

CHAPTER XIX.

LEWISHAM'S SOLUTION.

The next morning Lewisham learnt from Lagune that his intuition was correct, that Ethel had at last succumbed to pressure and consented to attempt thought-reading. "We made a good beginning," said Lagune, rubbing his hands. "I am sure we shall do well with her. Certainly she has powers. I have always felt it in her face. She has powers."

"Was much ... pressure necessary?" asked Lewisham by an effort.

"We had--considerable difficulty. Considerable. But of course--as I pointed out to her--it was scarcely possible for her to continue as my typewriter unless she was disposed to take an interest in my investigations--"

"You did that?"

"Had to. Fortunately Chaffery--it was his idea. I must admit--"

Lagune stopped astonished. Lewisham, after making an odd sort of movement with his hands, had turned round and was walking away down the laboratory. Lagune stared; confronted by a psychic phenomenon beyond his circle of ideas. "Odd!" he said at last, and began to

unpack his bag. Ever and again he stopped and stared at Lewisham, who was now sitting in his own place and drumming on the table with both hands.

Presently Miss Heydinger came out of the specimen room and addressed a remark to the young man. He appeared to answer with considerable brevity. He then stood up, hesitated for a moment between the three doors of the laboratory and walked out by that opening on the back staircase. Lagune did not see him again until the afternoon.

That night Ethel had Lewisham's company again on her way home, and their voices were earnest. She did not go straight home, but instead they went up under the gas lamps to the vague spaces of Clapham Common to talk there at length. And the talk that night was a momentous one. "Why have you broken your promise?" he said.

Her excuses were vague and weak. "I thought you did not care so much as you did," she said. "And when you stopped these walks--nothing seemed to matter. Besides--it is not like séances with spirits ..."

At first Lewisham was passionate and forcible. His anger at Lagune and Chaffery blinded him to her turpitude. He talked her defences down. "It is cheating," he said. "Well--even if what you do is not cheating, it is delusion--unconscious cheating. Even if there is something in it, it is wrong. True or not, it is wrong. Why don't they thought-read each other? Why should they want you? Your mind is

your own. It is sacred. To probe it!--I won't have it! I won't have it! At least you are mine to that extent. I can't think of you like that--bandaged. And that little fool pressing his hand on the back of your neck and asking questions. I won't have it! I would rather kill you than that."

"They don't do that!"

"I don't care! that is what it will come to. The bandage is the beginning. People must not get their living in that way anyhow. I've thought it out. Let them thought-read their daughters and hypnotise their aunts, and leave their typewriters alone."

"But what am I to do?"

"That's not it. There are things one must not suffer anyhow, whatever happens! Or else--one might be made to do anything. Honour! Just because we are poor--Let him dismiss you! Let him dismiss you. You can get another place--"

"Not at a guinea a week."

"Then take less."

"But I have to pay sixteen shillings every week."

"That doesn't matter."

She caught at a sob, "But to leave London--I can't do it, I can't."

"But how?--Leave London?" Lewisham's face changed.

"Oh! life is hard," she said. "I can't. They--they wouldn't let me stop in London."

"What do you mean?"

She explained if Lagune dismissed her she was to go into the country to an aunt, a sister of Chaffery's who needed a companion. Chaffery insisted upon that. "Companion they call it. I shall be just a servant--she has no servant. My mother cries when I talk to her. She tells me she doesn't want me to go away from her. But she's afraid of him. 'Why don't you do what he wants?' she says."

She sat staring in front of her at the gathering night. She spoke again in an even tone.

"I hate telling you these things. It is you ... If you didn't mind ... But you make it all different. I could do it--if it wasn't for you. I was ... I was helping ... I had gone meaning to help if anything went wrong at Mr. Lagune's. Yes--that night. No ... don't! It was too hard before to tell you. But I really did not feel it

... until I saw you there. Then all at once I felt shabby and mean."

"Well?" said Lewisham.

"That's all. I may have done thought-reading, but I have never really cheated since--never.... If you knew how hard it is ..."

"I wish you had told me that before."

"I couldn't. Before you came it was different. He used to make fun of the people--used to imitate Lagune and make me laugh. It seemed a sort of joke." She stopped abruptly. "Why did you ever come on with me? I told you not to--you know I did."

She was near wailing. For a minute she was silent.

"I can't go to his sister's," she cried. "I may be a coward--but I can't."

Pause. And then Lewisham saw his solution straight and clear. Suddenly his secret desire had become his manifest duty.

"Look here," he said, not looking at her and pulling his moustache. "I won't have you doing any more of that damned cheating. You shan't soil yourself any more. And I won't have you leaving London."

"But what am I to do?" Her voice went up.

"Well--there is one thing you can do. If you dare."

"What is it?"

He made no answer for some seconds. Then he turned round and sat looking at her. Their eyes met....

The grey of his mind began to colour. Her face was white and she was looking at him, in fear and perplexity. A new tenderness for her sprang up in him--a new feeling. Hitherto he had loved and desired her sweetness and animation--but now she was white and weary-eyed. He felt as though he had forgotten her and suddenly remembered. A great longing came into his mind.

"But what is the other thing I can do?"

It was strangely hard to say. There came a peculiar sensation in his throat and facial muscles, a nervous stress between laughing and crying. All the world vanished before that great desire. And he was afraid she would not dare, that she would not take him seriously.

"What is it?" she said again.

"Don't you see that we can marry?" he said, with the flood of his

resolution suddenly strong and steady. "Don't you see that is the only thing for us? The dead lane we are in! You must come out of your cheating, and I must come out of my ... cramming. And we--we must marry."

He paused and then became eloquent. "The world is against us, against--us. To you it offers money to cheat--to be ignoble. For it is ignoble! It offers you no honest way, only a miserable drudgery. And it keeps you from me. And me too it bribes with the promise of success--if I will desert you ... You don't know all ... We may have to wait for years--we may have to wait for ever, if we wait until life is safe. We may be separated.... We may lose one another altogether.... Let us fight against it. Why should we separate? Unless True Love is like the other things--an empty cant. This is the only way. We two--who belong to one another."

She looked at him, her face perplexed with this new idea, her heart beating very fast. "We are so young," she said. "And how are we to live? You get a guinea."

"I can get more--I can earn more, I have thought it out. I have been thinking of it these two days. I have been thinking what we could do. I have money."

"You have money?"

"Nearly a hundred pounds."

"But we are so young--And my mother ..."

"We won't ask her. We will ask no one. This is our affair. Ethel! this is our affair. It is not a question of ways and means--even before this--I have thought ... Dear one!--don't you love me?"

She did not grasp his emotional quality. She looked at him with puzzled eyes--still practical--making the suggestion arithmetical.

"I could typewrite if I had a machine. I have heard--"

"It's not a question of ways and means. Now. Ethel--I have longed--"

He stopped. She looked at his face, at his eyes now eager and eloquent with the things that never shaped themselves into words.

"Dare you come with me?" he whispered.

Suddenly the world opened out in reality to her as sometimes it had opened out to her in wistful dreams. And she quailed before it. She dropped her eyes from his. She became a fellow-conspirator. "But, how--?"

"I will think how. Trust me! Surely we know each other now--Think! We

two--"

"But I have never thought--"

"I could get apartments for us both. It would be so easy. And think of it--think--of what life would be!"

"How can I?"

"You will come?"

She looked at him, startled. "You know," she said, "you must know I would like--I would love--"

"You will come?"

"But, dear--! Dear, if you make me--"

"Yes!" cried Lewisham triumphantly. "You will come." He glanced round and his voice dropped. "Oh! my dearest! my dearest!..."

His voice sank to an inaudible whisper. But his face was eloquent. Two garrulous, home-going clerks passed opportunely to remind him that his emotions were in a public place.