

CHAPTER VII

THE ROAD THAT BECAME LONELY

"HE used to go with Cavani. He was only twelve. Our circus was at Lucca when Cavani joined us. He and Tino. That was two years ago, then Tino died."

"Tell me about yourself," said Jean. He wished not only to hear about herself, but also to hear her speak; there was something fascinating in her voice and in her strange Italo-Provençal French—French warmed and tinged, and with words that seemed some half-melted by the southern sun.

She spoke at first with the hesitancy of a person unused to much speech, but as time went on and as he questioned her this hesitancy almost passed.

Perhaps she had never been questioned before about herself and her past life, for sometimes her tone took on an earnestness, and her look an abstraction as though she were bringing out for the first time and to her own sole view, that tissue of bizarre and half-connected happenings she called her past.

This is the story that she told; with the addition of small details discovered by him later on.

Mother, father, relations she had none living, and her first recollection was of the sun with fishing nets hung up against a yellow wall; sea and boats, and a fountain in a street that was full of people. It was possibly all Naples jumbled up in her head with the recollection of a young woman, her mother, and a man who was not her father—a man called

Zacconi, evidently a terror, for her eyes dilated when she spoke his name.

This man lived with her mother and she worked for him, and he used to beat her. Then he went away and there was another man named Damalo. The mother had evidently taken up with Damalo, who rode horses in a circus, and Karan was taken along.

There was an elephant in the circus and there were lions, and twenty or more horses; also dogs—performing dogs—and Karan in her small way had to work for her living by looking after some of the dogs.

There was one very old and clever dog, Titi by name, who was her special charge. "He was like a man," he knew everything; but his eyesight was failing and it was her business to take him for exercise. He did not care for any one else much.

Then Karan's mother went away. A man took her away, it was said they had gone to Rome, and Damalo was so put out that he rode one of the horses badly and broke its knees, and Zorn who owned the circus told him to get out. He went away leaving Karan behind. Zorn would have sent her away too, only for the dogs.

Zorn only cared for people who could make money for him.

Well, presently along came Cavani, the old soldier of Napoleon, with a little boy leading him. Zorn had seen the two in the streets of Lucca and had taken them into the show thinking they would be an attraction, as indeed they were for a while till Tino, the little boy, fell ill at Arles and died, whereupon Karan was deputed to take his place.

Then one day at Nîmes strange things happened. Police came to the circus and they took Zorn away, and there was no money for any one, and she and

Cavani found themselves on the road. She could not leave him for he had no one to look after him, and indeed it was just as well, for begging their way they made much more money than in the circus, where they got nothing, only promises of payment.

The old wise dog had followed them and helped to make money by performing his little tricks till alas!—the tears ran down her face—he died. They buried him by the road by an apple orchard that was in blossom; that was away in the north of France and she did not know the name of the place, but it was there and every spring the blossoms would come just as then.

After that they went here and there.

She did not mind what direction they took, and it was Cavani who always chose the way, blind as Fate though he was.

“He is so old he knows everything,” said Karan.

Meaning, no doubt, that he could sense the direction in which he wished to go and the places where he was contented to stop. And here the curious fact seemed to show itself that, like a swallow, he chose the north in summer and the south in winter, as a rule, though this year for some reason he had not gone north.

Another fact, though not so strange since it is a faculty of the blind, he knew the people to avoid, a bad man could not impose himself on Cavani.

So they had lived together, free as the gypsies, wandering where they chose and under the protection of the God who looks after the sparrows, and whose ministering angels are the Common People, for the Poor are the only real friends of the Poor.

“Tell me,” asked Jean. “Why did you not meet me on the road as you said you would at Mostar?”

"I don't know," said Karan.

She sighed and looked away between the tombs to the left at the far-stretching plain, a stone-strewn waste where nothing moved but the bird and the shadow of the bird, and the wind in the bushes.

Something had warned her to avoid him, he knew, also he knew that she did not dislike him.

The little story she had told him of her life had drawn them together in some curious way, establishing an intimacy that amounted to friendship. It had done more, it had awakened in Jean something new in his relationship to women, something akin to pity. The story of the old dog lying there by the apple orchard somewhere in France, the story of her wanderings, the naïve simplicity yet the strangeness of it all. Oh! yes, he had never been touched before as now.

Then there was her tenderness for the old man. It seemed that she was born to take care of the old and frail and blind in this wilderness of a world more desolate than this Plain of the Tombs, for here there was the companion bird and the fellow wanderer wind, and the sunshine that never fell on the sordid and the evil, and the Rich.

To be without money or social condition or friends was nothing here where the mighty men of a thousand years ago lay heedless of their state, as Cavani by his drum.

"I came from Paris," said Jean, speaking at last and under the dictate of some lazy half-subliminal bidding.

"I came to walk through this country, like you. Then I met you and made that little picture, and I showed it to a man at Serajevo and he liked it so much that he asked me to go to Ragusa to do another picture for him. So you see if I had

not met you I would not be here, or going to Ragusa.

"When I left Serajevo I remembered you said you were going south to the sea. I wondered would I meet you again on the road for the road went south, but there was no sign of you both. Still, I felt, somehow, that you were there in front of me—and I was right, was not I?"

She nodded, still looking away towards the distance.

"One day I saw you, but a great way off, and the rain came on and you were gone when it passed—and then at Mostar——"

She nodded as if to say, "Yes, I know."

"Then I saw you to-day when I left the Han on the hill away back there."

"I saw you," said Karan.

"You recognised me at that distance?"

She nodded.

"I came here among the tombs to look at them. I did not wait on the road to speak to you."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I wanted to see if you would come here. Did you know I was here?"

"No."

"What made you come?"

"I was tired and the road had become lonely."

"But there was a man driving a mule——" He stopped, almost confused.

Knowing in a sudden flash her meaning, or rather the meaning behind her thoughts, something which perhaps she scarcely recognised herself.

The road was lonely because he had left it.

And yet she had given no sign of gladness when he had disclosed himself; on the contrary, she had

made a movement as though to say, "Ah, there you are, I can't escape from you."

Her mind regretting him had still, in a vague way, resented him. The surest sign of the hold he had upon her.

Oh, he knew at once and for truth that she wanted him, that she had thought of him, that he had been in her mind ever since that day at Serajevo, and the fact, not spoken yet hinting of itself as the sky colour hints of dawn, made him suddenly bashful as a child.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HOTEL OF THE WINDS

HE had started out after her, led by Lust. Stein had thought right when he considered him a person over-reactive to environments.

The talk of that gendarme coming after his dream on the hill-side had coloured his mind. To the gendarme all women were animals, good mostly for one purpose.

Well, he had pursued her in a sort of way, now energetically, now half-forgetfully, now held back by the decent and cleanly minded person that was perhaps the real Him.

He had pursued her, led by the animal, and lo and behold! the animal had broken away and raced off, and left him with her and Desolation.

Titi, the old wise dog, had helped to drive it away, and Cavani, the tenderly cared for, asleep in the sunshine, the story of their wanderings, their helplessness, herself. She was well guarded.

Then came this new knowledge, strange as a flower in a winter landscape.