

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE RAPHAEL GALLERY.

It was nearly three o'clock, and in the Biological Laboratory the lamps were all alight. The class was busy with razors cutting sections of the root of a fern to examine it microscopically. A certain silent frog-like boy, a private student who plays no further part in this story, was working intently, looking more like a frog than usual--his expression modest with a touch of effort. Behind Miss Heydinger, jaded and untidy in her early manner again, was a vacant seat, an abandoned microscope and scattered pencils and note-books.

On the door of the class-room was a list of those who had passed the Christmas examination. At the head of it was the name of the aforesaid frog-like boy; next to him came Smithers and one of the girls bracketed together. Lewisham ingloriously headed the second class, and Miss Heydinger's name did not appear--there was, the list asserted, "one failure." So the student pays for the finer emotions.

And in the spacious solitude of the museum gallery devoted to the Raphael cartoons sat Lewisham, plunged in gloomy meditation. A negligent hand pulled thoughtfully at the indisputable moustache, with particular attention to such portions as were long enough to gnaw.

He was trying to see the situation clearly. As he was just smarting acutely under his defeat, this speaks little for the clearness of his mind. The shadow of that defeat lay across everything, blotted out the light of his pride, shaded his honour, threw everything into a new perspective. The rich prettiness of his love-making had fled to some remote quarter of his being. Against the frog-like youngster he felt a savage animosity. And Smithers had betrayed him. He was angry, bitterly angry, with "swats" and "muggers" who spent their whole time grinding for these foolish chancy examinations. Nor had the practical examination been altogether fair, and one of the questions in the written portion was quite outside the lectures. Biver, Professor Biver, was an indiscriminating ass, he felt assured, and so too was Weeks, the demonstrator. But these obstacles could not blind his intelligence to the manifest cause of his overthrow, the waste of more than half his available evening, the best time for study in the twenty-four hours, day after day. And that was going on steadily, a perpetual leakage of time. To-night he would go to meet her again, and begin to accumulate to himself ignominy in the second part of the course, the botanical section, also. And so, reluctantly rejecting one cloudy excuse after another, he clearly focussed the antagonism between his relations to Ethel and his immediate ambitions.

Things had come so easily to him for the last two years that he had taken his steady upward progress in life as assured. It had never occurred to him, when he went to intercept Ethel after that séance, that he went into any peril of that sort. Now he had had a sharp

reminder. He began to shape a picture of the frog-like boy at home--he was a private student of the upper middle class--sitting in a convenient study with a writing-table, book-shelves, and a shaded lamp--Lewisham worked at his chest of drawers, with his greatcoat on, and his feet in the lowest drawer wrapped in all his available linen--and in the midst of incredible conveniences the frog-like boy was working, working, working. Meanwhile Lewisham toiled through the foggy streets, Chelsea-ward, or, after he had left her, tramped homeward--full of foolish imaginings.

He began to think with bloodless lucidity of his entire relationship to Ethel. His softer emotions were in abeyance, but he told himself no lies. He cared for her, he loved to be with her and to talk to her and please her, but that was not all his desire. He thought of the bitter words of an orator at Hammersmith, who had complained that in our present civilisation even the elemental need of marriage was denied. Virtue had become a vice. "We marry in fear and trembling, sex for a home is the woman's traffic, and the man comes to his heart's desire when his heart's desire is dead." The thing which had seemed a mere flourish, came back now with a terrible air of truth. Lewisham saw that it was a case of divergent ways. On the one hand that shining staircase to fame and power, that had been his dream from the very dawn of his adolescence, and on the other hand--Ethel.

And if he chose Ethel, even then, would he have his choice? What would come of it? A few walks more or less! She was hopelessly poor, he was

hopelessly poor, and this cheat of a Medium was her stepfather! After all she was not well-educated, she did not understand his work and his aims....

He suddenly perceived with absolute conviction that after the séance he should have gone home and forgotten her. Why had he felt that irresistible impulse to seek her out? Why had his imagination spun such a strange web of possibilities about her? He was involved now, foolishly involved.... All his future was a sacrifice to this transitory ghost of love-making in the streets. He pulled spitefully at his moustache.

His picture began to shape itself into Ethel, and her mysterious mother, and the vague dexterous Chaffery holding him back, entangled in an impalpable net from that bright and glorious ascent to performance and distinction. Leaky boots and the splash of cabs for all his life as his portion! Already the Forbes Medal, the immediate step, was as good as lost....

What on earth had he been thinking about? He fell foul of his upbringing. Men of the upper or middle classes were put up to these things by their parents; they were properly warned against involving themselves in this love nonsense before they were independent. It was much better....

Everything was going. Not only his work--his scientific career, but

the Debating Society, the political movement, all his work for Humanity.... Why not be resolute--even now?... Why not put the thing clearly and plainly to her? Or write? If he wrote now he could get the advantage of the evening at the Library. He must ask her to forgo these walks home--at least until the next examination. She would understand. He had a qualm of doubt whether she would understand.... He grew angry at this possibility. But it was no good mincing matters. If once he began to consider her--Why should he consider her in that way? Simply because she was unreasonable!

Lewisham had a transitory gust of anger.

Yet that abandonment of the walks insisted on looking mean to him. And she would think it mean. Which was very much worse, somehow. Why mean? Why should she think it mean? He grew angry again.

The portly museum policeman who had been watching him furtively, wondering why a student should sit in front of the "Sacrifice of Lystra" and gnaw lips and nails and moustache, and scowl and glare at that masterpiece, saw him rise suddenly to his feet with an air of resolution, spin on his heel, and set off with a quick step out of the gallery. He looked neither to the right nor the left. He passed out of sight down the staircase.

"Gone to get some more moustache to eat, I suppose," said the policeman reflectively....

"One 'ud think something had bit him."

After some pensive moments the policeman strolled along down the gallery and came to a stop opposite the cartoon.

"Figgers is a bit big for the houses," said the policeman, anxious to do impartial justice. "But that's Art. I lay 'e couldn't do anything ... not arf so good."