

CHAPTER II.

"AS THE WIND BLOWS."

A flaw in that pentagram of a time-table, that pentagram by which the demons of distraction were to be excluded from Mr. Lewisham's career to Greatness, was the absence of a clause forbidding study out of doors. It was the day after the trivial window peeping of the last chapter that this gap in the time-table became apparent, a day if possible more gracious and alluring than its predecessor, and at half-past twelve, instead of returning from the school directly to his lodging, Mr. Lewisham escaped through the omission and made his way--Horace in pocket--to the park gates and so to the avenue of ancient trees that encircles the broad Whortley domain. He dismissed a suspicion of his motive with perfect success. In the avenue--for the path is but little frequented--one might expect to read undisturbed. The open air, the erect attitude, are surely better than sitting in a stuffy, enervating bedroom. The open air is distinctly healthy, hardy, simple....

The day was breezy, and there was a perpetual rustling, a going and coming in the budding trees.

The network of the beeches was full of golden sunlight, and all the lower branches were shot with horizontal dashes of new-born green.

"Tu, nisi ventis

Debes ludibrium, cave."

was the appropriate matter of Mr. Lewisham's thoughts, and he was mechanically trying to keep the book open in three places at once, at the text, the notes, and the literal translation, while he turned up the vocabulary for ludibrium, when his attention, wandering dangerously near the top of the page, fell over the edge and escaped with incredible swiftness down the avenue....

A girl, wearing a straw hat adorned with white blossom, was advancing towards him. Her occupation, too, was literary. Indeed, she was so busy writing that evidently she did not perceive him.

Unreasonable emotions descended upon Mr. Lewisham--emotions that are unaccountable on the mere hypothesis of a casual meeting. Something was whispered; it sounded suspiciously like "It's her!" He advanced with his fingers in his book, ready to retreat to its pages if she looked up, and watched her over it. Ludibrium passed out of his universe. She was clearly unaware of his nearness, he thought, intent upon her writing, whatever that might be. He wondered what it might be. Her face, foreshortened by her downward regard, seemed infantile. Her fluttering skirt was short, and showed her shoes and ankles. He noted her graceful, easy steps. A figure of health and lightness it was, sunlit, and advancing towards him, something, as he

afterwards recalled with a certain astonishment, quite outside the Schema.

Nearer she came and nearer, her eyes still downcast. He was full of vague, stupid promptings towards an uncalled-for intercourse. It was curious she did not see him. He began to expect almost painfully the moment when she would look up, though what there was to expect--! He thought of what she would see when she discovered him, and wondered where the tassel of his cap might be hanging--it sometimes occluded one eye. It was of course quite impossible to put up a hand and investigate. He was near trembling with excitement. His paces, acts which are usually automatic, became uncertain and difficult. One might have thought he had never passed a human being before. Still nearer, ten yards now, nine, eight. Would she go past without looking up?...

Then their eyes met.

She had hazel eyes, but Mr. Lewisham, being quite an amateur about eyes, could find no words for them. She looked demurely into his face. She seemed to find nothing there. She glanced away from him among the trees, and passed, and nothing remained in front of him but an empty avenue, a sunlit, green-shot void.

The incident was over.

From far away the sougning of the breeze swept towards him, and in a

moment all the twigs about him were quivering and rustling and the boughs creaking with a gust of wind. It seemed to urge him away from her. The faded dead leaves that had once been green and young sprang up, raced one another, leapt, danced and pirouetted, and then something large struck him on the neck, stayed for a startling moment, and drove past him up the avenue.

Something vividly white! A sheet of paper--the sheet upon which she had been writing!

For what seemed a long time he did not grasp the situation. He glanced over his shoulder and understood suddenly. His awkwardness vanished. Horace in hand, he gave chase, and in ten paces had secured the fugitive document. He turned towards her, flushed with triumph, the quarry in his hand. He had as he picked it up seen what was written, but the situation dominated him for the instant. He made a stride towards her, and only then understood what he had seen. Lines of a measured length and capitals! Could it really be--? He stopped. He looked again, eyebrows rising. He held it before him, staring now quite frankly. It had been written with a stylographic pen. Thus it ran:--

"Come! Sharp's the word."

And then again,

"Come! Sharp's the word."

And then,

"Come! Sharp's the word."

"Come! Sharp's the word."

And so on all down the page, in a boyish hand uncommonly like Frobisher ii.'s.

Surely! "I say!" said Mr. Lewisham, struggling with, the new aspect and forgetting all his manners in his surprise.... He remembered giving the imposition quite well:--Frobisher ii. had repeated the exhortation just a little too loudly--had brought the thing upon himself. To find her doing this jarred oddly upon certain vague preconceptions he had formed of her. Somehow it seemed as if she had betrayed him. That of course was only for the instant.

She had come up with him now. "May I have my sheet of paper, please?" she said with a catching of her breath. She was a couple of inches less in height than he. Do you observe her half-open lips? said Mother Nature in a noiseless aside to Mr. Lewisham--a thing he afterwards recalled. In her eyes was a touch of apprehension.

"I say," he said, with protest still uppermost, "you oughtn't to do

this."

"Do what?"

"This. Impositions. For my boys."

She raised her eyebrows, then knitted them momentarily, and looked at him. "Are you Mr. Lewisham?" she asked with an affectation of entire ignorance and discovery.

She knew him perfectly well, which was one reason why she was writing the imposition, but pretending not to know gave her something to say.

Mr. Lewisham nodded.

"Of all people! Then"--frankly--"you have just found me out."

"I am afraid I have," said Lewisham. "I am afraid I have found you out."

They looked at one another for the next move. She decided to plead in extenuation.

"Teddy Frobisher is my cousin. I know it's very wrong, but he seemed to have such a lot to do and to be in such trouble. And I had nothing to do. In fact, it was I who offered...."

She stopped and looked at him. She seemed to consider her remark complete.

That meeting of the eyes had an oddly disconcerting quality. He tried to keep to the business of the imposition. "You ought not to have done that," he said, encountering her steadfastly.

She looked down and then into his face again. "No," she said. "I suppose I ought not to. I'm very sorry."

Her looking down and up again produced another unreasonable effect. It seemed to Lewisham that they were discussing something quite other than the topic of their conversation; a persuasion patently absurd and only to be accounted for by the general disorder of his faculties. He made a serious attempt to keep his footing of reproof.

"I should have detected the writing, you know."

"Of course you would. It was very wrong of me to persuade him. But I did--I assure you. He seemed in such trouble. And I thought--"

She made another break, and there was a faint deepening of colour in her cheeks. Suddenly, stupidly, his own adolescent cheeks began to glow. It became necessary to banish that sense of a duplicate topic forthwith.

"I can assure you," he said, now very earnestly, "I never give a punishment, never, unless it is merited. I make that a rule. I--er--always make that a rule. I am very careful indeed."

"I am really sorry," she interrupted with frank contrition. "It was silly of me."

Lewisham felt unaccountably sorry she should have to apologise, and he spoke at once with the idea of checking the reddening of his face. "I don't think that," he said with a sort of belated alacrity. "Really, it was kind of you, you know--very kind of you indeed. And I know that--I can quite understand that--er--your kindness...."

"Ran away with me. And now poor little Teddy will get into worse trouble for letting me...."

"Oh no," said Mr. Lewisham, perceiving an opportunity and trying not to smile his appreciation of what he was saying. "I had no business to read this as I picked it up--absolutely no business. Consequently...."

"You won't take any notice of it? Really!"

"Certainly not," said Mr. Lewisham.

Her face lit with a smile, and Mr. Lewisham's relaxed in sympathy. "It

is nothing--it's the proper thing for me to do, you know."

"But so many people won't do it. Schoolmasters are not usually so--chivalrous."

He was chivalrous! The phrase acted like a spur. He obeyed a foolish impulse.

"If you like--" he said.

"What?"

"He needn't do this. The Impot., I mean. I'll let him off."

"Really?"

"I can."

"It's awfully kind of you."

"I don't mind," he said. "It's nothing much. If you really think ..."

He was full of self-applause for this scandalous sacrifice of justice.

"It's awfully kind of you," she said.

"It's nothing, really," he explained, "nothing."

"Most people wouldn't--"

"I know."

Pause.

"It's all right," he said. "Really."

He would have given worlds for something more to say, something witty and original, but nothing came.

The pause lengthened. She glanced over her shoulder down the vacant avenue. This interview--this momentous series of things unsaid was coming to an end! She looked at him hesitatingly and smiled again. She held out her hand. No doubt that was the proper thing to do. He took it, searching a void, tumultuous mind in vain.

"It's awfully kind of you," she said again as she did so.

"It don't matter a bit," said Mr. Lewisham, and sought vainly for some other saying, some doorway remark into new topics. Her hand was cool and soft and firm, the most delightful thing to grasp, and this observation ousted all other things. He held it for a moment, but nothing would come.

They discovered themselves hand in hand. They both laughed and felt "silly." They shook hands in the manner of quite intimate friends, and snatched their hands away awkwardly. She turned, glanced timidly at him over her shoulder, and hesitated. "Good-bye," she said, and was suddenly walking from him.

He bowed to her receding back, made a seventeenth-century sweep with his college cap, and then some hitherto unexplored regions of his mind flashed into revolt.

Hardly had she gone six paces when he was at her side again.

"I say," he said with a fearful sense of his temerity, and raising his mortar-board awkwardly as though he was passing a funeral. "But that sheet of paper ..."

"Yes," she said surprised--quite naturally.

"May I have it?"

"Why?"

He felt a breathless pleasure, like that of sliding down a slope of snow. "I would like to have it."

She smiled and raised her eyebrows, but his excitement was now too great for smiling. "Look here!" she said, and displayed the sheet crumpled into a ball. She laughed--with a touch of effort.

"I don't mind that," said Mr. Lewisham, laughing too. He captured the paper by an insistent gesture and smoothed it out with fingers that trembled.

"You don't mind?" he said.

"Mind what?"

"If I keep it?"

"Why should I?"

Pause. Their eyes met again. There was an odd constraint about both of them, a palpitating interval of silence.

"I really must be going," she said suddenly, breaking the spell by an effort. She turned about and left him with the crumpled piece of paper in the fist that held the book, the other hand lifting the mortar board in a dignified salute again.

He watched her receding figure. His heart was beating with remarkable rapidity. How light, how living she seemed! Little round flakes of

sunlight raced down her as she went. She walked fast, then slowly, looking sideways once or twice, but not back, until she reached the park gates. Then she looked towards him, a remote friendly little figure, made a gesture of farewell, and disappeared.

His face was flushed and his eyes bright. Curiously enough, he was out of breath. He stared for a long time at the vacant end of the avenue. Then he turned his eyes to his trophy gripped against the closed and forgotten Horace in his hand.