

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FRIENDS OF PROGRESS MEET.

The night next but one after this meditation saw a new order in the world. A young lady dressed in an astrachan-edged jacket and with a face of diminished cheerfulness marched from Chelsea to Clapham alone, and Lewisham sat in the flickering electric light of the Education Library staring blankly over a business-like pile of books at unseen things.

The arrangement had not been effected without friction, the explanation had proved difficult. Evidently she did not appreciate the full seriousness of Lewisham's mediocre position in the list. "But you have passed all right," she said. Neither could she grasp the importance of evening study. "Of course I don't know," she said judicially; "but I thought you were learning all day." She calculated the time consumed by their walk as half an hour, "just one half hour;" she forgot that he had to get to Chelsea and then to return to his lodgings. Her customary tenderness was veiled by an only too apparent resentment. First at him, and then when he protested, at Fate. "I suppose it has to be," she said. "Of course, it doesn't matter, I suppose, if we don't see each other quite so often," with a quiver of pale lips.

He had returned from the parting with an uneasy mind, and that evening had gone in the composition of a letter that was to make things clearer. But his scientific studies rendered his prose style "hard," and things he could whisper he could not write. His justification indeed did him no sort of justice. But her reception of it made her seem a very unreasonable person. He had some violent fluctuations. At times he was bitterly angry with her for her failure to see things as he did. He would wander about the museum conducting imaginary discussions with her and making even scathing remarks. At other times he had to summon all his powers of acrid discipline and all his memories of her resentful retorts, to keep himself from a headlong rush to Chelsea and unmanly capitulation.

And this new disposition of things endured for two weeks. It did not take Miss Heydinger all that time to discover that the disaster of the examination had wrought a change in Lewisham. She perceived those nightly walks were over. It was speedily evident to her that he was working with a kind of dogged fury; he came early, he went late. The wholesome freshness of his cheek paled. He was to be seen on each of the late nights amidst a pile of diagrams and text-books in one of the less draughty corners of the Educational Library, accumulating piles of memoranda. And nightly in the Students' "club" he wrote a letter addressed to a stationer's shop in Clapham, but that she did not see. For the most part these letters were brief, for Lewisham, South Kensington fashion, prided himself upon not being "literary," and some of the more despatch-like wounded a heart perhaps too hungry for

tender words.

He did not meet Miss Heydinger's renewed advances with invariable kindness. Yet something of the old relations were presently restored. He would talk well to her for a time, and then snap like a dry twig. But the loaning of books was resumed, the subtle process of his aesthetic education that Miss Heydinger had devised. "Here is a book I promised you," she said one day, and he tried to remember the promise.

The book was a collection of Browning's Poems, and it contained "Sludge"; it also happened that it contained "The Statue and the Bust"--that stimulating lecture on half-hearted constraints. "Sludge" did not interest Lewisham, it was not at all his idea of a medium, but he read and re-read "The Statue and the Bust." It had the profoundest effect upon him. He went to sleep--he used to read his literature in bed because it was warmer there, and over literature nowadays it did not matter as it did with science if one dozed a little--with these lines stimulating his emotion:--

"So weeks grew months, years; gleam by gleam
The glory dropped from their youth and love,
And both perceived they had dreamed a dream."

By way of fruit it may be to such seed, he dreamed a dream that night. It concerned Ethel, and at last they were a-marrying. He drew

her to his arms. He bent to kiss her. And suddenly he saw her lips were shrivelled and her eyes were dull, saw the wrinkles seaming her face! She was old! She was intolerably old! He woke in a kind of horror and lay awake and very dismal until dawn, thinking of their separation and of her solitary walk through the muddy streets, thinking of his position, the leeway he had lost and the chances there were against him in the battle of the world. He perceived the colourless truth; the Career was improbable, and that Ethel should be added to it was almost hopeless. Clearly the question was between these two. Or should he vacillate and lose both? And then his wretchedness gave place to that anger that comes of perpetually thwarted desires....

It was on the day after this dream that he insulted Parkson so grossly. He insulted Parkson after a meeting of the "Friends of Progress" at Parkson's rooms.

No type of English student quite realises the noble ideal of plain living and high thinking nowadays. Our admirable examination system admits of extremely little thinking at any level, high or low. But the Kensington student's living is at any rate insufficient, and he makes occasional signs of recognition towards the cosmic process.

One such sign was the periodic gathering of these "Friends of Progress," an association begotten of Lewisham's paper on Socialism. It was understood that strenuous things were to be done to

make the world better, but so far no decisive action had been taken.

They met in Parkson's sitting-room, because Parkson was the only one of the Friends opulent enough to have a sitting-room, he being a Whitworth Scholar and in receipt of one hundred pounds a year. The Friends were of various ages, mostly very young. Several smoked and others held pipes which they had discontinued smoking--but there was nothing to drink, except coffee, because that was the extent of their means. Dunkerley, an assistant master in a suburban school, and Lewisham's former colleague at Whortley, attended these assemblies through the introduction of Lewisham. All the Friends wore red ties except Bletherley, who wore an orange one to show that he was aware of Art, and Dunkerley, who wore a black one with blue specks, because assistant masters in small private schools have to keep up appearances. And their simple procedure was that each talked as much as the others would suffer.

Usually the self-proposed "Luther of Socialism"--ridiculous Lewisham!--had a thesis or so to maintain, but this night he was depressed and inattentive. He sat with his legs over the arm of his chair by way of indicating the state of his mind. He had a packet of Algerian cigarettes (twenty for fivepence), and appeared chiefly concerned to smoke them all before the evening was out. Bletherley was going to discourse of "Woman under Socialism," and he brought a big American edition of Shelley's works and a volume of Tennyson with the "Princess," both bristling with paper tongues against his marked

quotations. He was all for the abolition of "monopolies," and the crèche was to replace the family. He was unctuous when he was not pretty-pretty, and his views were evidently unpopular.

Parkson was a man from Lancashire, and a devout Quaker; his third and completing factor was Ruskin, with whose work and phraseology he was saturated. He listened to Bletherley with a marked disapproval, and opened a vigorous defence of that ancient tradition of loyalty that Bletherley had called the monopolist institution of marriage. "The pure and simple old theory--love and faithfulness," said Parkson, "suffices for me. If we are to smear our political movements with this sort of stuff ..."

"Does it work?" interjected Lewisham, speaking for the first time.

"What work?"

"The pure and simple old theory. I know the theory. I believe in the theory. Bletherley's Shelley-witted. But it's theory. You meet the inevitable girl. The theory says you may meet her anywhen. You meet too young. You fall in love. You marry--in spite of obstacles. Love laughs at locksmiths. You have children. That's the theory. All very well for a man whose father can leave him five hundred a year. But how does it work for a shopman?... An assistant master like Dunkerley? Or ... Me?"

"In these cases one must exercise restraint," said Parkson. "Have faith. A man that is worth having is worth waiting for."

"Worth growing old for?" said Lewisham.

"Chap ought to fight," said Dunkerley. "Don't see your difficulty, Lewisham. Struggle for existence keen, no doubt, tremendous in fact--still. In it--may as well struggle. Two--join forces--pool the luck. If I saw, a girl I fancied so that I wanted to, I'd marry her to-morrow. And my market value is seventy non res."

Lewisham looked round at him eagerly, suddenly interested. "Would you?" he said. Dunkerley's face was slightly flushed.

"Like a shot. Why not?"

"But how are you to live?"

"That comes after. If ..."

"I can't agree with you, Mr. Dunkerley," said Parkson. "I don't know if you have read *Sesame and Lilies*, but there you have, set forth far more fairly than any words of mine could do, an ideal of a woman's place ..."

"All rot--*Sesame and Lilies*," interrupted Dunkerley. "Read

bits. Couldn't stand it. Never can stand Ruskin. Too many prepositions. Tremendous English, no doubt, but not my style. Sort of thing a wholesale grocer's daughter might read to get refined. We can't afford to get refined."

"But would you really marry a girl ...?" began Lewisham, with an unprecedented admiration for Dunkerley in his eyes.

"Why not?"

"On--?" Lewisham hesitated.

"Forty pounds a year res. Whack! Yes."

A silent youngster began to speak, cleared an accumulated huskiness from his throat and said, "Consider the girl."

"Why marry?" asked Bletherley, unregarded.

"You must admit you are asking a great thing when you want a girl ..." began Parkson.

"Not so. When a girl's chosen a man, and he chooses her, her place is with him. What is the good of hankering? Mutual. Fight together."

"Good!" said Lewisham, suddenly emotional. "You talk like a man,

Dunkerley. I'm hanged if you don't."

"The place of Woman," insisted Parkson, "is the Home. And if there is no home--! I hold that, if need be, a man should toil seven years--as Jacob did for Rachel--ruling his passions, to make the home fitting and sweet for her ..."

"Get the hutch for the pet animal," said Dunkerley. "No. I mean to marry a woman. Female sex always has been in the struggle for existence--no great damage so far--always will be. Tremendous idea--that struggle for existence. Only sensible theory you've got hold of, Lewisham. Woman who isn't fighting square side by side with a man--woman who's just kept and fed and petted is ..." He hesitated.

A lad with a spotted face and a bulldog pipe between his teeth supplied a Biblical word.

"That's shag," said Dunkerley, "I was going to say 'a harem of one'"

The youngster was puzzled for a moment. "I smoke Perique," he said.

"It will make you just as sick," said Dunkerley.

"Refinement's so beastly vulgar," was the belated answer of the smoker of Perique.

That was the interesting part of the evening to Lewisham. Parkson suddenly rose, got down "Sesame and Lilies," and insisted upon reading a lengthy mellifluous extract that went like a garden roller over the debate, and afterwards Bletherley became the centre of a wrangle that left him grossly insulted and in a minority of one. The institution of marriage, so far as the South Kensington student is concerned, is in no immediate danger.

Parkson turned out with the rest of them at half-past ten, for a walk. The night was warm for February and the waxing moon bright. Parkson fixed himself upon Lewisham and Dunkerley, to Lewisham's intense annoyance--for he had a few intimate things he could have said to the man of Ideas that night. Dunkerley lived north, so that the three went up Exhibition Road to High Street, Kensington. There they parted from Dunkerley, and Lewisham and Parkson turned southward again for Lewisham's new lodging in Chelsea.

Parkson was one of those exponents of virtue for whom the discussion of sexual matters has an irresistible attraction. The meeting had left him eloquent. He had argued with Dunkerley to the verge of indelicacy, and now he poured out a vast and increasingly confidential flow of talk upon Lewisham. Lewisham was distraught. He walked as fast as he could. His sole object was to get rid of Parkson. Parkson's sole object was to tell him interesting secrets, about himself and a Certain Person with a mind of extraordinary Purity of whom Lewisham had heard before.

Ages passed.

Lewisham suddenly found himself being shown a photograph under a lamp. It represented an unsymmetrical face singularly void of expression, the upper part of an "art" dress, and a fringe of curls. He perceived he was being given to understand that this was a Paragon of Purity, and that she was the particular property of Parkson. Parkson was regarding him proudly, and apparently awaiting his verdict.

Lewisham struggled with the truth. "It's an interesting face," he said.

"It is a face essentially beautiful," said Parkson quietly but firmly. "Do you notice the eyes, Lewisham?"

"Oh yes," said Lewisham. "Yes. I see the eyes."

"They are ... innocent. They are the eyes of a little child."

"Yes. They look that sort of eye. Very nice, old man. I congratulate you. Where does she live?"

"You never saw a face like that in London," said Parkson.

"Never," said Lewisham decisively.

"I would not show that to every one," said Parkson. "You can scarcely judge all that pure-hearted, wonderful girl is to me." He returned the photograph solemnly to its envelope, regarding Lewisham with an air of one who has performed the ceremony of blood-brotherhood. Then taking Lewisham's arm affectionately--a thing Lewisham detested--he went on to a copious outpouring on Love--with illustrative anecdotes of the Paragon. It was just sufficiently cognate to the matter of Lewisham's thoughts to demand attention. Every now and then he had to answer, and he felt an idiotic desire--albeit he clearly perceived its idiocy--to reciprocate confidences. The necessity of fleeing Parkson became urgent--Lewisham's temper under these multitudinous stresses was going.

"Every man needs a Lode Star," said Parkson--and Lewisham swore under his breath.

Parkson's lodgings were now near at hand to the left, and it occurred to him this boredom would be soonest ended if he took Parkson home, Parkson consented mechanically, still discoursing.

"I have often seen you talking to Miss Heydinger," he said. "If you will pardon my saying it ..."

"We are excellent friends," admitted Lewisham. "But here we are at

your diggings."

Parkson stared at his "diggings." "There's Heaps I want to talk about. I'll come part of the way at any rate to Battersea. Your Miss Heydinger, I was saying ..."

From that point onwards he made casual appeals to a supposed confidence between Lewisham and Miss Heydinger, each of which increased Lewisham's exasperation. "It will not be long before you also, Lewisham, will begin to know the infinite purification of a Pure Love...." Then suddenly, with a vague idea of suppressing Parkson's unendurable chatter, as one motive at least, Lewisham rushed into the confidential.

"I know," he said. "You talk to me as though ... I've marked out my destiny these three years." His confidential impulse died as he relieved it.

"You don't mean to say Miss Heydinger--?" asked Parkson.

"Oh, damn Miss Heydinger!" said Lewisham, and suddenly, abruptly, uncivilly, he turned away from Parkson at the end of the street and began walking away southward, leaving Parkson in mid-sentence at the crossing.

Parkson stared in astonishment at his receding back and ran after him

to ask for the grounds of this sudden offence. Lewisham walked on for a space with Parkson trotting by his side. Then suddenly he turned. His face was quite white and he spoke in a tired voice.

"Parkson," he said, "you are a fool!... You have the face of a sheep, the manners of a buffalo, and the conversation of a bore, Pewrity indeed!... The girl whose photograph you showed me has eyes that don't match. She looks as loathsome as one would naturally expect.... I'm not joking now.... Go away!"

After that Lewisham went on his southward way alone. He did not go straight to his room in Chelsea, but spent some hours in a street in Battersea, pacing to and fro in front of a possible house. His passion changed from savageness to a tender longing. If only he could see her to-night! He knew his own mind now. To-morrow he was resolved he would fling work to the dogs and meet her. The things Dunkerley had said had filled his mind with wonderful novel thoughts. If only he could see her now!

His wish was granted. At the corner of the street two figures passed him; one of these, a tall man in glasses and a quasi-clerical hat, with coat collar turned up under his grey side-whiskers, he recognised as Chaffery; the other he knew only too well. The pair passed him without seeing him, but for an instant the lamplight fell upon her face and showed it white and tired.

Lewisham stopped dead at the corner, staring in blank astonishment after these two figures as they receded into the haze under the lights. He was dumfounded. A clock struck slowly. It was midnight. Presently down the road came the slamming of their door.

Long after the echo died away he stood there. "She has been at a séance; she has broken her promise. She has been at a séance; she has broken her promise," sang in perpetual reiteration through his brain.

And then came the interpretation. "She has done it because I have left her. I might have told it from her letters. She has done it because she thinks I am not in earnest, that my love-making was just boyishness ...

"I knew she would never understand."