

CHAPTER VI

THE PLACE OF THE TOMBS

DAYS later having stopped to sketch at Leinbinge and a village near Katoei he reached a point from which, with mountains pushed away, the naked road marches across a vast heaving plain.

Broken stones, bushes, grass patches as far as the eye could see ; no life except an occasional peasant on the road, an occasional beast cropping the scant grass or the tremble of a wing where a hawk hung nearly motionless in the stainless blue of the sky. No sound but the cry of a bird and the rustle of the wind in the bushes by the way.

The motor-car, the travelling carriage and the post wagon pass along the road and the peasant from village to village, but the traffic is so small that it leaves the desolation scarcely touched.

On the right of this road lies the Place of the Tombs, astonishing as Stonehenge, though less striking to the eye at a distance. Here great grey coffin-shaped and ark-shaped mausoleums lie as they have lain through the ages, some complete, some broken, strewn over more than an acre of ground, the wild thyme and grass and bushes growing between them.

Jean, leaving the road, came amongst them. Strange at a distance they were stranger still when within touch, for now could be seen on the stones the traces of old sculpture, here the forms of dancing girls weathered and worn to a vague tracery, here warriors, here horses and horsemen, here inscriptions

in unknown characters, and here and there amidst these houses of the dead a cross heavy and plain, contrasting strangely with the pagan carvings and evidently of the same antiquity. Jean sat down in the shadow of one of the tombs and lit a cigarette.

It was a good place to rest for a while and think.

A few yards away, and cutting off the view of the road, a tomb with the sunlight full upon it showed a half-vanished bas-relief of some festival or procession—strutting figures, almost Egyptian in their stiffness and mystery; going where from where in what time, who could tell?

To the left of it a glimpse of the road could be seen, the road he had just travelled along; beyond the road stretched the plain with a glimpse of the far mountains towards Markomyitz.

A man driving a mule was coming along the road, he passed from view. The shadow of a bird crossed the sunlight on the grass, and the hum of a wild bee filled the warm air for a second, to be taken away on the wind, and the strutting figures somehow took to themselves some significance from these flitting and momentary impressions.

A thousand years ago, maybe, they had been keeping that festival or observing that ceremony in honour of the tombled one; the passing bee said this, speaking for those who could not speak themselves.

But they had little interest for Jean, he was waiting for the living.

Several hours ago, away back where the road rose over a hill, on leaving the Han where he had spent the night, he had seen two figures coming along the road—figures he had scarcely expected to see again—the girl and the old man—the girl who had given him the slip at Mostar.

Had they taken the railway at Mostar, or had they come by some by-road, or even across country, trusting to the instinct of gipsies? It did not matter, they were there, easily recognisable, though at that distance it was possible that the girl would not recognise him—a single figure in the landscape.

The Han was situated on the high ground away from the road.

He had a moment to decide in. Should he go to meet them or pass on his way, ahead of them, or strike away from the road a few miles so as to give them time to get well ahead of him?

To tell the truth, in the few days since Mostar his ardour had cooled, he had even been glad that he was rid of the business.

Looking back it had seemed not altogether a creditable affair, and there was more than that. Instinct came to him now again warning him to have done with it. Warning him not to get tangled, and to fight against the attraction that was threatening him once more.

He took this advice.

Coming down the hill-slope he found the road and went on his way. He could easily outwalk those two, he had a long start; he would not see her again.

After to-day he would leave the road and take the train for the rest of the way to Ragusa; the railway ran only a few miles to the south and was easy to reach.

Well, that was all right, he had conquered an inclination that would have taken him right towards her, face to face, and he was now, as the sailors say, running before the wind.

There seemed no reef in his path, either. The road held good and without obstruction, till he

reached the Place of the Tombs, where the suggestion came to him that he should rest and let the people he was avoiding go by.

Later he could take the road again or even make for the railway.

All this was honest enough, yet behind it was the desire to see her go by ; himself half-hidden, and the half-hope that perhaps she might leave the road and come amidst the tombs to look at them.

So do men play with Fate when it takes the form of Desire—or is it that Desire so plays with men at the dictation of Fate? Fate, whose other name is Weakness.

Half-hidden by the tomb and lying on his side amidst the grass, he watched the road.

After the peasant and the mule had passed there came an interval of time so long that he began to imagine that they would not come at all. Perhaps she had recognised him and had made her companion turn and go back. She was quite capable of doing that after the way she had given him the slip at Mostar.

Then he drew in his breath. The two forms had appeared. The girl and the old man walking side by side, an astonishing picture had he not been waiting for it.

The uniform of Cavani though faded and thread-bare still showed up against the dull monotony of the background with startling effect, so did the shako. So did the yellow handkerchief binding the girl's head and the dull-red sash round the waist of her slim figure.

They passed from sight, the great tomb blocking the view. To the right of the tomb he could see the peasant and his mule just emerged to sight on the far road to the south.

If she continued on her way he would see her on the road like that in a few moments before losing sight of her altogether.

If—— Ah, what was that? A voice!

He rose up. She was coming amidst the stones, the old man following her like a led horse.

She started when she saw Jean. Then she made a little movement of the head, such as a person makes when a troublesome task is beyond him.

It was as though she had put herself to the work of avoiding him—and, look now, there he was before her.

Jean laughed. He took her meaning just as clearly as though she had spoken.

“It is your fault,” said he. “If you did not want to see me you should not have come here. I was watching you on the road and I would have let you go by, and not have followed you, but see——!”

He could speak without trammel, for Cavani was deaf as a post, unless spoken to by the girl.

For all answer she made the old man sit down in the sun with his back against one of the blocks of stone and removed the haversack that he wore. Jean saw that it contained a light blanket, provisions and odds and ends. Besides the little drum she also carried a haversack of white canvas, and the baggage having been deposited on the grass, she produced food for her companion and started to prepare a meal.

This, then, was part of her life business. Her charge that had to be looked after like an animal had come to his feeding time.

“And now,” continued Jean, “if you mind me being here—if you don’t care to see me I will go away.”

“It is all the same,” said the girl.

She spoke on her knees, cutting the bread for the old man and seeming to address the loaf.

He might have thought she meant that it was all the same to her whether he went or stayed, but there was that in her voice which brought to him her true meaning.

"It is all the same, do what we will we cannot avoid one another."

At least that was what he fancied.

At the Han that morning he had bought a loaf of rye bread and a sausage, also a flask of wine. He produced the food now, placing it on the grass on a newspaper he took from his rucksack.

It was like a picnic. But she would not share his food or drink. She had food enough of her own. Her words and her tone had opened the door for a conversation more intimate than up to this.

"Tell me," said Jean, "why did you say you would meet me on the road that evening I saw you at Mostar?"

"Why did you ask me?" said she, her voice in the reply betraying a trace of the Provençal accent, something picked up on the way and added to the trace of Italian.

"Because I wanted to meet you."

"Of what use?" She spoke the words and fell dumb, seeming to have forgotten him for a moment in some troublous speculation.

Jean watched her.

She had finished eating, so had her companion. She sighed deeply as though at the close of some mental argument in which she had been defeated, then, turning to the old man whose head was nodding, she rolled the blanket into a pillow for him against the stone and made him lie down. Then she came and sat down again, putting away the remnants of

the meal, and rolling them up in the little haversack. This she placed beside the drum.

Jean laughed.

All this domesticity amused him, also the putting to sleep of the old man ; amused him, yet brought the sting of something strange and tragic.

What a house, even for temporary shelter ! And yet, perhaps, not stranger than the house of the sky and the winds that was the major domicile of these two wanderers.

That they should exist at all in such circumstances was a wonder made more wonderful by the extreme neatness and cleanness of the girl, and also of her companion.

It is easy to be a tramp and be filthy, difficult to be a tramp and be clean. Even the drum was bright though old, and the little brass eagles on it polished to shine.

“ Your drum——”

“ It was Tino's.”