

CHAPTER X

THE MORNING

THE sun across the hills touched Jean as he lay, his face half-hidden on his arm. Karan was standing by the embers of the fire on which she had thrown some sticks, and a tiny spiral of smoke was rising from them, blown and twisted by the wind blowing from the sea. The sea lay over there beyond the blue lift that told of the Dalmatian hills, whose vagueness and whose colour hinted of the continuance of fine weather.

He rose and came to her, and they stood for a moment without speaking watching the little fire.

Well, here was Love, stripped of the magic of the moon, its house built of the tombstones of forgotten people, its hearth a little fire of brambles, its child an old blind man who had to be led like a child.

Truly this was a fine adventure in a world inhospitable to love as the Plain of the Tombs to roses.

"Karan, when we leave here——" He paused for a moment as though the Future had suddenly checked him like a wall. Then over-leaping it and its impossibilities his mind reached Paris.

He told her of Paris. She must come there, they could be together there as nowhere else, he had friends . . .

But Karan, without raising her eyes from the fire, shook her head.

She knew as well as he the impossibilities surrounding them. Jean was not of them. In the wilderness, yes, but not in the world of men.

She had said so at Mostar, she said so now with that shake of the head. She had tried to avoid him after Mostar, but you cannot avoid what has to be.

Last night had to be and this morning. She said so, suddenly speaking as though her reverie had found tongue, and taking her hands he held her for a moment, looking at her as she stood with head half-dropped.

“Karan, would you have had it otherwise?”

“No,” said Karan. “Though I should never see you again.”

Though she should never see him again he was hers always now. She never would see Titi again, but the old, wise dog buried away there in France was hers still and always.

What you love never can be taken from you if you love it truly, for the truly loved is beyond the touch of death or change.

And that was the only sort of possession that this wanderer could ever have and hold, and call her own, she for whom the life of cities was impossible.

Jean released her hands. His mind, flying far ahead like a questing hawk, had suddenly glimpsed what lay across the distant hills to the west—the sea. The land was impossible, the cities and the streets; even on the country roads the peasants would mark the difference between him and these two strange companions that Fate had linked him with. The fantastic idea had come to him that by the shore of the sea or on one of those islands marked on his map things would be different, life freer, people blinder to the social side of things. He remembered the Brittany fisher folk, their simplicity and indifference to convention. Amongst people like that he and Karan might hold together awhile till things developed and the future grew more clear.

He told himself all this but half-heartedly, for in his heart of hearts he knew that all these imaginings were only pictures cast on the hard wall of the World.

Yes, for a while he might possess her as he had possessed her last night and as he possessed her now—but what about the future? She herself had said that things were impossible.

And now the strange fact appeared that this attitude of hers had strengthened her hold on him.

After the events of last night if she had clung to him as she had a right to cling, if she had made him feel responsibility and the necessity of payment for that which she had given him, she might have turned at once to a burden, a nightmare, an antagonist to the profound selfishness which is the basis of Man.

But what had happened had left her, without reproach for him or herself, she would not have had it otherwise though she never saw him again; it had to be, because she loved him. Though she did not say it, it was clear to him that what she had given him had been paid for by what he had given her.

It was a transaction in dreamland and she had not broken the dream for him; he had run down the quarry—yet he was still pursuing it. He had eaten the fruit, yet it remained uneaten.

He could not leave her:

“Karan!”

It was Cavani's voice. He had roused himself from sleep and pushed off the blanket that covered him, and he was calling as he always called for the some one who fed him and tended him in his prison of darkness and old age.

The girl turned and went to him, and Jean, taking

his road map from the rucksack, lay down on the grass with it and spread it open.

As on the French and Italian Rivas, the mountains dominate the seaboard of the coast that runs from Fiume to Cataro and beyond.

Between the Plain of the Tombs and Ragusa the road would lead across the mountains, climbing and descending in zig-zags. The distance was not great, and here was a village marked half-way down the descent to Ragusa where there was an inn of sorts.

The journey, he reckoned, would take some days and he reckoned they would make it just as they had made the journey from Serajevo—apart. He could pick them up of nights and sometimes travel with them in the daytime as fancy pleased.

Leaving everything else aside, this method of travel relieved the monotony of the road. It also avoided notice. Karan and the old man travelling together, though bizarre enough and striking to the eye, were understandable to all men just as a man leading a bear or a juggler with his mate are understandable, but Jean, going with them, would throw everything out of focus. He didn't belong to them.

Karan had said it, summing up the whole matter in four words.

He called her to him when she had finished attending to the old man.

She knelt down on the grass beside him.

"Look," said he, "here is the road, here are we though it does not mark the tombs. Here is a village, you can stop there to-night and here is another, twenty kilometres farther on, that is for the next night. I will take the road by myself and pick up with you here and there till we get to the sea. Look, Karan! that is the sea and there are the islands off the coast. I do not know, but we might

go to one of those for a while—you and he might rest there——”

He paused. It almost seemed to him that on some happy little island they might all rest and remain beyond the reach of pointing fingers, and the ridicule and disdain that their relationship would bring upon them in the social world. And what better for an artist who, to be great, should live beyond the world?

His Bosnian friend, Mitrovik, had spoken to him of these islands of the Adriatic, and their beauty and desolation, and their nearness to the coast. Jean was a dreamer, but he was also practical in many ways. A plan that threatened to divorce him from his art would have been at once rejected; without it he would have died spiritually, and there was the question of money. His small means were enough for one, living on that stepping stone, Montmartre, but not enough to give him freedom with others depending on him. He had never for a moment forgotten Stein's commission waiting to be earned and the chance of Stein's support in the social artistic world. If this woman was worth painting and if the picture was worthy of the woman, and if it found a place in the Salon—well, there was a future maybe assured. The future not only of a portrait painter but of a painter.

Then, living on that little island where necessities were few, what might he not do working with that spacious slowness, that release from hurry and turmoil impossible in Paris.

“Karan!” he said, placing his hand on hers, “it has come to me that there by the sea there is something waiting for us; so that we can be together with no one to trouble us, it is all like a dream, but I can make it come true. Follow me on

the road to-day, you will stop at this village to-night. I will find some place there too, to-morrow we will go on, but don't trouble about me, just believe, if you do not see me, that I am there somewhere on the road ahead.

"Then, here at this last village just before Ragusa, we will meet and you can stay there whilst I go into the town to make any plans. You trust in me?"

"Yes," said Karan.

They breakfasted on the food he had brought from the Han, and when they had finished Karan threw the remains away for the magpies and crows to pick up.

Then, before he left, yielding to some fancy that suddenly took him, he opened his rucksack and taking a pencil wrote on the face of the tomb beneath which they had lain last night, two names :

KARAN
JEAN

And there the letters still may be—if the rains have not washed them out.