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## Chapter 21

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The tall white yachts in a throng were lounging off the roads of Ryde. It was near the regatta time, so these proud creatures had flown loftily together, and now flitted hither and thither among themselves, like a concourse of tall women, footing the waves with superb touch. To Siegmund they were very beautiful, but removed from him, as dancers crossing the window-lights are removed from the man who looks up from the street. He saw the Solent and the world of glamour flying gay as snow outside, where inside was only Siegmund, tired, dispirited, without any joy.

He and Helena had climbed among coils of rope on to the prow of their steamer, so they could catch a little spray of speed on their faces to stimulate them. The sea was very bright and crowded. White sails leaned slightly and filed along the roads; two yachts with sails of amber floated, it seemed, without motion, amid the eclipsed blue of the day; small boats with red and yellow flags fluttered quickly, trailing the sea with colour; a pleasure steamer coming from Cowes swung her soft stout way among the fleeting ships; high in the background were men-of-war, a long line, each one threading tiny triangles of flags through a sky dim with distance.

'It is all very glad,' said Siegmund to himself, 'but it seems to be fanciful.'

He was out of it. Already he felt detached from life. He belonged to his destination. It is always so: we have no share in the beauty that lies between us and our goal.

Helena watched with poignant sorrow all the agitation of colour on the blue afternoon.

'We must leave it; we must pass out of it,' she lamented, over and over again. Each new charm she caught eagerly.

'I like the steady purpose of that brown-sailed tramp,' she said to herself, watching a laden coaster making for Portsmouth.

They were still among the small shipping of Ryde. Siegmund and Helena, as they looked out, became aware of a small motor-launch heading across their course towards a yacht whose tall masts were drawn clean on the sky. The eager launch, its nose up as if to breathe, was racing over the swell like a coursing dog. A lady, in white, and a lad with dark head and white jersey were leaning in the bows; a gentleman was bending over some machinery in the middle of the boat, while the sailor in the low stern was also stooping forward attending to something. The steamer was sweeping onwards, huge above the water; the dog of a boat was coursing straight across her track. The lady saw the danger first. Stretching forward, she seized the arm of the lad and held him firm, making no sound, but watching the forward menace of the looming steamer.

'Look!' cried Helena, catching hold of Siegmund. He was already watching. Suddenly the steamer bell clanged. The gentleman looked up, with startled, sunburned face; then he leaped to the stern. The launch veered. It and the steamer closed together like a pair of scissors. The lady, still holding the boy, looked up with an expressionless face at the high sweeping chisel of the steamer's bows; the husband stood rigid, staring ahead. No sound was to be heard save the rustling of water under the bows. The scissors closed, the launch skelped forward like a dog from in front of the traffic. It escaped by a yard or two. Then, like a dog, it seemed to look round. The gentleman in the stern glanced back quickly. He was a handsome, dark-haired man with dark eyes. His face was as if carved out of oak, set and grey-brown. Then he looked to the steering of his boat. No one had uttered a sound. From the tiny boat coursing low on the water, not a sound, only tense waiting. The launch raced out of danger towards the yacht. The gentleman, with a brief gesture, put his man in charge again, whilst he himself went forward to the lady. He was a handsome man, very proud in his movements; and she, in her bearing, was prouder still. She received him almost with indifference.

Helena turned to Siegmund. He took both her hands and pressed them, whilst she looked at him with eyes blind with emotion. She was white to the lips, and heaving like the buoy in the wake of the steamer. The noise of life had suddenly been hushed, and each heart had heard for a moment the noiselessness of death. How everyone was white and gasping! They strove, on every hand, to fill the day with noise and the colour of life again.

'By Jove, that was a near thing!'

'Ah, that has made me feel bad!' said a woman.

'A French yacht,' said somebody.

Helena was waiting for the voice of Siegmund. But he did not know what to say. Confused, he repeated:

'That was a close shave.'

Helena clung to him, searching his face. She felt his difference from herself. There was something in his experience that made him different, quiet, with a peculiar expression as if he were pained.

'Ah, dear Lord!' he was saying to himself. 'How bright and whole the day is for them! If God had suddenly put His hand over the sun, and swallowed us up in a shadow, they could not have been more startled. That man, with his fine, white-flannelled limbs and his dark head, has no suspicion of the shadow that supports it all. Between the blueness of the sea and the sky he passes easy as a gull, close to the fine white seamew of his mate, amid red flowers of flags, and soft birds of ships, and slow-moving monsters of steamboats.

'For me the day is transparent and shrivelling. I can see the darkness through its petals. But for him it is a fresh bell-flower, in which he fumbles with delights like a bee.

'For me, quivering in the interspaces of the atmosphere, is the darkness the same that fills in my soul. I can see death urging itself into life, the shadow supporting the substance. For my life is burning an invisible flame. The glare of the light of myself, as I burn on the fuel of death, is not enough to hide from me the source and the issue. For what is a life but a flame that bursts off the surface of darkness, and tapers into the darkness again? But the death that issues differs from the death that was the source. At least, I shall enrich death with a potent shadow, if I do not enrich life.'

'Wasn't that woman fine!' said Helena.

'So perfectly still,' he answered.

'The child realized nothing,' she said.

Siegmund laughed, then leaned forward impulsively to her.

'I am always so sorry,' he said, 'that the human race is urged inevitably into a deeper and deeper realization of life.'

She looked at him, wondering what provoked such a remark.

'I guess,' she said slowly, after a while, 'that the man, the sailor, will have a bad time. He was abominably careless.'

'He was careful of something else just then,' said Siegmund, who hated to hear her speak in cold condemnation. 'He was attending to the machinery or something.'

'That was scarcely his first business,' said she, rather sarcastic.

Siegmund looked at her. She seemed very hard in judgement - very blind. Sometimes his soul surged against her in hatred.

'Do you think the man wanted to drown the boat?' he asked.

'He nearly succeeded,' she replied.

There was antagonism between them. Siegmund recognized in Helena the world sitting in judgement, and he hated it. 'But, after all,' he thought, I suppose it is the only way to get along, to judge the event and not the person. I have a disease of sympathy, a vice of exoneration.'

Nevertheless, he did not love Helena as a judge. He thought rather of the woman in the boat. She was evidently one who watched the sources of life, saw it great and impersonal.

'Would the woman cry, or hug and kiss the boy when she got on board?' he asked.

'I rather think not. Why?' she replied.

'I hope she didn't,' he said.

Helena sat watching the water spurt back from the bows. She was very much in love with Siegmund. He was suggestive; he stimulated her. But to her mind he had not her own dark eyes of hesitation; he was swift and proud as the wind. She never realized his helplessness.

Siegmund was gathering strength from the thought of that other woman's courage. If she had so much restraint as not to cry out, or alarm the boy, if she had so much grace not to complain to her husband, surely he himself might refrain from revealing his own fear of Helena, and from lamenting his hard fate.

They sailed on past the chequered round towers. The sea opened, and they looked out to eastward into the sea-space. Siegmund wanted to flee. He yearned to escape down the open ways before him. Yet he knew he would be carried on to London. He watched the sea-ways closing up. The shore came round. The high old houses stood flat on the right hand. The shore swept round in a sickle, reaping them into the harbour. There the old Victory, gay with myriad pointed pennons, was harvested, saved for a trophy.

'It is a dreadful thing,' thought Siegmund, 'to remain as a trophy when there is nothing more to do.' He watched the landing-stages swooping nearer. There were the trains drawn up in readiness. At the other end of the train was London.

He could scarcely bear to have Helena before him for another two hours. The suspense of that protracted farewell, while he sat opposite her in the beating train, would cost too much. He longed to be released from her.

They had got their luggage, and were standing at the foot of the ladder, in the heat of the engines and the smell of hot oil, waiting for the crowd to pass on, so that they might ascend and step off the ship on to the mainland.

'Won't you let me go by the South-Western, and you by the Brighton?' asked Siegmund, hesitating, repeating the morning's question.

Helena looked at him, knitting her brows with misgiving and perplexity.

'No,' she replied. 'Let us go together.'

Siegmund followed her up the iron ladder to the quay.

There was no great crowd on the train. They easily found a second-class compartment without occupants. He swung the luggage on the rack and sat down, facing Helena.

'Now,' said he to himself, 'I wish I were alone.'

He wanted to think and prepare himself.

Helena, who was thinking actively, leaned forward to him to say:

'Shall I not go down to Cornwall?'

By her soothing willingness to do anything for him, Siegmund knew that she was dogging him closely. He could not bear to have his anxiety protracted.

'But you have promised Louisa, have you not?' he replied.

'Oh, well!' she said, in the peculiar slighting tone she had when she wished to convey the unimportance of affairs not touching him.

'Then you must go,' he said.

'But,' she began, with harsh petulance, 'I do not want to go down to Cornwall with Louisa and Olive' - she accentuated the two names - 'after this,' she added.

'Then Louisa will have no holiday - and you have promised,' he said gravely.

Helena looked at him. She saw he had decided that she should go.

'Is my promise so very important?' she asked. She glanced angrily at the three ladies who were hesitating in the doorway. Nevertheless, the ladies entered, and seated themselves at the opposite end of the carriage. Siegmund did not know whether he were displeased or relieved by their intrusion. If they had stayed out, he might have held Helena in his arms for still another hour. As it was, she could not harass him with words. He tried not to look at her, but to think.

The train at last moved out of the station. As it passed through Portsmouth, Siegmund remembered his coming down, on the Sunday. It seemed an indefinite age ago. He was thankful that he sat on the side of the carriage opposite from the one he had occupied five days before. The afternoon of the flawless sky was ripening into evening. The chimneys and the sides of the houses of Portsmouth took on that radiant appearance which transfigures the end of day in town. A rich bloom of light appears on the surfaces of brick and stone.

'It will go on,' thought Siegmund, 'being gay of an evening, for ever. And I shall miss it all!'

But as soon as the train moved into the gloom of the Town station, he began again:

'Beatrice will be proud, and silent as steel when I get home. She will say nothing, thank God - nor shall I. That will expedite matters: there will be no interruptions....'

'But we cannot continue together after this. Why should I discuss reasons for and against? We cannot. She goes to a cottage in the country. Already I have spoken of it to her. I allow her all I can of my money, and on the rest I manage for myself in lodgings in London. Very good.

'But when I am comparatively free I cannot live alone. I shall want Helena; I shall remember the children. If I have the one, I shall be damned by the thought of the other. This bruise on my mind will never get better. Helena says she would never come to me; but she would, out of pity for me. I know she would.

'But then, what then? Beatrice and the children in the country, and me not looking after the children. Beatrice is thriftless. She would be in endless difficulty. It would be a degradation to me. She would keep a red sore inflamed against me; I should be a shameful thing in her mouth. Besides, there would go all her strength. She would not make any efforts. "He has brought it on us," she would say; "let him see what the result is." And things would go from bad to worse with them. It would be a gangrene of shame.

'And Helena - I should have nothing but mortification. When she was asleep I could not look at her. She is such a strange, incongruous creature. But I should be responsible for her. She believes in me as if I had the power of God. What should I think of myself?'

Siegmund leaned with his head against the window, watching the country whirl past, but seeing nothing. He thought imaginatively, and his imagination destroyed him. He pictured Beatrice in the country. He sketched the morning - breakfast haphazard at a late hour; the elder children rushing off without food, miserable and untidy, the youngest bewildered under her swift, indifferent preparations for school. He thought of Beatrice in the evening, worried and irritable, her bills unpaid, the work undone, declaiming lamentably against the cruelty of her husband, who had abandoned her to such a burden of care while he took his pleasure elsewhere.

This line exhausted or intolerable, Siegmund switched off to the consideration of his own life in town. He would go to America; the agreement was signed with the theatre manager. But America would be only a brief shutting of the eyes and closing of the mouth. He would wait for the home-coming to Helena, and she would wait for him. It was inevitable; then would begin - what? He would never have enough money to keep Helena, even if he managed to keep himself. Their meetings would then be occasional and clandestine. Ah, it was intolerable!

'If I were rich,' said Siegmund, 'all would be plain. I would give each of my children enough, and Beatrice, and we would go away; but I am nearly forty; I have no genius; I shall never be rich.' Round and round went his thoughts like oxen over a threshing floor, treading out the grain. Gradually the chaff flew away; gradually the corn of conviction gathered small and hard upon the floor.

As he sat thinking, Helena leaned across to him and laid her hand on his knee.

'If I have made things more difficult,' she said, her voice harsh with pain, 'you will forgive me.'

He started. This was one of the cruel cuts of pain that love gives, filling the eyes with blood. Siegmund stiffened himself; slowly he smiled, as he looked at her childish, plaintive lips, and her large eyes haunted with pain.

'Forgive you?' he repeated. 'Forgive you for five days of perfect happiness; the only real happiness I have ever known!'

Helena tightened her fingers on his knee. She felt herself stinging with painful joy; but one of the ladies was looking her curiously. She leaned back in her place, and turned to watch at the shocks of corn strike swiftly, in long rows, across her vision.

Siegmund, also quivering, turned his face to the window, where the rotation of the wide sea-flat helped the movement of his thought. Helena had interrupted him. She had bewildered his thoughts from their hawking, so that they struck here and there, wildly, among small, pitiful prey that was useless, conclusions which only hindered the bringing home of the final convictions.

'What will she do?' cried Siegmund, 'What will she do when I am gone? What will become of her? Already she has no aim in life; then she will have no object. Is it any good my going if I leave her behind? What an inextricable knot this is! But what will she do?'

It was a question she had aroused before, a question which he could never answer; indeed, it was not for him to answer.

They wound through the pass of the South Downs. As Siegmund, looking backward, saw the northern slope of the downs swooping smoothly, in a great, broad bosom of sward, down to the body of the land, he warmed with sudden love for the earth; there the great downs were, naked like a breast, leaning kindly to him. The earth is always kind; it loves us, and would foster us like a nurse. The downs were big and tender and simple. Siegmund looked at the farm, folded in a hollow, and he wondered what fortunate folk were there, nourished and quiet, hearing the vague roar of the train that was carrying him home.

Up towards Arundel the cornfields of red wheat were heavy with gold. It was evening, when the green of the trees ended proud upon the sky; but the red wheat was forged in the sunset, hot and magnificent. Siegmund almost gloated as he smelled the ripe corn, and opened his eyes to its powerful radiation. For a moment he forgot everything, amid the forging of red fields of gold in the smithy of the sunset. Like sparks, poppies blew along the railway-banks, a crimson train. Siegmund waited, through the meadows, for the next wheat-field. It came like the lifting of yellow-hot metal out of the gloom of darkened grass-lands.

Helena was reassured by the glamour of evening over ripe Sussex. She breathed the land now and then, while she watched the sky. The sunset was stately. The blue-eyed day, with great limbs, having fought its victory and won, now mounted triumphant on its pyre, and with white arms uplifted took the flames, which leaped like blood about its feet. The day died nobly, so she thought.

One gold cloud, as an encouragement tossed to her, followed the train.

'Surely that cloud is for us,' said she, as she watched it anxiously. Dark trees brushed between it and her, while she waited in suspense. It came, unswerving, from behind the trees.

'I am sure it is for us,' she repeated. A gladness came into her eyes. Still the cloud followed the train. She leaned forward to Siegmund and pointed out the cloud to him. She was very eager to give him a little of her faith.

'It has come with us quite a long way. Doesn't it seem to you to be travelling with us? It is the golden hand; it is the good omen.'

She then proceeded to tell him the legend from 'Aylwin'.

Siegmund listened, and smiled. The sunset was handsome on his face.

Helena was almost happy.

'I am right,' said he to himself. I am right in my conclusions, and Helena will manage by herself afterwards. I am right; there is the hand to confirm it.'

The heavy train settled down to an easy, unbroken stroke, swinging like a greyhound over the level northwards. All the time Siegmund was mechanically thinking the well-known movement from the Valkyrie Ride, his whole self beating to the rhythm. It seemed to him there was a certain grandeur in this flight, but it hurt him with its heavy insistence of catastrophe. He was afraid; he had to summon his courage to sit quiet. For a time he was reassured; he believed he was going on towards the right end. He hunted through the country and the sky, asking of everything, 'Am I right? Am I right?' He did not mind what happened to him, so long as he felt it was right. What he meant by 'right' he did not trouble to think, but the question remained. For a time he had been reassured; then a dullness came over him, when his thoughts were stupid, and he merely submitted to the rhythm of the train, which stamped him deeper and deeper with a brand of catastrophe.

The sun had gone down. Over the west was a gush of brightness as the fountain of light bubbled lower. The stars, like specks of froth from the foaming of the day, clung to the blue ceiling. Like spiders they hung overhead, while the hosts of the gold atmosphere poured out of the hive by the western low door. Soon the hive was empty, a hollow dome of purple, with here and there on the floor a bright brushing of wings - a village; then, overhead, the luminous star-spider began to run.

'Ah, well!' thought Siegmund - he was tired - 'if one bee dies in a swarm, what is it, so long as the hive is all right? Apart from the gold light, and the hum and the colour of the day, what was I? Nothing! Apart from these rushings out of the hive, along with swarm, into the dark meadows of night, gathering God knows what, I was a pebble. Well, the day will swarm in golden again, with colour on the wings of every bee, and humming in each activity. The gold and the colour and sweet smell and the sound of life, they exist, even if there is no bee; it only happens we see the iridescence on the wings of a bee. It exists whether or not, bee or no bee. Since the iridescence and the humming of life are always, and since it was they who made me, then I am not lost. At least, I do not care. If the spark goes out, the essence of the fire is there in the darkness. What does it matter? Besides, I have burned bright; I have laid up a fine cell of honey somewhere - I wonder where? We can never point to it; but it is so - what does it matter, then!'

They had entered the north downs, and were running through Dorking towards Leatherhead. Box Hill stood dark in the dusky sweetness of the night. Helena remembered that here she and Siegmund had come for their first walk together. She would like to come again. Presently she saw the quick stilettoes of stars on the small, baffled river; they ran between high embankments. Siegmund recollected that these were covered with roses of Sharon - the large golden St John's wort of finest silk. He looked, and could just distinguish the full-blown, delicate flowers, ignored by the stars. At last he had something to say to Helena:

'Do you remember,' he asked, 'the roses of Sharon all along here?'

'I do,' replied Helena, glad he spoke so brightly. 'Weren't they pretty?'

After a few moments of watching the bank, she said:

'Do you know, I have never gathered one? I think I should like to; I should like to feel them, and they should have an orangy smell.'

He smiled, without answering.

She glanced up at him, smiling brightly.

'But shall we come down here in the morning, and find some?' she asked. She put the question timidly. 'Would you care to?' she added.

Siegmund darkened and frowned. Here was the pain revived again.

'No,' he said gently; 'I think we had better not.' Almost for the first time he did not make apologetic explanation.

Helena turned to the window, and remained, looking out at the spinning of the lights of the towns without speaking, until they were near Sutton. Then she rose and pinned on her hat, gathering her gloves and her basket. She was, in spite of herself, slightly angry. Being quite ready to leave the train, she sat down to wait for the station. Siegmund was aware that she was displeased, and again, for the first time, he said to himself, 'Ah, well, it must be so.'

She looked at him. He was sad, therefore she softened instantly.

'At least,' she said doubtfully, 'I shall see you at the station.'

'At Waterloo?' he asked.

'No, at Wimbledon,' she replied, in her metallic tone.

'But - ' he began.

'It will be the best way for us,' she interrupted, in the calm tone of conviction. 'Much better than crossing London from Victoria to Waterloo.'

'Very well,' he replied.

He looked up a train for her in his little time-table.

'You will get in Wimbledon 10.5 - leave 10.40 - leave Waterloo 11.30,' he said.

'Very good,' she answered.

The brakes were grinding. They waited in a burning suspense for the train to stop.

'If only she will soon go!' thought Siegmund. It was an intolerable minute. She rose; everything was a red blur. She stood before him, pressing his hand; then he rose to give her the bag. As he leaned upon the window-frame and she stood below on the platform, looking up at him, he could scarcely breathe. 'How long will it be?' he said to himself, looking at the open carriage doors. He hated intensely the lady who could not get a porter to remove her luggage; he could have killed her; he could have killed the dilatory guard. At last the doors slammed and the whistle went. The train started imperceptibly into motion.

'Now I lose her,' said Siegmund.

She looked up at him; her face was white and dismal.

'Good-bye, then!' she said, and she turned away.

Siegmund went back to his seat. He was relieved, but he trembled with sickness. We are all glad when intense moments are done with; but why did she fling round in that manner, stopping the keen note short; what would she do?