

CHAPTER IV.

RAISED EYEBROWS.

"Work must be done anyhow," said Mr. Lewisham.

But never had the extraordinary advantages of open-air study presented themselves so vividly. Before breakfast he took half an hour of open-air reading along the allotments lane near the Frobishers' house, after breakfast and before school he went through the avenue with a book, and returned from school to his lodgings circuitously through the avenue, and so back to the avenue for thirty minutes or so before afternoon school. When Mr. Lewisham was not looking over the top of his book during these periods of open-air study, then commonly he was glancing over his shoulder. And at last who should he see but--!

He saw her out of the corner of his eye, and he turned away at once, pretending not to have seen her. His whole being was suddenly irradiated with emotion. The hands holding his book gripped it very tightly. He did not glance back again, but walked slowly and steadfastly, reading an ode that he could not have translated to save his life, and listening acutely for her approach. And after an interminable time, as it seemed, came a faint footfall and the swish of skirts behind him.

He felt as though his head was directed forward by a clutch of iron.

"Mr. Lewisham," she said close to him, and he turned with a quality of movement that was almost convulsive. He raised his cap clumsily.

He took her extended hand by an afterthought, and held it until she withdrew it. "I am so glad to have met you," she said.

"So am I," said Lewisham simply.

They stood facing one another for an expressive moment, and then by a movement she indicated her intention to walk along the avenue with him. "I wanted so much," she said, looking down at her feet, "to thank you for letting Teddy off, you know. That is why I wanted to see you." Lewisham took his first step beside her. "And it's odd, isn't it," she said, looking up into his face, "that I should meet you here in just the same place. I believe ... Yes. The very same place we met before."

Mr. Lewisham was tongue-tied.

"Do you often come here?" she said.

"Well," he considered--and his voice was most unreasonably hoarse when he spoke--"no. No.... That is--At least not often. Now and then. In fact, I like it rather for reading and that sort of thing. It's so quiet."

"I suppose you read a great deal?"

"When one teaches one has to."

"But you ..."

"I'm rather fond of reading, certainly. Are you?"

"I love it."

Mr. Lewisham was glad she loved reading. He would have been disappointed had she answered differently. But she spoke with real fervour. She loved reading! It was pleasant. She would understand him a little perhaps. "Of course," she went on, "I'm not clever like some people are. And I have to read books as I get hold of them."

"So do I," said Mr. Lewisham, "for the matter of that.... Have you read ... Carlyle?"

The conversation was now fairly under way. They were walking side by side beneath the swaying boughs. Mr. Lewisham's sensations were ecstatic, marred only by a dread of some casual boy coming upon them. She had not read much Carlyle. She had always wanted to, even from quite a little girl--she had heard so much about him. She knew he was a Really Great Writer, a very Great Writer indeed. All she had

read of him she liked. She could say that. As much as she liked anything. And she had seen his house in Chelsea.

Lewisham, whose knowledge of London had been obtained by excursion trips on six or seven isolated days, was much impressed by this. It seemed to put her at once on a footing of intimacy with this imposing Personality. It had never occurred to him at all vividly that these Great Writers had real abiding places. She gave him a few descriptive touches that made the house suddenly real and distinctive to him. She lived quite near, she said, at least within walking distance, in Clapham. He instantly forgot the vague design of lending her his "Sartor Resartus" in his curiosity to learn more about her home. "Clapham--that's almost in London, isn't it?" he said.

"Quite," she said, but she volunteered no further information about her domestic circumstances, "I like London," she generalised, "and especially in winter." And she proceeded to praise London, its public libraries, its shops, the multitudes of people, the facilities for "doing what you like," the concerts one could go to, the theatres. (It seemed she moved in fairly good society.) "There's always something to see even if you only go out for a walk," she said, "and down here there's nothing to read but idle novels. And those not new."

Mr. Lewisham had regretfully to admit the lack of such culture and mental activity in Whortley. It made him feel terribly her inferior. He had only his bookishness and his certificates to set

against it all--and she had seen Carlyle's house! "Down here," she said, "there's nothing to talk about but scandal." It was too true.

At the corner by the stile, beyond which the willows were splendid against the blue with silvery aments and golden pollen, they turned by mutual impulse and retraced their steps. "I've simply had no one to talk to down here," she said. "Not what I call talking."

"I hope," said Lewisham, making a resolute plunge, "perhaps while you are staying at Whortley ..."

He paused perceptibly, and she, following his eyes, saw a voluminous black figure approaching. "We may," said Mr. Lewisham, resuming his remark, "chance to meet again, perhaps."

He had been about to challenge her to a deliberate meeting. A certain delightful tangle of paths that followed the bank of the river had been in his mind. But the apparition of Mr. George Bonover, headmaster of the Whortley Proprietary School, chilled him amazingly. Dame Nature no doubt had arranged the meeting of our young couple, but about Bonover she seems to have been culpably careless. She now receded inimitably, and Mr. Lewisham, with the most unpleasant feelings, found himself face to face with a typical representative of a social organisation which objects very strongly inter alia to promiscuous conversation on the part of the young unmarried junior master.

"--chance to meet again, perhaps," said Mr. Lewisham, with a sudden lack of spirit.

"I hope so too," she said.

Pause. Mr. Bonover's features, and particularly a bushy pair of black eyebrows, were now very near, those eyebrows already raised, apparently to express a refined astonishment.

"Is this Mr. Bonover approaching?" she asked.

"Yes."

Prolonged pause.

Would he stop and accost them? At any rate this frightful silence must end. Mr. Lewisham sought in his mind for some remark wherewith to cover his employer's approach. He was surprised to find his mind a desert. He made a colossal effort. If they could only talk, if they could only seem at their ease! But this blank incapacity was eloquent of guilt. Ah!

"It's a lovely day, though," said Mr. Lewisham. "Isn't it?"

She agreed with him. "Isn't it?" she said.

And then Mr. Bonover passed, forehead tight reefed so to speak, and lips impressively compressed. Mr. Lewisham raised his mortar-board, and to his astonishment Mr. Bonover responded with a markedly formal salute--mock clerical hat sweeping circuitously--and the regard of a searching, disapproving eye, and so passed. Lewisham was overcome with astonishment at this improvement on the nod of their ordinary commerce. And so this terrible incident terminated for the time.

He felt a momentary gust of indignation. After all, why should Bonover or anyone interfere with his talking to a girl if he chose? And for all he knew they might have been properly introduced. By young Frobisher, say. Nevertheless, Lewisham's spring-tide mood relapsed into winter. He was, he felt, singularly stupid for the rest of their conversation, and the delightful feeling of enterprise that had hitherto inspired and astonished him when talking to her had shrivelled beyond contempt. He was glad--positively glad--when things came to an end.

At the park gates she held out her hand. "I'm afraid I have interrupted your reading," she said.

"Not a bit," said Mr. Lewisham, warming slightly. "I don't know when I've enjoyed a conversation...."

"It was--a breach of etiquette, I am afraid, my speaking to you, but I

did so want to thank you...."

"Don't mention it," said Mr. Lewisham, secretly impressed by the etiquette.

"Good-bye." He stood hesitating by the lodge, and then turned back up the avenue in order not to be seen to follow her too closely up the West Street.

And then, still walking away from her, he remembered that he had not lent her a book as he had planned, nor made any arrangement ever to meet her again. She might leave Whortley anywhen for the amenities of Clapham. He stopped and stood irresolute. Should he run after her? Then he recalled Bonover's enigmatical expression of face. He decided that to pursue her would be altogether too conspicuous. Yet ... So he stood in inglorious hesitation, while the seconds passed.

He reached his lodging at last to find Mrs. Munday halfway through dinner.

"You get them books of yours," said Mrs. Munday, who took a motherly interest in him, "and you read and you read, and you take no account of time. And now you'll have to eat your dinner half cold, and no time for it to settle proper before you goes off to school. It's ruination to a stummik--such ways."

"Oh, never mind my stomach, Mrs. Munday," said Lewisham, roused from a tangled and apparently gloomy meditation; "that's my affair." Quite crossly he spoke for him.

"I'd rather have a good sensible actin' stummik than a full head," said Mrs. Monday, "any day."

"I'm different, you see," snapped Mr. Lewisham, and relapsed into silence and gloom.

("Hoity toity!" said Mrs. Monday under her breath.)