

CHAPTER VI.

THE SCANDALOUS RAMBLE.

As soon as school was dismissed Lewisham made a gaol-delivery of his outstanding impositions, and hurried back to his lodgings, to spend the time until his dinner was ready--Well?... It seems hardly fair, perhaps, to Lewisham to tell this; it is doubtful, indeed, whether a male novelist's duty to his sex should not restrain him, but, as the wall in the shadow by the diamond-framed window insisted, "Magna est veritas et prevalebit." Mr. Lewisham brushed his hair with elaboration, and ruffled it picturesquely, tried the effect of all his ties and selected a white one, dusted his boots with an old pocket-handkerchief, changed his trousers because the week-day pair was minutely frayed at the heels, and inked the elbows of his coat where the stitches were a little white. And, to be still more intimate, he studied his callow appearance in the glass from various points of view, and decided that his nose might have been a little smaller with advantage....

Directly after dinner he went out, and by the shortest path to the allotment lane, telling himself he did not care if he met Bonover forthwith in the street. He did not know precisely what he intended to do, but he was quite clear that he meant to see the girl he had met in the avenue. He knew he should see her. A sense of obstacles merely

braced him and was pleasurable. He went up the stone steps out of the lane to the stile that overlooked the Frobishers, the stile from which he had watched the Frobisher bedroom. There he seated himself with his arms, folded, in full view of the house.

That was at ten minutes to two. At twenty minutes to three he was still sitting there, but his hands were deep in his jacket pockets, and he was scowling and kicking his foot against the step with an impatient monotony. His needless glasses had been thrust into his waistcoat pocket--where they remained throughout the afternoon--and his cap was tilted a little back from his forehead and exposed a wisp of hair. One or two people had gone down the lane, and he had pretended not to see them, and a couple of hedge-sparrows chasing each other along the side of the sunlit, wind-rippled field had been his chief entertainment. It is unaccountable, no doubt, but he felt angry with her as the time crept on. His expression lowered.

He heard someone going by in the lane behind him. He would not look round--it annoyed him to think of people seeing him in this position. His once eminent discretion, though overthrown, still made muffled protests at the afternoon's enterprise. The feet down the lane stopped close at hand.

"Stare away," said Lewisham between his teeth. And then began mysterious noises, a violent rustle of hedge twigs, a something like a very light foot-tapping.

Curiosity boarded Lewisham and carried him after the briefest struggle. He looked round, and there she was, her back to him, reaching after the spiky blossoming blackthorn that crested the opposite hedge. Remarkable accident! She had not seen him!

In a moment Lewisham's legs were flying over the stile. He went down the steps in the bank with such impetus that it carried him up into the prickly bushes beside her. "Allow me," he said, too excited to see she was not astonished.

"Mr. Lewisham!" she said in feigned surprise, and stood away to give him room at the blackthorn.

"Which spike will you have?" he cried, overjoyed. "The whitest? The highest? Any!"

"That piece," she chose haphazard, "with the black spike sticking out from it."

A mass of snowy blossom it was against the April sky, and Lewisham, straggling for it--it was by no means the most accessible--saw with fantastic satisfaction a lengthy scratch flash white on his hand, and turn to red.

"Higher up the lane," he said, descending triumphant and breathless,

"there is blackthorn.... This cannot compare for a moment...."

She laughed and looked at him as he stood there flushed, his eyes triumphant, with an unpremeditated approval. In church, in the gallery, with his face foreshortened, he had been effective in a way, but this was different. "Show me," she said, though she knew this was the only place for blackthorn for a mile in either direction.

"I knew I should see you," he said, by way of answer, "I felt sure I should see you to-day."

"It was our last chance almost," she answered with as frank a quality of avowal. "I'm going home to London on Monday."

"I knew," he cried in triumph. "To Clapham?" he asked.

"Yes. I have got a situation. You did not know that I was a shorthand clerk and typewriter, did you? I am. I have just left the school, the Grogram School. And now there is an old gentleman who wants an amanuensis."

"So you know shorthand?" said he. "That accounts for the stylographic pen. Those lines were written.... I have them still."

She smiled and raised her eyebrows. "Here," said Mr. Lewisham, tapping his breast-pocket.

"This lane," he said--their talk was curiously inconsecutive--"some way along this lane, over the hill and down, there is a gate, and that goes--I mean, it opens into the path that runs along the river bank. Have you been?"

"No," she said.

"It's the best walk about Whortley. It brings you out upon Immering Common. You must--before you go."

"Now?" she said with her eyes dancing.

"Why not?"

"I told Mrs. Frobisher I should be back by four," she said.

"It's a walk not to be lost."

"Very well," said she.

"The trees are all budding," said Mr. Lewisham, "the rushes are shooting, and all along the edge of the river there are millions of little white flowers floating on the water, I don't know the names of them, but they're fine.... May I carry that branch of blossom?"

As he took it their hands touched momentarily ... and there came another of those significant gaps.

"Look at those clouds," said Lewisham abruptly, remembering the remark he had been about to make and waving the white froth of blackthorn, "And look at the blue between them."

"It's perfectly splendid. Of all the fine weather the best has been kept for now. My last day. My very last day."

And off these two young people went together in a highly electrical state--to the infinite astonishment of Mrs. Frobisher, who was looking out of the attic window--stepping out manfully and finding the whole world lit and splendid for their entertainment. The things they discovered and told each other that afternoon down by the river!--that spring was wonderful, young leaves beautiful, bud scales astonishing things, and clouds dazzling and stately!--with an air of supreme originality! And their naïve astonishment to find one another in agreement upon these novel delights! It seemed to them quite outside the play of accident that they should have met each other.

They went by the path that runs among the trees along the river bank, and she must needs repent and wish to take the lower one, the towing path, before they had gone three hundred yards. So Lewisham had to find a place fit for her descent, where a friendly tree proffered its protruding roots as a convenient balustrade, and down she clambered

with her hand in his.

Then a water-vole washing his whiskers gave occasion for a sudden touching of hands and the intimate confidence of whispers and silence together. After which Lewisham essayed to gather her a marsh mallow at the peril, as it was judged, of his life, and gained it together with a bootful of water. And at the gate by the black and shiny lock, where the path breaks away from the river, she overcame him by an unexpected feat, climbing gleefully to the top rail with the support of his hand, and leaping down, a figure of light and grace, to the ground.

They struck boldly across the meadows, which were gay with lady's smock, and he walked, by special request, between her and three matronly cows--feeling as Perseus might have done when he fended off the sea-monster. And so by the mill, and up a steep path to Immering Common. Across the meadows Lewisham had broached the subject of her occupation. "And are you really going away from here to be an amanuensis?" he said, and started her upon the theme of herself, a theme she treated with a specialist's enthusiasm. They dealt with it by the comparative methods and neither noticed the light was out of the sky until the soft feet of the advancing shower had stolen right upon them.

"Look!" said he. "Yonder! A shed," and they ran together. She ran laughing, and yet swiftly and lightly. He pulled her through the hedge by both hands, and released her skirt from an amorous bramble, and so

they came into a little black shed in which a rusty harrow of gigantic proportions sheltered. He noted how she still kept her breath after that run.

She sat down on the harrow and hesitated. "I must take off my hat," she said, "that rain will spot it," and so he had a chance of admiring the sincerity of her curls--not that he had ever doubted them. She stooped over her hat, pocket-handkerchief in hand, daintily wiping off the silvery drops. He stood up at the opening of the shed and looked at the country outside through the veil of the soft vehemence of the April shower.

"There's room for two on this harrow," she said.

He made inarticulate sounds of refusal, and then came and sat down beside her, close beside her, so that he was almost touching her. He felt a fantastic desire to take her in his arms and kiss her, and overcame the madness by an effort. "I don't even know your name," he said, taking refuge from his whirling thoughts in conversation.

"Henderson," she said.

"Miss Henderson?"

She smiled in his face--hesitated. "Yes--Miss Henderson."

Her eyes, her atmosphere were wonderful. He had never felt quite the same sensation before, a strange excitement, almost like a faint echo of tears. He was for demanding her Christian name. For calling her "dear" and seeing what she would say. He plunged headlong into a rambling description of Bonover and how he had told a lie about her and called her Miss Smith, and so escaped this unaccountable emotional crisis....

The whispering of the rain about them sank and died, and the sunlight struck vividly across the distant woods beyond Immering. Just then they had fallen on a silence again that was full of daring thoughts for Mr. Lewisham. He moved his arm suddenly and placed it so that it was behind her on the frame of the harrow.

"Let us go on now," she said abruptly. "The rain has stopped."

"That little path goes straight to Immering," said Mr. Lewisham.

"But, four o'clock?"

He drew out his watch, and his eyebrows went up. It was already nearly a quarter past four.

"Is it past four?" she asked, and abruptly they were face to face with parting. That Lewisham had to take "duty" at half-past five seemed a thing utterly trivial. "Surely," he said, only slowly realising what

this parting meant. "But must you? I--I want to talk to you."

"Haven't you been talking to me?"

"It isn't that. Besides--no."

She stood looking at him. "I promised to be home by four," she said. "Mrs. Frobisher has tea...."

"We may never have a chance to see one another again."

"Well?"

Lewisham suddenly turned very white.

"Don't leave me," he said, breaking a tense silence and with a sudden stress in his voice. "Don't leave me. Stop with me yet--for a little while.... You ... You can lose your way."

"You seem to think," she said, forcing a laugh, "that I live without eating and drinking."

"I have wanted to talk to you so much. The first time I saw you.... At first I dared not.... I did not know you would let me talk.... And now, just as I am--happy, you are going."

He stopped abruptly. Her eyes were downcast. "No," she said, tracing a curve with the point of her shoe. "No. I am not going."

Lewisham restrained an impulse to shout. "You will come to Immering?" he cried, and as they went along the narrow path through the wet grass, he began to tell her with simple frankness how he cared for her company, "I would not change this," he said, casting about for an offer to reject, "for--anything in the world.... I shall not be back for duty. I don't care. I don't care what happens so long as we have this afternoon."

"Nor I," she said.

"Thank you for coming," he said in an outburst of gratitude.--"Oh, thank you for coming," and held out his hand. She took it and pressed it, and so they went on hand in hand until the village street was reached. Their high resolve to play truant at all costs had begotten a wonderful sense of fellowship. "I can't call you Miss Henderson," he said. "You know I can't. You know ... I must have your Christian name."

"Ethel," she told him.

"Ethel," he said and looked at her, gathering courage as he did so. "Ethel," he repeated. "It is a pretty name. But no name is quite pretty enough for you, Ethel ... dear."...

The little shop in Immering lay back behind a garden full of wallflowers, and was kept by a very fat and very cheerful little woman, who insisted on regarding them as brother and sister, and calling them both "dearie." These points conceded she gave them an admirable tea of astonishing cheapness. Lewisham did not like the second condition very much, because it seemed to touch a little on his latest enterprise. But the tea and the bread and butter and the whort jam were like no food on earth. There were wallflowers, heavy scented, in a jug upon the table, and Ethel admired them, and when they set out again the little old lady insisted on her taking a bunch with her.

It was after they left Immering that this ramble, properly speaking, became scandalous. The sun was already a golden ball above the blue hills in the west--it turned our two young people into little figures of flame--and yet, instead of going homeward, they took the Wentworth road that plunges into the Forshaw woods. Behind them the moon, almost full, hung in the blue sky above the tree-tops, ghostly and indistinct, and slowly gathered to itself such light as the setting sun left for it in the sky.

Going out of Immering they began to talk of the future. And for the very young lover there is no future but the immediate future.

"You must write to me," he said, and she told him she wrote such silly letters. "But I shall have reams to write to you," he told

her.

"How are you to write to me?" she asked, and they discussed a new obstacle between them. It would never do to write home--never. She was sure of that with an absolute assurance. "My mother--" she said and stopped.

That prohibition cut him, for at that time he had the makings of a voluminous letter-writer. Yet it was only what one might expect. The whole world was unpropitious--obdurate indeed.... A splendid isolation à deux.

Perhaps she might find some place where letters might be sent to her? Yet that seemed to her deceitful.

So these two young people wandered on, full of their discovery of love, and yet so full too of the shyness of adolescence that the word "Love" never passed their lips that day. Yet as they talked on, and the kindly dusk gathered about them, their speech and their hearts came very close together. But their speech would seem so threadbare, written down in cold blood, that I must not put it here. To them it was not threadbare.

When at last they came down the long road into Whortley, the silent trees were black as ink and the moonlight made her face pallid and wonderful, and her eyes shone like stars. She still carried the

blackthorn from which most of the blossoms had fallen. The fragrant wallflowers were fragrant still. And far away, softened by the distance, the Whortley band, performing publicly outside the vicarage for the first time that year, was playing with unctuous slowness a sentimental air. I don't know if the reader remembers it that, favourite melody of the early eighties:--

"Sweet dreamland faces, passing to and fro, (pum, pum)
Bring back to Mem'ry days of long ago-o-o-oh,"

was the essence of it, very slow and tender and with an accompaniment of pum, pum. Pathetically cheerful that pum, pum, hopelessly cheerful indeed against the dirge of the air, a dirge accentuated by sporadic vocalisation. But to young people things come differently.

"I love music," she said.

"So do I," said he.

They came on down the steepness of West Street. They walked athwart the metallic and leathery tumult of sound into the light cast by the little circle of yellow lamps. Several people saw them and wondered what the boys and girls were coming to nowadays, and one eye-witness even subsequently described their carriage as "brazen." Mr. Lewisham was wearing his mortarboard cap of office--there was no mistaking him. They passed the Proprietary School and saw a yellow picture

framed and glazed, of Mr. Bonover taking duty for his aberrant assistant master. And outside the Frobisher house at last they parted perforce.

"Good-bye," he said for the third time. "Good-bye, Ethel."

She hesitated. Then suddenly she darted towards him. He felt her hands upon his shoulders, her lips soft and warm upon his cheek, and before he could take hold of her she had eluded him, and had flitted into the shadow of the house. "Good-bye," came her sweet, clear voice out of the shadow, and while he yet hesitated an answer, the door opened.

He saw her, black in the doorway, heard some indistinct words, and then the door closed and he was alone in the moonlight, his cheek still glowing from her lips....

So ended Mr. Lewisham's first day with Love.