CHAPTER XV.

LOVE IN THE STREETS.

Lewisham was not quite clear what course he meant to take in the high enterprise of foiling Lagune, and indeed he was anything but clear about the entire situation. His logical processes, his emotions and his imagination seemed playing some sort of snatching game with his will. Enormous things hung imminent, but it worked out to this, that he walked home with Ethel night after night for--to be exact--seven-and-sixty nights. Every week night through November and December, save once, when he had to go into the far East to buy himself an overcoat, he was waiting to walk with her home. A curious, inconclusive affair, that walk, to which he came nightly full of vague longings, and which ended invariably under an odd shadow of disappointment. It began outside Lagune's most punctually at five, and ended--mysteriously--at the corner of a side road in Clapham, a road of little yellow houses with sunk basements and tawdry decorations of stone. Up that road she vanished night after night, into a grey mist and the shadow beyond a feeble yellow gas-lamp, and he would watch her vanish, and then sigh and turn back towards his lodgings.

They talked of this and that, their little superficial ideas about themselves, and of their circumstances and tastes, and always there was something, something that was with them unspoken, unacknowledged,

which made all these things unreal and insincere.

Yet out of their talk he began to form vague ideas of the home from which she came. There was, of course, no servant, and the mother was something meandering, furtive, tearful in the face of troubles. Sometimes of an afternoon or evening she grew garrulous. "Mother does talk so--sometimes." She rarely went out of doors. Chaffery always rose late, and would sometimes go away for days together. He was mean; he allowed only a weekly twenty-five shillings for housekeeping, and sometimes things grew unsatisfactory at the week-end. There seemed to be little sympathy between mother and daughter; the widow had been flighty in a dingy fashion, and her marriage with her chief lodger Chaffery had led to unforgettable sayings. It was to facilitate this marriage that Ethel had been sent to Whortley, so that was counted a mitigated evil. But these were far-off things, remote and unreal down the long, ill-lit vista of the suburban street which swallowed up Ethel nightly. The walk, her warmth and light and motion close to him, her clear little voice, and the touch of her hand; that was reality.

The shadow of Chaffery and his deceptions lay indeed across all these things, sometimes faint, sometimes dark and present. Then Lewisham became insistent, his sentimental memories ceased, and he asked questions that verged on gulfs of doubt. Had she ever "helped"? She had not, she declared. Then she added that twice at home she had "sat down" to complete the circle. She would never help again. That she promised--if it needed promising. There had already been dreadful

trouble at home about the exposure at Lagune's. Her mother had sided with her stepfather and joined in blaming her. But was she to blame?

"Of course you were not to blame," said Lewisham. Lagune, he learnt, had been unhappy and restless for the three days after the séance--indulging in wearisome monologue--with Ethel as sole auditor (at twenty-one shillings a week). Then he had decided to give Chaffery a sound lecture on his disastrous dishonesty. But it was Chaffery gave the lecture. Smithers, had he only known it, had been overthrown by a better brain than Lagune's, albeit it spoke through Lagune's treble.

Ethel did not like talking of Chaffery and these other things. "If you knew how sweet it was to forget it all," she would say; "to be just us two together for a little while." And, "What good does it do to keep on?" when Lewisham was pressing. Lewisham wanted very much to keep on at times, but the good of it was a little hard to demonstrate. So his knowledge of the situation remained imperfect and the weeks drifted by.

Wonderfully varied were those seven-and-sixty nights, as he came to remember in after life. There were nights of damp and drizzle, and then thick fogs, beautiful, isolating, grey-white veils, turning every yard of pavement into a private room. Grand indeed were these fogs, things to rejoice at mightily, since then it was no longer a thing for public scorn when two young people hurried along arm in arm, and one

could do a thousand impudent, significant things with varying pressure and the fondling of a little hand (a hand in a greatly mended glove of cheap kid). Then indeed one seemed to be nearer that elusive something that threaded it all together. And the dangers of the street corners, the horses looming up suddenly out of the dark, the carters with lanterns at their horses' heads, the street lamps, blurred, smoky orange at one's nearest, and vanishing at twenty yards into dim haze, seemed to accentuate the infinite need of protection on the part of a delicate young lady who had already traversed three winters of fogs, thornily alone. Moreover, one could come right down the quiet street where she lived, halfway to the steps of her house, with a delightful sense of enterprise.

The fogs passed all too soon into a hard frost, into nights of starlight and presently moonlight, when the lamps looked hard, flashing like rows of yellow gems, and their reflections and the glare of the shop windows were sharp and frosty, and even the stars hard and bright, snapping noiselessly (if one may say so) instead of twinkling. A jacket trimmed with imitation Astrachan replaced Ethel's lighter coat, and a round cap of Astrachan her hat, and her eyes shone hard and bright, and her forehead was broad and white beneath it. It was exhilarating, but one got home too soon, and so the way from Chelsea to Clapham was lengthened, first into a loop of side streets, and then when the first pulverulent snows told that Christmas was at hand, into a new loop down King's Road, and once even through the Brompton Road and Sloane Street, where the shops were full of

decorations and entertaining things.

And, under circumstances of infinite gravity, Mr. Lewisham secretly spent three-and-twenty shillings out of the vestiges of that hundred pounds, and bought Ethel a little gold ring set with pearls. With that there must needs be a ceremonial, and on the verge of the snowy, foggy Common she took off her glove and the ring was placed on her finger. Whereupon he was moved to kiss her--on the frost-pink knuckle next to an inky nail.

"It's silly of us," she said. "What can we do?--ever?"

"You wait." he said, and his tone was full of vague promises.

Afterwards he thought over those promises, and another evening went into the matter more fully, telling her of all the brilliant things that he held it was possible for a South Kensington student to do and be--of headmasterships, northern science schools, inspectorships, demonstratorships, yea, even professorships. And then, and then--To all of which she lent a willing and incredulous ear, finding in that dreaming a quality of fear as well as delight.

The putting on of the pearl-set ring was mere ceremonial, of course; she could not wear it either at Lagune's or at home, so instead she threaded it on a little white satin ribbon and wore it round her neck--"next her heart." He thought of it there warm "next her heart."

When he had bought the ring he had meant to save it for Christmas before he gave it to her. But the desire to see her pleasure had been too strong for him.

Christmas Eve, I know not by what deceit on her part, these young people spent together all day. Lagune was down with a touch of bronchitis and had given his typewriter a holiday. Perhaps she forgot to mention it at home. The Royal College was in vacation and Lewisham was free. He declined the plumber's invitation; "work" kept him in London, he said, though it meant a pound or more of added expenditure. These absurd young people walked sixteen miles that Christmas Eve, and parted warm and glowing. There had been a hard frost and a little snow, the sky was a colourless grey, icicles hung from the arms of the street lamps, and the pavements were patterned out with frond-like forms that were trodden into slides as the day grew older. The Thames they knew was a wonderful sight, but that they kept until last. They went first along the Brompton Road....

And it is well that you should have the picture of them right: Lewisham in the ready-made overcoat, blue cloth and velvet collar, dirty tan gloves, red tie, and bowler hat; and Ethel in a two-year-old jacket and hat of curly Astrachan; both pink-cheeked from the keen air, shyly arm in arm occasionally, and very alert to miss no possible spectacle. The shops were varied and interesting along the Brompton Road, but nothing to compare with Piccadilly. There were windows in

Piccadilly so full of costly little things, it took fifteen minutes to get them done, card shops, drapers' shops full of foolish, entertaining attractions. Lewisham, in spite of his old animosities, forgot to be severe on the Shopping Class, Ethel was so vastly entertained by all these pretty follies.

Then up Regent Street by the place where the sham diamonds are, and the place where the girls display their long hair, and the place where the little chickens run about in the window, and so into Oxford Street, Holborn, Ludgate Hill, St. Paul's Churchyard, to Leadenhall, and the markets where turkeys, geese, ducklings, and chickens--turkeys predominant, however--hang in rows of a thousand at a time.

"I must buy you something," said Lewisham, resuming a topic.

"No, no," said Ethel, with her eye down a vista of innumerable birds.

"But I must," said Lewisham. "You had better choose it, or I shall get something wrong." His mind ran on brooches and clasps.

"You mustn't waste your money, and besides, I have that ring."

But Lewisham insisted.

"Then--if you must--I am starving. Buy me something to eat."

An immense and memorable joke. Lewisham plunged recklessly--orientally--into an awe-inspiring place with mitred napkins. They lunched on cutlets--stripped the cutlets to the bone--and little crisp brown potatoes, and they drank between them a whole half bottle of--some white wine or other, Lewisham selected in an off-hand way from the list. Neither of them had ever taken wine at a meal before. One-and-ninepence it cost him, Sir, and the name of it was Capri! It was really very passable Capri--a manufactured product, no doubt, but warming and aromatic. Ethel was aghast at his magnificence and drank a glass and a half.

Then, very warm and comfortable, they went down by the Tower, and the Tower Bridge with its crest of snow, huge pendant icicles, and the ice blocks choked in its side arches, was seasonable seeing. And as they had had enough of shops and crowds they set off resolutely along the desolate Embankment homeward.

But indeed the Thames was a wonderful sight that year! ice-fringed along either shore, and with drift-ice in the middle reflecting a luminous scarlet from the broad red setting sun, and moving steadily, incessantly seaward. A swarm of mewing gulls went to and fro, and with them mingled pigeons and crows. The buildings on the Surrey side were dim and grey and very mysterious, the moored, ice-blocked barges silent and deserted, and here and there a lit window shone warm. The sun sank right out of sight into a bank of blue, and the Surrey side dissolved in mist save for a few insoluble, spots of yellow light,

that presently became many. And after our lovers had come under Charing Cross Bridge the Houses of Parliament rose before them at the end of a great crescent of golden lamps, blue and faint, halfway between the earth and sky. And the clock on the Tower was like a November sun.

It was a day without a flaw, or at most but the slightest speck. And that only came at the very end.

"Good-bye, dear," she said. "I have been very happy to-day."

His face came very close to hers. "Good-bye," he said, pressing her hand and looking into her eyes.

She glanced round, she drew nearer to him. "Dearest one," she whispered very softly, and then, "Good-bye."

Suddenly he became unaccountably petulant, he dropped her hand. "It's always like this. We are happy. I am happy. And then--then you are taken away...."

There was a silence of mute interrogations.

"Dear," she whispered, "we must wait."

A moment's pause. "Wait!" he said, and broke off. He

hesitated. "Good-bye," he said as though he was snapping a thread that held them together.