Chapter 4

The Bridge of Sighs

It was not until after her husband's death in 1896 that Regine Olsen Schlegel spoke openly at last of her relationship with Søren Kierkegaard. After almost half a century as a loyal wife, she was suddenly free to break her silence and, as though transported back to girlhood, to relive her first encounter at fifteen with the love of her life. Her memory of him was as fresh as though it were yesterday: his beauty, his lovely trepidation, his shy, fleeting smile, the blue light in his eyes, the torrents of witticism and wisdom. She was a child, he almost ten years her senior and as gentle as she imagined an older brother might be. She felt in that instant the strange sense of remembrance known to all true love, that she had known him forever and knew what he would always be to her, knew in her innocence that this was no fraternal friendship. After that day she had waited and after a few days he returned to see her, just as she had known he would, as though it were his right always to seek out and find her. It felt to her as though this was indeed his absolute entitlement and that they would never be parted.

He had entered the drawing-room that first afternoon at the house of friends of Regine's father: a party to celebrate the birthday of Bolette, the widow Rørdam's daughter. Søren Kierkegaard had come for Bolette's sake, to see her in particular. She was just over twenty, near his own age, and they were friends. Perhaps each felt towards the other a little more friendship; later he would recall a measure of 'responsibility' towards her, while insisting that their relationship had been 'innocent', purely intellectual. In any case, that day eight young

people were gathered to enjoy each other's company. Happy noise and chatter filled the room, rising to its high moulded ceiling. Spring sunshine flooded in through high casement windows, sparkling in crystal chandeliers. Regine had retreated to a window-seat to rest a moment. She recalled his arrival with great clarity. He stood in the doorway, a slight figure leaning on a rolled umbrella. Sunlight in his halo of fair hair, a mass of dark blond curls above a high clear brow. Sunlight sheened the silk velvet high hat he held. His face was exquisite; perfectly spaced expressive eyes beneath delicately winged eyebrows, full, softly curved mouth. Like an icon, his image took immediate possession of her soul. He in turn immediately found her face and returned her gaze with gentleness and grace, the faintest softening in his demeanour. They were introduced; he must have crossed the room during the secret meeting of their eyes, but Regine already knew his name. Bolette had spoken of him. Anyway, she did not need names. She knew him by heart. She felt her whole being suddenly on high alert. People, friends, clothes, gaiety, laughter, they disappeared, and she watched the whole room turn towards the same point. He was talking and the air buzzed with shared attention and laughter. What was he expounding? What were the words that so captivated each listener. He had simply enchanted everyone, and all the time sent secret smiles her way.

Now, all these decades later, her own drawing-room was constantly full of enquirers asking about him. How could she begin to convey anything of his reality? Her lover's truth was then as now ineffable, a kingfisher that flits beneath the bridge, an azure glimpse of God. The flash of quicksilver that leaps to sip at air and plunges back into the river's spate – a twist, a pirouette of light. His was the most vital presence, and yet he possessed supreme stillness; an inner being that seemed to exist in utter peace and steadfastness, silent and unseen. It was in that quiet truth that they had met and, until now, she had never spoken of it – or of anything that followed.

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May 1837 had found Kierkegaard once more out looking for diversion, doing his best to forget his (better) self, breaking his resolution to remain a penitent. He nevertheless decided in his loneliness to seek out the 'intellectual' friendship of a girl he knew, daughter of a deceased clergyman and herself engaged to a theology student, to try to talk to her. He knew he was turning back to the world again,

succumbing to temptation, but it was not the bustle that he sought, but quiet conversation with Bolette. He had vowed to leave at home his 'demoniacal wit', which he felt stood with a sword of fire between himself and every innocent girl. Returning to the Rørdams in Frederiksberg on subsequent days and recording these visits in his journal, he seems bemused and disconcerted by this new pattern of behaviour, throwing him from his usual habit of proud solitude. He cannot trust or welcome the new inclination for company and feels belittled by it. There is fervency in his prayer for divine support at this moment when he senses imminent breach in his integrity. As the visits to Frederiksberg continue there appear in the journal several extraordinarily passionate outbursts of anguish and dread, in one of which he curses his 'arrogant satisfaction' in standing alone and declares that all will despise him now. He asks God to stand by him, to let him live and better himself. These were the entries that Regine Olsen believed alluded to their first meeting and the effect they had had upon each other. He agonises over the ambiguity of his situation and the effort required to suppress the emotions aroused, and again resorts to fairy tale to remind himself of his life task and restore some sort of balance: 'The early Christian dogmatic terminology is like a magic castle where the most beautiful princes and princesses lie in a deep sleep – it only needs to be awakened in order to appear in all its glory.'[1] It is more human enchantment, though, that still holds him hostage, and about two months later comes a very deliberately dated passage written on a Sunday in the gardens of the Frederiksberg after a visit to the Rørdams:

> *July 9*. I stand like a lonely pine tree egotistically shut off, pointing to the skies and casting no shadow, and only the turtledove builds its nest in my branches.[2]

There follows a short vignette describing someone wishing to write a novel about a character who goes insane; while working on it, the writer gradually succumbs to madness and finishes his book in the first person. In 1849 Kierkegaard was to record his first meeting with her, just as in old age Regine recalled how she had seen him when he turned up unexpectedly at the party and the impression he

1. Kierkegaard, *Journals*, p. 46.
2. Ibid.

had made on her with his liveliness of mind, although she could no longer recall all he had said. In any case, he was fighting now for his very existence as he knew it, and intellectually exhausting himself in the process. How, he reasoned, could he find himself thus tempted? Six years later, in *The Diary of a Seducer*, which concludes the first part of *Either/Or*, he would vividly describe this scene in which a young man, finding himself in the company of eight pretty women, captivates them with his conversation. Yet in truth, a few days after his twenty-fourth birthday he had fallen in love for the first time with a girl of fifteen. Moreover, this was no passing infatuation but a love that would endure for a lifetime and, he believed, beyond.

How was this reality to be reconciled with loyalty to his father, the curse that lay upon his family? A sacred marriage vow demanded absolute transparency. It could not be compromised by secrets, hidden vice and duplicity. He knew that many marriages involved such little or greater falsities and omissions, but could not imagine either hiding from or confiding in a woman the extent of his own depravity and lost virtue. He felt utterly debarred from any fully committed relationship with a woman. Yet, driven by desolate loneliness, he now found himself using his prodigious powers of espionage to discover when this girl would be at the Rørdams and contriving somehow to be there himself, visits that would become the couple's alibi. Scandalised by his own behaviour, he felt deserving of the world's derision and worse, that despite his conviction of forgiveness at the heart of Christianity he was not released from his fallen state. Thoughts of both the absolute need for candour in marriage and confession in entry to the ministry were paralysing. His current state left him drained, unable to summons energy for anything at all. Walking tired him; if he lay down, he feared he'd never get up again. The thought of riding was too violent to contemplate. He felt only slightly tempted to take a carriage out of town to linger amidst nature and so surrender to his languor.

His own ideas and conceits repelled him, and even the pithy language of the Middle Ages failed to work its usual magic in banishing his ennui…Driven again to the edge of madness, drinking and overthinking, he despaired: 'All the flowers of my heart turn to ice-flowers.'[3] He could do nothing, not retain a single serious idea. His dissertation eluded and reflection deserted him. The only occasion

3. Ibid.

which allowed him to keep a mental grip was in a room full of chatter; then he hung on grimly to his precious thought, determined to preserve it through the hubbub. He felt himself a lunatic, a Janus who laughed with one face and wept with the other. December came and cast its own darkness on his spirit, so that he sat one day ruinously sunken in himself, losing himself and his ego in pantheism. He was reading an old folk song about a girl who waits fruitlessly for her lover, until she goes to bed and weeps, and awakens weeping…and suddenly Sædding came to Kierkegaard's mind's eye, his father's birthplace, its lonely larches and desolate moors, and one generation after another arose before him, their girls singing and piteously tearfully sinking back into the grave, and he wept with them.

The old year passed into a new, and March 1838 brought news of the death of his most loved and esteemed teacher, Professor Poul Møller, he who had warned his pupil against his monstrous wit and love of refutation. The memory of Møller, and perhaps particularly of his admonishment, now returned with startling clarity, concentrating his pupil's mind, shaking him out of his apathy and precipitating a solemn vow to make something of his life for his teacher's sake. It was five years since Kierkegaard had passed the first two parts of his theological examinations with honours. Having studied Greek, Latin, Hebrew and history, mathematics, philosophy and physics, he began again to reflect seriously on what might constitute his life's work. Among his contemporaries only one man had penetrated Kierkegaard's incognito. Poul Martin Møller, academic and poet, recognised in him the manifestation of a rare prodigious intellect and typecast him fatefully enough as Ahasuerus, mythological archetype of the Wandering Jew.[4] The friendship between mentor and pupil had been instrumental in liberating Kierkegaard from the thraldom of Hegelian logic and Kierkegaard had in turn enriched Møller's poetical and philosophical endeavours; Möller would become more widely recognised as poet than philosopher.

It was a meeting of 'the younger and older philosopher of personality', as acknowledged by Kierkegaard in his most important philosophical work, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*. Apart from his father and Regine Olsen, writes Dru in his Introduction to the Journals, only one man influenced Søren Kierkegaard, and that man was Møller; he is also the

4. Kierkegaard, *Journals*, p. xxxi.

only one to whom his pupil officially dedicated a work. *The Concept of Dread*, in which Kierkegaard expands on his youth, is inscribed: "To the late Professor…The happy lover of Greece, the admirer of Homer, the confidante of Socrates, the interpreter of Aristotle – Denmark's joy…the enthusiasm of my youth, the mighty trumpet of my awakening, the desired companion of my moods, the confidant of my beginnings, my departed friend, my missing reader…" Here, 'the mighty trumpet of my awakening' refers to Møller's warning Kierkegaard of his terrible capacity for polemics, which shocked the younger man into awareness of his powers of (self-)destruction. These were the words which recalled the then 25-year-old from wandering the path to perdition and set him firmly on another that may not merely be said to be 'running into uncertainty, but going to certain destruction – in confidence in God that means victory'.[5]

Møller had been well acquainted with the youthful Kierkegaard's ambitious plan for a comprehensive philosophical exposition of certain neglected aspects of the Middle Ages: "Life outside religion in its three typical aspects – doubt, sensuality and despair", as he had outlined it. Now Kierkegaard learnt of Møller's deathbed plea: 'Tell little Kierkegaard not to undertake too big a task, for that was injurious also to me.'[6] His pupil was stunned, not only at so personal an admonition, but the sudden removal from his life of so great a bulwark. He felt bereft, robbed of all direction. How was he to tackle any serious work, especially in his current state of ennui? Was this the reason why his mentor's words had been passed on so faithfully – as (yet another) warning and reminder? In any case, he resolved to abandon the original large-scale project. Then, just when he was at his lowest ebb, his twenty-fifth birthday dawned and with it came a solemn summons from his father. Søren recoiled. His father always sensed precisely the right moment and seized it. What kind of birthday gift had he prepared for his youngest son? It was bound to be a lecture! Had his boy got his thesis planned? Had he seen how well his dear brother was doing? He who with a tragic air murmured of his own inadequacy even as he clambered up the greasy spire. A small slithering slide from grace was nothing to Peter, he always found his way upright again. They were so very upright those two, father and

5. Ibid., p. xxxii.
6. Lowrie, *A Short Life of Kierkegaard*, p. 95.

Peter Christian Kierkegaard, Søren's brother (1805-1888).

elder son, they bobbed back to the surface like a couple of ducks. The youngest Kierkegaard could hardly meet their eyes.

Nonetheless, duty called and like Isaac he answered his father's summons. It had seemed to Søren lately that the old man had long perceived him thus, as sacrificial lamb. So, in deepening dread he entered his father's presence, and to his astonishment found tenderness awaiting him. Michael Pedersen greeted his youngest child with open face and mind; no harsh word, rather his eyes were moist with tears. As though for the first time, the son saw before him a gentleman in great old age, one humbled and reduced by the griefs of his 82 years. The dying father gestured for his youngest boy to take a seat. In the silence that followed, every busy thought was stilled and Søren discovered his derision fled. The father began to speak, to tell his son everything, pouring forth a cataract of sufferings; a torrent, a cascade of repentance that cleansed the air between them of all but grace. Listening, the son watched transfixed the softening of those formerly stern features which now showed only childlike innocence; he saw appear the boyhood smile that had existed before the curse eclipsed it. He witnessed the flesh absolved of all its worldly weight of guilt; the thorn removed. His father begged forgiveness, pure love upon his countenance. Søren fell to his knees. So he was not lost to his father, after all! Plain now was the fact of Michael's always having understood the origin of his youngest son's waywardness. For his part, Søren discovered himself truly his father's son, heir as much to his godliness as to his sin. It was redemption and like Lazarus he returned to life half-blinded by tears. Numb-limbed, he rose and blundering into new reality embraced his father and took leave of him. Returned to the outside world he felt as naked as a newborn lamb, stripped of all ingenious intellectual armour to protect him from its storms, its cold and cruelty and its beauty on this bright May day of epiphany. Two weeks later on 19 May came a morning of cool, clear breeze, a day so limpid that it lit the whole of life in radiant