came to a stile which they must climb. As he stepped over it needed a concentrated effort of will to place his foot securely on the step. The effort was so great that he became conscious of it.

'Good Lord!' he said to himself. 'I wonder what it is.'

He tried to examine himself. He thought of all the organs of his body - his brain, his heart, his liver. There was no pain, and nothing wrong with any of them, he was sure. His dim searching resolved itself into another detached phrase. 'There is nothing the matter with me,' he said.

Then he continued vaguely wondering, recalling the sensation of wretched sickness which sometimes follows drunkenness, thinking of the times when he had fallen ill.

'But I am not like that,' he said, 'because I don't feel tremulous. I am sure my hand is steady.'

Helena stood still to consider the road. He held out his hand before him. It was motionless as a dead flower on this silent night.

'Yes, I think this is the right way,' said Helena, and they set off again, as if gaily.

'It certainly feels rather deathly,' said Siegmund to himself. He remembered distinctly, when he was a child and had diphtheria, he had stretched himself in the horrible sickness, which he felt was - and here he chose the French word - 'l'agonie'. But his mother had seen and had cried aloud, which suddenly caused him to struggle with all his soul to spare her her suffering.

'Certainly it is like that,' he said. 'Certainly it is rather deathly. I wonder how it is.'

Then he reviewed the last hour.

'I believe we are lost!' Helena interrupted him.

'Lost! What matter!' he answered indifferently, and Helena pressed him tighter, nearer to her in a kind of triumph. 'But did we not come this way?' he added.

'No. See' - her voice was reeded with restrained emotion - 'we have certainly not been along this bare path which dips up and down.'

'Well, then, we must merely keep due eastward, towards the moon pretty well, as much as we can,' said Siegmund, looking forward over the down, where the moon was wrestling heroically to win free of the pack of clouds which hung on her like wolves on a white deer. As he looked at the moon he felt a sense of companionship. Helena, not understanding, left him so much alone; the moon was nearer.

Siegmund continued to review the last hours. He had been so wondrously happy. The world had been filled with a new magic, a wonderful, stately beauty which he had perceived for the first time. For long hours he had been wandering in another - a glamorous, primordial world.

'I suppose,' he said to himself, 'I have lived too intensely, I seem to have had the stars and moon and everything else for guests, and now they've gone my house is weak.'

So he struggled to diagnose his case of splendour and sickness. He reviewed his hour of passion with Helena.

'Surely,' he told himself, 'I have drunk life too hot, and it has hurt my cup. My soul seems to leak out - I am half here, half gone away. That's why I understand the trees and the night so painfully.'

Then he came to the hour of Helena's strange ecstasy over him. That, somehow, had filled him with passionate grief. It was happiness concentrated one drop too keen, so that what should have been vivid wine was like a pure poison scathing him. But his consciousness, which had been unnaturally active, now was dulling. He felt the blood flowing vigorously along the limbs again, and stilling his brain, sweeping away his sickness, soothing him.

'I suppose,' he said to himself for the last time, 'I suppose living too intensely kills you, more or less.'

Then Siegmund forgot. He opened his eyes and saw the night about him. The moon had escaped from the cloud-pack, and was radiant behind a fine veil which glistened to her rays, and which was broided with a lustrous halo, very large indeed, the largest halo Siegmund had ever seen. When the little lane turned full towards the moon, it seemed as if Siegmund and Helena would walk through a large Moorish arch of horse-shoe shape, the enormous white halo opening in front of them. They walked on, keeping their faces to the moon, smiling with wonder and a little rapture, until once more the little lane curved wilfully, and they were walking north. Helena observed three cottages crouching under the hill and under trees to cover themselves from the magic of the moonlight.

'We certainly did not come this way before,' she said triumphantly. The idea of being lost delighted her.

Siegmund looked round at the grey hills smeared over with a low, dim glisten of moon-mist. He could not yet fully realize that he was walking along a lane in the Isle of Wight. His surroundings seemed to belong to some state beyond ordinary experience - some place in romance, perhaps, or among the hills where Brünhild lay sleeping in her large bright halo of fire. How could it be that he and Helena were two children of London wandering to find their lodging in Freshwater? He sighed, and looked again over the hills where the moonlight was condensing in mist ethereal, frail, and yet substantial, reminding him of the way the manna must have condensed out of the white moonlit mists of Arabian deserts.

'We may be on the road to Newport,' said Helena presently, 'and the distance is ten miles.'

She laughed, not caring in the least whither they wandered, exulting in this wonderful excursion! She and Siegmund alone in a glistening wilderness of night at the back of her habited days and nights! Siegmund looked at her. He by no means shared her exultation, though he sympathized with it. He walked on alone in his deep seriousness, of which she was not aware. Yet when he noticed her abandon, he drew her nearer, and his heart softened with protecting tenderness towards her, and grew heavy with responsibility.

The fields breathed off a scent as if they were come to life with the night, and were talking with fragrant eagerness. The farms huddled together in sleep, and pulled the dark shadow over them to hide from the supernatural white night; the cottages were locked and darkened. Helena walked on in triumph through this wondrous hinterland of night, actively searching for the spirits, watching the cottages they approached, listening, looking for the dreams of those sleeping inside, in the darkened rooms. She imagined she could see the frail dream-faces at the windows; she fancied they stole out timidly into the gardens, and went running away among the rabbits on the gleamy hill-side. Helena laughed to herself, pleased with her fancy of wayward little dreams playing with weak hands and feet among the large, solemn-sleeping cattle. This was the first time, she told herself, that she had ever been out among the grey-frosted dreams and white-armed fairies. She imagined herself lying asleep in her room, while her own dreams slid out down the moonbeams. She imagined Siegmund sleeping in his room, while his dreams, dark-eyed, their blue eyes very dark and yearning at night-time, came wandering over the grey grass seeking her dreams.

So she wove her fancies as she walked, until for very weariness she was fain to remember that it was a long way - a long way. Siegmund's arm was about her to support her; she rested herself upon it. They crossed a stile and recognized, on the right of the path, the graveyard of the Catholic chapel. The moon, which the days were paring smaller with envious keen knife, shone upon the white stones in the burial-ground. The carved Christ upon His cross hung against a silver-grey sky. Helena looked up wearily, bowing to the tragedy. Siegmund also looked, and bowed his head.

'Thirty years of earnest love; three years' life like a passionate ecstasy-and it was finished. He was very great and very wonderful. I am very insignificant, and shall go out ignobly. But we are the same; love, the brief ecstasy, and the end. But mine is one rose, and His all the white beauty in the world.'

Siegmund felt his heart very heavy, sad, and at fault, in presence of the Christ. Yet he derived comfort from the knowledge that life was treating him in the same manner as it had treated the Master, though his compared small and despicable with the Christ-tragedy. Siegmund stepped softly into the shadow of the pine copse.

'Let me get under cover,' he thought. 'Let me hide in it; it is good, the sudden intense darkness. I am small and futile: my small, futile tragedy!'

Helena shrank in the darkness. It was almost terrible to her, and the silence was like a deep pit. She shrank to Siegmund. He drew her closer, leaning over her as they walked, trying to assure her. His heart was heavy, and heavy with a tenderness approaching grief, for his small, brave Helena.

'Are you sure this is the right way?' he whispered to her.

'Quite, quite sure,' she whispered confidently in reply. And presently they came out into the hazy moonlight, and began stumbling down the steep hill. They were both very tired, both found it difficult to go with ease or surety this sudden way down. Soon they were creeping cautiously across the pasture and the poultry farm. Helena's heart was beating, as she imagined what a merry noise there would be should they wake all the fowls. She dreaded any commotion, any questioning, this night, so she stole carefully along till they issued on the high-road not far from home.