

CHAPTER III.

THE WONDERFUL DISCOVERY.

On Sunday it was Lewisham's duty to accompany the boarders twice to church. The boys sat in the gallery above the choirs facing the organ loft and at right angles to the general congregation. It was a prominent position, and made him feel painfully conspicuous, except in moods of exceptional vanity, when he used to imagine that all these people were thinking how his forehead and his certificates accorded. He thought a lot in those days of his certificates and forehead, but little of his honest, healthy face beneath it. (To tell the truth there was nothing very wonderful about his forehead.) He rarely looked down the church, as he fancied to do so would be to meet the collective eye of the congregation regarding him. So that in the morning he was not able to see that the Frobishers' pew was empty until the litany.

But in the evening, on the way to church, the Frobishers and their guest crossed the market-square as his string of boys marched along the west side. And the guest was arrayed in a gay new dress, as if it was already Easter, and her face set in its dark hair came with a strange effect of mingled freshness and familiarity. She looked at him calmly! He felt very awkward, and was for cutting his new acquaintance. Then hesitated, and raised his hat with a jerk as if to

Mrs. Frobisher. Neither lady acknowledged his salute, which may possibly have been a little unexpected. Then young Siddons dropped his hymn-book; stooped to pick it up, and Lewisham almost fell over him.... He entered church in a mood of black despair.

But consolation of a sort came soon enough. As she took her seat she distinctly glanced up at the gallery, and afterwards as he knelt to pray he peeped between his fingers and saw her looking up again. She was certainly not laughing at him.

In those days much of Lewisham's mind was still an unknown land to him. He believed among other things that he was always the same consistent intelligent human being, whereas under certain stimuli he became no longer reasonable and disciplined but a purely imaginative and emotional person. Music, for instance, carried him away, and particularly the effect of many voices in unison whirled him off from almost any state of mind to a fine massive emotionality. And the evening service at Whortley church--at the evening service surplices were worn--the chanting and singing, the vague brilliance of the numerous candle flames, the multitudinous unanimity of the congregation down there, kneeling, rising, thunderously responding, invariably inebriated him. Inspired him, if you will, and turned the prose of his life into poetry. And Chance, coming to the aid of Dame Nature, dropped just the apt suggestion into his now highly responsive ear.

The second hymn was a simple and popular one, dealing with the theme of Faith, Hope, and Charity, and having each verse ending with the word "Love." Conceive it, long drawn out and disarticulate,--

"Faith will van ... ish in ... to sight,
Hope be emp ... tied in deli ... ight,
Love in Heaven will shine more bri ... ight,
There ... fore give us Love."

At the third repetition of the refrain, Lewisham looked down across the chancel and met her eyes for a brief instant....

He stopped singing abruptly. Then the consciousness of the serried ranks of faces below there came with almost overwhelming force upon him, and he dared not look at her again. He felt the blood rushing to his face.

Love! The greatest of these. The greatest of all things. Better than fame. Better than knowledge. So came the great discovery like a flood across his mind, pouring over it with the cadence of the hymn and sending a tide of pink in sympathy across his forehead. The rest of the service was phantasmagorial background to that great reality--a phantasmagorial background a little inclined to stare. He, Mr. Lewisham, was in Love.

"A ... men." He was so preoccupied that he found the whole

congregation subsiding into their seats, and himself still standing, rapt. He sat down spasmodically, with an impact that seemed to him to re-echo through the church.

As they came out of the porch into the thickening night, he seemed to see her everywhere. He fancied she had gone on in front, and he hurried up the boys in the hope of overtaking her. They pushed through the throng of dim people going homeward. Should he raise his hat to her again?... But it was Susie Hopbrow in a light-coloured dress--a raven in dove's plumage. He felt a curious mixture of relief and disappointment. He would see her no more that night.

He hurried from the school to his lodging. He wanted very urgently to be alone. He went upstairs to his little room and sat before the upturned box on which his Butler's Analogy was spread open. He did not go to the formality of lighting the candle. He leant back and gazed blissfully at the solitary planet that hung over the vicarage garden.

He took out of his pocket a crumpled sheet of paper, smoothed and carefully refolded, covered with a writing not unlike that of Frobisher ii., and after some maidenly hesitation pressed this treasure to his lips. The Schema and the time-table hung in the darkness like the mere ghosts of themselves.

Mrs. Munday called him thrice to his supper.

He went out immediately after it was eaten and wandered under the stars until he came over the hill behind the town again, and clambered up the back to the stile in sight of the Frobishers' house. He selected the only lit window as hers. Behind the blind, Mrs. Frobisher, thirty-eight, was busy with her curl-papers--she used papers because they were better for the hair--and discussing certain neighbours in a fragmentary way with Mr. Frobisher, who was in bed. Presently she moved the candle to examine a faint discolouration of her complexion that rendered her uneasy.

Outside, Mr. Lewisham (eighteen) stood watching the orange oblong for the best part of half an hour, until it vanished and left the house black and blank. Then he sighed deeply and returned home in a very glorious mood indeed.

He awoke the next morning feeling extremely serious, but not clearly remembering the overnight occurrences. His eye fell on his clock. The time was six and he had not heard the alarum; as a matter of fact the alarum had not been wound up. He jumped out of bed at once and alighted upon his best trousers amorphously dropped on the floor instead of methodically cast over a chair. As he soaped his head he tried, according to his rules of revision, to remember the overnight reading. He could not for the life of him. The truth came to him as he was getting into his shirt. His head, struggling in its recesses, became motionless, the handless cuffs ceased to dangle for a minute....

Then his head came through slowly with a surprised expression upon his face. He remembered. He remembered the thing as a bald discovery, and without a touch of emotion. With all the achromatic clearness, the unromantic colourlessness of the early morning....

Yes. He had it now quite distinctly. There had been no overnight reading. He was in Love.

The proposition jarred with some vague thing in his mind. He stood staring for a space, and then began looking about absent-mindedly for his collar-stud. He paused in front of his Schema, regarding it.