

## CHAPTER XIII.

### LEWISHAM INSISTS.

Ethel Henderson sat at her machine before the window of Mr. Lagume's study, and stared blankly at the greys and blues of the November twilight. Her face was white, her eyelids were red from recent weeping, and her hands lay motionless in her lap. The door had just slammed behind Lagune.

"Heigh-ho!" she said. "I wish I was dead. Oh! I wish I was out of it all."

She became passive again. "I wonder what I have done," she said, "that I should be punished like this."

She certainly looked anything but a Fate-haunted soul, being indeed visibly and immediately a very pretty girl. Her head was shapely and covered with curly dark hair, and the eyebrows above her hazel eyes were clear and dark. Her lips were finely shaped, her mouth was not too small to be expressive, her chin small, and her neck white and full and pretty. There is no need to lay stress upon her nose--it sufficed. She was of a mediocre height, sturdy rather than slender, and her dress was of a pleasant, golden-brown material with the easy sleeves and graceful line of those aesthetic days. And she sat at her

typewriter and wished she was dead and wondered what she had done.

The room was lined with bookshelves, and conspicuous therein were a long row of foolish pretentious volumes, the "works" of Lagune--the witless, meandering imitation of philosophy that occupied his life. Along the cornices were busts of Plato, Socrates, and Newton. Behind Ethel was the great man's desk with its green-shaded electric light, and littered with proofs and copies of *Hesperus*, "A Paper for Doubters," which, with her assistance, he edited, published, compiled, wrote, and (without her help) paid for and read. A pen, flung down forcibly, quivered erect with its one surviving nib in the blotting pad. Mr. Lagune had flung it down.

The collapse of the previous night had distressed him dreadfully, and ever and again before his retreat he had been breaking into passionate monologue. The ruin of a life-work, it was, no less. Surely she had known that Chaffery was a cheat. Had she not known? Silence. "After so many kindnesses--"

She interrupted him with a wailing, "Oh, I know--I know."

But Lagune was remorseless and insisted she had betrayed him, worse--made him ridiculous! Look at the "work" he had undertaken at South Kensington--how could he go on with that now? How could he find the heart? When his own typewriter sacrificed him to her stepfather's trickery? "Trickery!"

The gesticulating hands became active, the grey eyes dilated with indignation, the piping voice eloquent.

"If he hadn't cheated you, someone else would," was Ethel's inadequate muttered retort, unheard by the seeker after phenomena.

It was perhaps not so bad as dismissal, but it certainly lasted longer. And at home was Chaffery, grimly malignant at her failure to secure that pneumatic glove. He had no right to blame her, he really had not; but a disturbed temper is apt to falsify the scales of justice. The tambourine, he insisted, he could have explained by saying he put up his hand to catch it and protect his head directly Smithers moved. But the pneumatic glove there was no explaining. He had made a chance for her to secure it when he had pretended to faint. It was rubbish to say anyone could have been looking on the table then--rubbish.

Beside that significant wreck of a pen stood a little carriage clock in a case, and this suddenly lifted a slender voice and announced five. She turned round on her stool and sat staring at the clock. She smiled with the corners of her mouth down. "Home," she said, "and begin again. It's like battledore and shuttlecock...."

"I was silly...."

"I suppose I've brought it on myself. I ought to have picked it up, I suppose. I had time...."

"Cheats ... just cheats."

"I never thought I should see him again...."

"He was ashamed, of course.... He had his own friends."

For a space she sat still, staring blankly before her. She sighed, rubbed a knuckle in a reddened eye, rose.

She went into the hall, where her hat, transfixed by a couple of hat-pins, hung above her jacket, assumed these garments, and let herself out into the cold grey street.

She had hardly gone twenty yards from Lagune's door before she became aware of a man overtaking her and walking beside her. That kind of thing is a common enough experience to girls who go to and from work in London, and she had had perforce to learn many things since her adventurous Whortley days. She looked stiffly in front of her. The man deliberately got in her way so that she had to stop. She lifted eyes of indignant protest. It was Lewisham--and his face was white.

He hesitated awkwardly, and then in silence held out his hand. She took it mechanically. He found his voice. "Miss Henderson," he said.

"What do you want?" she asked faintly.

"I don't know," he said.... "I want to talk to you."

"Yes?" Her heart was beating fast.

He found the thing unexpectedly difficult.

"May I--? Are you expecting--? Have you far to go? I would like to talk to you. There is a lot ..."

"I walk to Clapham," she said. "If you care ... to come part of the way ..."

She moved awkwardly. Lewisham took his place at her side. They walked side by side for a moment, their manner constrained, having so much to say that they could not find a word to begin upon.

"Have you forgotten Whortley?" he asked abruptly.

"No."

He glanced at her; her face was downcast. "Why did you never write?" he asked bitterly.

"I wrote."

"Again, I mean."

"I did--in July."

"I never had it."

"It came back."

"But Mrs. Munday ..."

"I had forgotten her name. I sent it to the Grammar School."

Lewisham suppressed an exclamation.

"I am very sorry," she said.

They went on again in silence. "Last night," said Lewisham at length. "I have no business to ask. But--"

She took a long breath. "Mr. Lewisham," she said. "That man you saw--the Medium--was my stepfather."

"Well?"

"Isn't that enough?"

Lewisham paused. "No," he said.

There was another constrained silence. "No," he said less dubiously. "I don't care a rap what your stepfather is. Were you cheating?"

Her face turned white. Her mouth opened and closed. "Mr. Lewisham," she said deliberately, "you may not believe it, it may sound impossible, but on my honour ... I did not know--I did not know for certain, that is--that my stepfather ..."

"Ah!" said Lewisham, leaping at conviction. "Then I was right...."

For a moment she stared at him, and then, "I did know," she said, suddenly beginning to cry. "How can I tell you? It is a lie. I did know. I did know all the time."

He stared at her in white astonishment. He fell behind her one step, and then in a stride came level again. Then, a silence, a silence that seemed it would never end. She had stopped crying, she was one huge suspense, not daring even to look at his face. And at last he spoke.

"No," he said slowly. "I don't mind even that. I don't care--even if it was that."

Abruptly they turned into the King's Road, with its roar of wheeled traffic and hurrying foot-passengers, and forthwith a crowd of boys with a broken-spirited Guy involved and separated them. In a busy highway of a night one must needs talk disconnectedly in shouted snatches or else hold one's peace. He glanced at her face and saw that it was set again. Presently she turned southward out of the tumult into a street of darkness and warm blinds, and they could go on talking again.

"I understand what you mean," said Lewisham. "I know I do. You knew, but you did not want to know. It was like that."

But her mind had been active. "At the end of this road," she said, gulping a sob, "you must go back. It was kind of you to come, Mr. Lewisham. But you were ashamed--you are sure to be ashamed. My employer is a spiritualist, and my stepfather is a professional Medium, and my mother is a spiritualist. You were quite right not to speak to me last night. Quite. It was kind of you to come, but you must go back. Life is hard enough as it is ... You must go back at the end of the road. Go back at the end of the road ..."

Lewisham made no reply for a hundred yards. "I'm coming on to Clapham," he said.

They came to the end of the road in silence. Then at the kerb corner



she turned and faced him. "Go back," she whispered.

"No," he said obstinately, and they stood face to face at the cardinal point of their lives.

"Listen to me," said Lewisham. "It is hard to say what I feel. I don't know myself.... But I'm not going to lose you like this. I'm not going to let you slip a second time. I was awake about it all last night. I don't care where you are, what your people are, nor very much whether you've kept quite clear of this medium humbug. I don't. You will in future. Anyhow. I've had a day and night to think it over. I had to come and try to find you. It's you. I've never forgotten you. Never. I'm not going to be sent back like this."

"It can be no good for either of us," she said as resolute as he.

"I shan't leave you."

"But what is the good?..."

"I'm coming," said Lewisham, dogmatically.

And he came.

He asked her a question point blank and she would not answer him, and for some way they walked in grim silence. Presently she spoke with a

twitching mouth. "I wish you would leave me," she said. "You are quite different from what I am. You felt that last night. You helped find us out...."

"When first I came to London I used to wander about Clapham looking for you," said Lewisham, "week after week."

They had crossed the bridge and were in a narrow little street of shabby shops near Clapham Junction before they talked again. She kept her face averted and expressionless.

"I'm sorry," said Lewisham, with a sort of stiff civility, "if I seem to be forcing myself upon you. I don't want to pry into your affairs--if you don't wish me to. The sight of you has somehow brought back a lot of things.... I can't explain it. Perhaps--I had to come to find you--I kept on thinking of your face, of how you used to smile, how you jumped from the gate by the lock, and how we had tea ... a lot of things."

He stopped again.

"A lot of things."

"If I may come," he said, and went unanswered. They crossed the wide streets by the Junction and went on towards the Common.

"I live down this road," she said, stopping abruptly at a corner. "I would rather ..."

"But I have said nothing."

She looked at him with her face white, unable to speak for a space. "It can do no good," she said. "I am mixed up with this...."

She stopped.

He spoke deliberately. "I shall come," he said, "to-morrow night."

"No," she said.

"But I shall come."

"No," she whispered.

"I shall come." She could hide the gladness of her heart from herself no longer. She was frightened that he had come, but she was glad, and she knew he knew that she was glad. She made no further protest. She held out her hand dumbly. And on the morrow she found him awaiting her even as he had said.