

CHAPTER V.

HESITATIONS.

Mr. Bonover, having fully matured a Hint suitable for the occasion, dropped it in the afternoon, while Lewisham was superintending cricket practice. He made a few remarks about the prospects of the first eleven by way of introduction, and Lewisham agreed with him that Frobisher i. looked like shaping very well this season.

A pause followed and the headmaster hummed. "By-the-bye," he said, as if making conversation and still watching the play; "I, ah,--understood that you, ah--were a stranger to Whortley."

"Yes," said Lewisham, "that's so."

"You have made friends in the neighbourhood?"

Lewisham was troubled with a cough, and his ears--those confounded ears--brightened, "Yes," he said, recovering, "Oh yes. Yes, I have."

"Local people, I presume."

"Well, no. Not exactly." The brightness spread from Lewisham's ears over his face.

"I saw you," said Bonover, "talking to a young lady in the avenue. Her face was somehow quite familiar to me. Who was she?"

Should he say she was a friend of the Frobishers? In that case Bonover, in his insidious amiable way, might talk to the Frobisher parents and make things disagreeable for her. "She was," said Lewisham, flushing deeply with the stress on his honesty and dropping his voice to a mumble, "a ... a ... an old friend of my mother's. In fact, I met her once at Salisbury."

"Where?"

"Salisbury."

"And her name?"

"Smith," said Lewisham, a little hastily, and repenting the lie even as it left his lips.

"Well hit, Harris!" shouted Bonover, and began to clap his hands. "Well hit, sir."

"Harris shapes very well," said Mr. Lewisham.

"Very," said Mr. Bonover. "And--what was it? Ah! I was just remarking

the odd resemblances there are in the world. There is a Miss Henderson--or Henson--stopping with the Frobishers--in the very same town, in fact, the very picture of your Miss ..."

"Smith," said Lewisham, meeting his eye and recovering the full crimson note of his first blush.

"It's odd," said Bonover, regarding him pensively.

"Very odd," mumbled Lewisham, cursing his own stupidity and looking away.

"Very--very odd," said Bonover.

"In fact," said Bonover, turning towards the school-house, "I hardly expected it of you, Mr. Lewisham."

"Expected what, sir?"

But Mr. Bonover feigned to be already out of earshot.

"Damn!" said Mr. Lewisham. "Oh!--damn!"--a most objectionable expression and rare with him in those days. He had half a mind to follow the head-master and ask him if he doubted his word. It was only too evident what the answer would be.

He stood for a minute undecided, then turned on his heel and marched homeward with savage steps. His muscles quivered as he walked, and his face twitched. The tumult of his mind settled at last into angry indignation.

"Confound him!" said Mr. Lewisham, arguing the matter out with the bedroom furniture. "Why the devil can't he mind his own business?"

"Mind your own business, sir!" shouted Mr. Lewisham at the wash-hand stand. "Confound you, sir, mind your own business!"

The wash-hand stand did.

"You overrate your power, sir," said Mr. Lewisham, a little mollified. "Understand me! I am my own master out of school."

Nevertheless, for four days and some hours after Mr. Bonover's Hint, Mr. Lewisham so far observed its implications as to abandon open-air study and struggle with diminishing success to observe the spirit as well as the letter of his time-table prescriptions. For the most part he fretted at accumulating tasks, did them with slipshod energy or looked out of window. The Career constituent insisted that to meet and talk to this girl again meant reproof, worry, interference with his work for his matriculation, the destruction of all "Discipline," and he saw the entire justice of the insistence. It was nonsense this being in love; there wasn't such a thing as love outside of trashy

novelettes. And forthwith his mind went off at a tangent to her eyes under the shadow of her hat brim, and had to be lugged back by main force. On Thursday when he was returning from school he saw her far away down the street, and hurried in to avoid her, looking ostentatiously in the opposite direction. But that was a turning-point. Shame overtook him. On Friday his belief in love was warm and living again, and his heart full of remorse for laggard days.

On Saturday morning his preoccupation with her was so vivid that it distracted him even while he was teaching that most teachable subject, algebra, and by the end of the school hours the issue was decided and the Career in headlong rout. That afternoon he would go, whatever happened, and see her and speak to her again. The thought of Bonover arose only to be dismissed. And besides--

Bonover took a siesta early in the afternoon.

Yes, he would go out and find her and speak to her. Nothing should stop him.

Once that decision was taken his imagination became riotous with things he might say, attitudes he might strike, and a multitude of vague fine dreams about her. He would say this, he would say that, his mind would do nothing but circle round this wonderful pose of lover. What a cur he had been to hide from her so long! What could he have been thinking about? How could he explain it to her, when the

meeting really came? Suppose he was very frank--

He considered the limits of frankness. Would she believe he had not seen her on Thursday?--if he assured her that it was so?

And, most horrible, in the midst of all this came Bonover with a request that he would take "duty" in the cricket field instead of Dunkerley that afternoon. Dunkerley was the senior assistant master, Lewisham's sole colleague. The last vestige of disapprobation had vanished from Bonover's manner; asking a favour was his autocratic way of proffering the olive branch. But it came to Lewisham as a cruel imposition. For a fateful moment he trembled on the brink of acquiescence. In a flash came a vision of the long duty of the afternoon--she possibly packing for Clapham all the while. He turned white. Mr. Bonover watched his face.

"No," said Lewisham bluntly, saying all he was sure of, and forthwith racking his unpractised mind for an excuse. "I'm sorry I can't oblige you, but ... my arrangements ... I've made arrangements, in fact, for the afternoon."

Mr. Bonover's eyebrows went up at this obvious lie, and the glow of his suavity faded, "You see," he said, "Mrs. Bonover expects a friend this afternoon, and we rather want Mr. Dunkerley to make four at croquet...."

"I'm sorry," said Mr. Lewisham, still resolute, and making a mental note that Bonover would be playing croquet.

"You don't play croquet by any chance?" asked Bonover.

"No," said Lewisham, "I haven't an idea."

"If Mr. Dunkerley had asked you?..." persisted Bonover, knowing Lewisham's respect for etiquette.

"Oh! it wasn't on that account," said Lewisham, and Bonover with eyebrows still raised and a general air of outraged astonishment left him standing there, white and stiff, and wondering at his extraordinary temerity.