

CHAPTER XVI.

MISS HEYDINGER'S PRIVATE THOUGHTS.

The way from Chelsea to Clapham and the way from South Kensington to Battersea, especially if the former is looped about a little to make it longer, come very near to each other. One night close upon Christmas two friends of Lewisham's passed him and Ethel. But Lewisham did not see them, because he was looking at Ethel's face.

"Did you see?" said the other girl, a little maliciously.

"Mr. Lewisham--wasn't it?" said Miss Heydinger in a perfectly indifferent tone.

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Miss Heydinger sat in the room her younger sisters called her "Sanctum." Her Sanctum was only too evidently an intellectualised bedroom, and a cheap wallpaper of silvery roses peeped coquettishly from among her draped furniture. Her particular glories were the writing-desk in the middle and the microscope on the unsteady octagonal table under the window. There were bookshelves of workmanship patently feminine in their facile decoration and structural instability, and on them an array of glittering poets,

Shelley, Rossetti, Keats, Browning, and odd volumes of Ruskin, South Place Sermons, Socialistic publications in torn paper covers, and above, science text-books and note-books in an oppressive abundance. The autotypes that hung about the room were eloquent of aesthetic ambitions and of a certain impermeability to implicit meanings. There were the Mirror of Venus by Burne Jones, Rossetti's Annunciation, Lippi's Annunciation, and the Love of Life and Love and Death of Watts. And among other photographs was one of last year's Debating Society Committee, Lewisham smiling a little weakly near the centre, and Miss Heydinger out of focus in the right wing. And Miss Heydinger sat with her back to all these things, in her black horse-hair arm-chair, staring into the fire, her eyes hot, and her chin on her hand.

"I might have guessed--before," she said. "Ever since that séance. It has been different ..."

She smiled bitterly. "Some shop girl ..."

She mused. "They are all alike, I suppose. They come back--a little damaged, as the woman says in 'Lady Windermere's Fan.' Perhaps he will. I wonder ..."

"Why should he be so deceitful? Why should he act to me ...?"

"Pretty, pretty, pretty--that is our business. What man hesitates in

the choice? He goes his own way, thinks his own thoughts, does his own work ...

"His dissection is getting behind--one can see he takes scarcely any notes...."

For a long time she was silent. Her face became more intent. She began to bite her thumb, at first slowly, then faster. She broke out at last into words again.

"The things he might do, the great things he might do. He is able, he is dogged, he is strong. And then comes a pretty face! Oh God! Why was I made with heart and brain?" She sprang to her feet, with her hands clenched and her face contorted. But she shed no tears.

Her attitude fell limp in a moment. One hand dropped by her side, the other rested on a fossil on the mantel-shelf, and she stared down into the red fire.

"To think of all we might have done! It maddens me!

"To work, and think, and learn. To hope and wait. To despise the petty arts of womanliness, to trust to the sanity of man....

"To awake like the foolish virgins," she said, "and find the hour of life is past!"

Her face, her pose, softened into self-pity.

"Futility ...

"It's no good...." Her voice broke.

"I shall never be happy...."

She saw the grandiose vision of the future she had cherished suddenly rolled aside and vanishing, more and more splendid as it grew more and more remote--like a dream at the waking moment. The vision of her inevitable loneliness came to replace it, clear and acute. She saw herself alone and small in a huge desolation--infinitely pitiful, Lewisham callously receding with "some shop girl." The tears came, came faster, until they were streaming down her face. She turned as if looking for something. She flung herself upon her knees before the little arm-chair, and began an incoherent sobbing prayer for the pity and comfort of God.

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The next day one of the other girls in the biological course remarked to her friend that "Heydinger-dingery" had relapsed. Her friend glanced down the laboratory. "It's a bad relapse," she said. "Really ... I couldn't ... wear my hair like that."

She continued to regard Miss Heydinger with a critical eye. She was free to do this because Miss Heydinger was standing, lost in thought, staring at the December fog outside the laboratory windows. "She looks white," said the girl who had originally spoken. "I wonder if she works hard."

"It makes precious little difference if she does," said her friend. "I asked her yesterday what were the bones in the parietal segment, and she didn't know one. Not one."

The next day Miss Heydinger's place was vacant. She was ill--from overstudy--and her illness lasted to within three weeks of the terminal examination. Then she came back with a pallid face and a strenuous unavailing industry.