

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. LAGUNE'S POINT OF VIEW.

For three days the Laboratory at South Kensington saw nothing of Lagune, and then he came back more invincibly voluble than ever. Everyone had expected him to return apostate, but he brought back an invigorated faith, a propaganda unashamed. From some source he had derived strength and conviction afresh. Even the rhetorical Smithers availed nothing. There was a joined battle over the insufficient tea-cups, and the elderly young assistant demonstrator hovered on the verge of the discussion, rejoicing, it is supposed, over the entanglements of Smithers. For at the outset Smithers displayed an overweening confidence and civility, and at the end his ears were red and his finer manners lost to him.

Lewisham, it was remarked by Miss Heydinger, made but a poor figure in this discussion. Once or twice he seemed about to address Lagune, and thought better of it with the words upon his lips.

Lagune's treatment of the exposure was light and vigorous. "The man Chaffery," he said, "has made a clean breast of it. His point of view--"

"Facts are facts," said Smithers.

"A fact is a synthesis of impressions," said Lagune; "but that you will learn when you are older. The thing is that we were at cross purposes. I told Chaffery you were beginners. He treated you as beginners--arranged a demonstration."

"It was a demonstration," said Smithers.

"Precisely. If it had not been for your interruptions ..."

"Ah!"

"He forged elementary effects ..."

"You can't but admit that."

"I don't attempt to deny it. But, as he explained, the thing is necessary--justifiable. Psychic phenomena are subtle, a certain training of the observation is necessary. A medium is a more subtle instrument than a balance or a borax bead, and see how long it is before you can get assured results with a borax bead! In the elementary class, in the introductory phase, conditions are too crude...."

"For honesty."

"Wait a moment. Is it dishonest--rigging a demonstration?"

"Of course it is."

"Your professors do it."

"I deny that in toto," said Smithers, and repeated with satisfaction,
"in toto."

"That's all right," said Lagune, "because I have the facts. Your chemical lecturers--you may go downstairs now and ask, if you disbelieve me--always cheat over the indestructibility of matter experiment--always. And then another--a physiography thing. You know the experiment I mean? To demonstrate the existence of the earth's rotation. They use--they use--"

"Foucault's pendulum," said Lewisham. "They use a rubber ball with a pin-hole hidden in the hand, and blow the pendulum round the way it ought to go."

"But that's different," said Smithers.

"Wait a moment," said Lagune, and produced a piece of folded printed paper from his pocket. "Here is a review from Nature of the work of no less a person than Professor Greenhill. And see--a convenient pin

is introduced in the apparatus for the demonstration of virtual velocities! Read it--if you doubt me. I suppose you doubt me."

Smithers abruptly abandoned his position of denial "in toto." "This isn't my point, Mr. Lagune; this isn't my point," he said. "These things that are done in the lecture theatre are not to prove facts, but to give ideas."

"So was my demonstration," said Lagune.

"We didn't understand it in that light."

"Nor does the ordinary person who goes to Science lectures understand it in that light. He is comforted by the thought that he is seeing things with his own eyes."

"Well, I don't care," said Smithers; "two wrongs don't make a right. To rig demonstrations is wrong."

"There I agree with you. I have spoken plainly with this man Chaffery. He's not a full-blown professor, you know, a highly salaried ornament of the rock of truth like your demonstration-rigging professors here, and so I can speak plainly to him without offence. He takes quite the view they would take. But I am more rigorous. I insist that there shall be no more of this...."

"Next time--" said Smithers with irony.

"There will be no next time. I have done with elementary exhibitions. You must take the word of the trained observer--just as you do in the matter of chemical analysis."

"Do you mean you are going on with that chap when he's been caught cheating under your very nose?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

Smithers set out to explain why not, and happened on confusion. "I still believe the man has powers," said Lagune.

"Of deception," said Smithers.

"Those I must eliminate," said Lagune. "You might as well refuse to study electricity because it escaped through your body. All new science is elusive. No investigator in his senses would refuse to investigate a compound because it did unexpected things. Either this dissolves in acid or I have nothing more to do with it--eh? That's fine research!"

Then it was the last vestiges of Smithers' manners vanished. "I don't care what you say," said Smithers. "It's all rot--it's all just rot. Argue if you like--but have you convinced anybody? Put it to the

vote."

"That's democracy with a vengeance," said Lagune. "A general election of the truth half-yearly, eh?"

"That's simply wriggling out of it," said Smithers. "That hasn't anything to do with it at all."

Lagune, flushed but cheerful, was on his way downstairs when Lewisham overtook him. He was pale and out of breath, but as the staircase invariably rendered Lagune breathless he did not remark the younger man's disturbance. "Interesting talk," panted Lewisham. "Very interesting talk, sir."

"I'm glad you found it so--very," said Lagune.

There was a pause, and then Lewisham plunged desperately. "There is a young lady--she is your typewriter...."

He stopped from sheer loss of breath.

"Yes?" said Lagune.

"Is she a medium or anything of that sort?"

"Well," Lagune reflected, "She is not a medium, certainly. But--why do

you ask?"

"Oh!... I wondered."

"You noticed her eyes perhaps. She is the stepdaughter of that man Chaffery--a queer character, but indisputably mediumistic. It's odd the thing should have struck you. Curiously enough I myself have fancied she might be something of a psychic--judging from her face."

"A what?"

"A psychic--undeveloped, of course. I have thought once or twice. Only a little while ago I was speaking to that man Chaffery about her."

"Were you?"

"Yes. He of course would like to see any latent powers developed. But it's a little difficult to begin, you know."

"You mean--she won't?"

"Not at present. She is a good girl, but in this matter she is--timid. There is often a sort of disinclination--a queer sort of feeling--one might almost call it modesty."

"I see," said Lewisham.

"One can override it usually. I don't despair."

"No," said Lewisham shortly. They were at the foot of the staircase now. He hesitated. "You've given me a lot to think about," he said with an attempt at an off-hand manner. "The way you talked upstairs;" and turned towards the book he had to sign.

"I'm glad you don't take up quite such an intolerant attitude as Mr. Smithers," said Lagune; "very glad. I must lend you a book or two. If your cramming here leaves you any time, that is."

"Thanks," said Lewisham shortly, and walked away from him. The studiously characteristic signature quivered and sprawled in an unfamiliar manner.

"I'm damned if he overrides it," said Lewisham, under his breath.