

CHAPTER IX.

ALICE HEYDINGER.

When he arrived at the top of the building he stood aside for the only remaining passenger to step out before him. It was the Miss Heydinger who had addressed him, the owner of that gilt-edged book in the cover of brown paper. No one else had come all the way up from the ground floor. The rest of the load in the lift had emerged at the "astronomical" and "chemical" floors, but these two had both chosen "zoology" for their third year of study, and zoology lived in the attics. She stepped into the light, with a rare touch of colour springing to her cheeks in spite of herself. Lewisham perceived an alteration in her dress. Perhaps she was looking for and noticed the transitory surprise in his face.

The previous session--their friendship was now nearly a year old--it had never once dawned upon him that she could possibly be pretty. The chief thing he had been able to recall with any definiteness during the vacation was, that her hair was not always tidy, and that even when it chanced to be so, she was nervous about it; she distrusted it. He remembered her gesture while she talked, a patting exploration that verged on the exasperating. From that he went on to remember that its colour was, on the whole, fair, a light brown. But he had

forgotten her mouth, he had failed to name the colour of her eyes. She wore glasses, it is true. And her dress was indefinite in his memory--an amorphous dinginess.

And yet he had seen a good deal of her. They were not in the same course, but he had made her acquaintance on the committee of the school Debating Society. Lewisham was just then discovering Socialism. That had afforded a basis of conversation--an incentive to intercourse. She seemed to find something rarely interesting in his peculiar view of things, and, as chance would have it, he met her accidentally quite a number of times, in the corridors of the schools, in the big Education Library, and in the Art Museum. After a time those meetings appear to have been no longer accidental.

Lewisham for the first time in his life began to fancy he had conversational powers. She resolved to stir up his ambitions--an easy task. She thought he had exceptional gifts and that she might serve to direct them; she certainly developed his vanity. She had matriculated at the London University and they took the Intermediate Examination in Science together in July--she a little unwisely--which served, as almost anything will serve in such cases, as a further link between them. She failed, which in no way diminished Lewisham's regard for her. On the examination days they discoursed about Friendship in general, and things like that, down the Burlington Arcade during the lunch time--Burlington Arcade undisguisedly amused by her learned dinginess and his red tie--and among other things that were said she

reproached him for not reading poetry. When they parted in Piccadilly, after the examination, they agreed to write, about poetry and themselves, during the holidays, and then she lent him, with a touch of hesitation, Rossetti's poems. He began to forget what had at first been very evident to him, that she was two or three years older than he.

Lewisham spent the vacation with an unsympathetic but kindly uncle who was a plumber and builder. His uncle had a family of six, the eldest eleven, and Lewisham made himself agreeable and instructive. Moreover he worked hard for the culminating third year of his studies (in which he had decided to do great things), and he learnt to ride the Ordinary Bicycle. He also thought about Miss Heydinger, and she, it would seem, thought about him.

He argued on social questions with his uncle, who was a prominent local Conservative. His uncle's controversial methods were coarse in the extreme. Socialists, he said, were thieves. The object of Socialism was to take away what a man earned and give it to "a lot of lazy scoundrels." Also rich people were necessary. "If there weren't well-off people, how d'ye think I'd get a livin'? Hey? And where'd you be then?" Socialism, his uncle assured him, was "got up" by agitators. "They get money out of young Gabies like you, and they spend it in champagne." And thereafter he met Mr. Lewisham's arguments with the word "Champagne" uttered in an irritating voice, followed by a luscious pantomime of drinking.

Naturally Lewisham felt a little lonely, and perhaps he laid stress upon it in his letters to Miss Heydinger. It came to light that she felt rather lonely too. They discussed the question of True as distinguished from Ordinary Friendship, and from that they passed to Goethe and Elective Affinities. He told her how he looked for her letters, and they became more frequent. Her letters were Indisputably well written. Had he been a journalist with a knowledge of "per thou." he would have known each for a day's work. After the practical plumber had been asking what he expected to make by this here science of his, re-reading her letters was balsamic. He liked Rossetti--the exquisite sense of separation in "The Blessed Damozel" touched him. But, on the whole, he was a little surprised at Miss Heydinger's taste in poetry. Rossetti was so sensuous ... so florid. He had scarcely expected that sort of thing.

Altogether he had returned to the schools decidedly more interested in her than when they had parted. And the curious vague memories of her appearance as something a little frayed and careless, vanished at sight of her emerging from the darkness of the lift. Her hair was in order, as the light glanced through it it looked even pretty, and she wore a well-made, dark-green and black dress, loose-gathered as was the fashion in those days, that somehow gave a needed touch of warmth to her face. Her hat too was a change from the careless lumpishness of last year, a hat that, to a feminine mind, would have indicated design. It suited her--these things are past a male novelist's

explaining.

"I have this book of yours, Miss Heydinger," he said.

"I am glad you have written that paper on Socialism," she replied, taking the brown-covered volume.

They walked along the little passage towards the biological laboratory side by side, and she stopped at the hat pegs to remove her hat. For that was the shameless way of the place, a girl student had to take her hat off publicly, and publicly assume the holland apron that was to protect her in the laboratory. Not even a looking-glass!

"I shall come and hear your paper," she said.

"I hope you will like it," said Lewisham at the door of the laboratory.

"And in the vacation I have been collecting evidence about ghosts--you remember our arguments. Though I did not tell you in my letters."

"I'm sorry you're still obdurate," said Lewisham. "I thought that was over."

"And have you read 'Looking Backward'?"

"I want to."

"I have it here with my other books, if you'd care for me to lend it to you. Wait till I reach my table. My hands are so full."

They entered the laboratory together, Lewisham holding the door open courtly-wise, Miss Heydinger taking a reassuring pat at her hair. Near the door was a group of four girls, which group Miss Heydinger joined, holding the brown-covered book as inconspicuously as possible. Three of them had been through the previous two years with her, and they greeted her by her Christian name. They had previously exchanged glances at her appearance in Lewisham's company.

A morose elderly young demonstrator brightened momentarily at the sight of Lewisham. "Well, we've got one of the decent ones anyhow," said the morose elderly young demonstrator, who was apparently taking an inventory, and then brightening at a fresh entry. "Ah! and here's Smithers."