

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN BATTERSEA PARK.

Now although Lewisham had promised to bring things to a conclusion with Miss Heydinger, he did nothing in the matter for five weeks, he merely left that crucial letter of hers unanswered. In that time their removal from Madam Gadow's into the gaunt house at Clapham was accomplished--not without polyglot controversy--and the young couple settled themselves into the little room on the second floor even as they had arranged. And there it was that suddenly the world was changed--was astonishingly transfigured--by a whisper.

It was a whisper between sobs and tears, with Ethel's arms about him and Ethel's hair streaming down so that it hid her face from him. And he too had whispered, dismayed perhaps a little, and yet feeling a strange pride, a strange novel emotion, feeling altogether different from the things he had fancied he might feel when this thing that he had dreaded should come. Suddenly he perceived finality, the advent of the solution, the reconciliation of the conflict that had been waged so long. Hesitations were at an end;--he took his line.

Next day he wrote a note, and two mornings later he started for his mathematical duffers an hour before it was absolutely necessary, and instead of going directly to Vigours', went over the bridge to

Battersea Park. There waiting for him by a seat where once they had met before, he found Miss Heydinger pacing. They walked up and down side by side, speaking for a little while about indifferent topics, and then they came upon a pause ...

"You have something to tell me?" said Miss Heydinger abruptly.

Lewisham changed colour a little. "Oh yes," he said; "the fact is--"
He affected ease. "Did I ever tell you I was married?"

"Married?"

"Yes."

"Married!"

"Yes," a little testily.

For a moment neither spoke. Lewisham stood without dignity staring at the dahlias of the London County Council, and Miss Heydinger stood regarding him.

"And that is what you have to tell me?"

Mr. Lewisham tamed and met her eyes. "Yes!" he said. "That is what I have to tell you."

Pause. "Do you mind if I sit down?" asked Miss Heydinger in an indifferent tone.

"There is a seat yonder," said Lewisham, "under the tree."

They walked to the seat in silence.

"Now," said Miss Heydinger, quietly. "Tell me whom you have married."

Lewisham answered sketchily. She asked him another question and another. He felt stupid and answered with a halting truthfulness.

"I might have known," she said, "I might have known. Only I would not know. Tell me some more. Tell me about her."

Lewisham did. The whole thing was abominably disagreeable to him, but it had to be done, he had promised Ethel it should be done. Presently Miss Heydinger knew the main outline of his story, knew all his story except, the emotion that made it credible. "And you were married--before the second examination?" she repeated.

"Yes," said Lewisham.

"But why did you not tell me of this before?" asked Miss Heydinger.

"I don't, know," said Lewisham. "I wanted to--that day, in Kensington Gardens. But I didn't. I suppose I ought to have done so."

"I think you ought to have done so."

"Yes, I suppose I ought ... But I didn't. Somehow--it has been hard. I didn't know what you would say. The thing seemed so rash, you know, and all that."

He paused blankly.

"I suppose you had to do it," said Miss Heydinger presently, with her eyes on his profile.

Lewisham began the second and more difficult part of his explanation. "There's been a difficulty," he said, "all the way along--I mean--about you, that is. It's a little difficult--The fact is, my life, you know--She looks at things differently from what we do."

"We?"

"Yes--it's odd, of course. But she has seen your letters--"

"You didn't show her--?"

"No. But, I mean, she knows you write to me, and she knows you write about Socialism and Literature and--things we have in common--things she hasn't."

"You mean to say she doesn't understand these things?"

"She's not thought about them. I suppose there's a sort of difference in education--"

"And she objects--?"

"No," said Lewisham, lying promptly. "She doesn't object ..."

"Well?" said Miss Heydinger, and her face was white.

"She feels that--She feels--she does not say, of course, but I know she feels that it is something she ought to share. I know--how she cares for me. And it shames her--it reminds her--Don't you see how it hurts her?"

"Yes. I see. So that even that little--" Miss Heydinger's breath seemed to catch and she was abruptly silent.

She spoke at last with an effort. "That it hurts me," she said, and grimaced and stopped again.

"No," said Lewisham, "that is not it." He hesitated.

"I knew this would hurt you."

"You love her. You can sacrifice--"

"No. It is not that. But there is a difference. Hurting her--she would not understand. But you--somehow it seems a natural thing for me to come to you. I seem to look to you--For her I am always making allowances--"

"You love her."

"I wonder if it is that makes the difference. Things are so complex. Love means anything--or nothing. I know you better than I do her, you know me better than she will ever do. I could tell you things I could not tell her. I could put all myself before you--almost--and know you would understand--Only--"

"You love her."

"Yes," said Lewisham lamely and pulling at his moustache. "I suppose ... that must be it."

For a space neither spoke. Then Miss Heydinger said "Oh!" with extraordinary emphasis.

"To think of this end to it all! That all your promise ... What is it she gives that I could not have given?"

"Even now! Why should I give up that much of you that is mine? If she could take it--But she cannot take it. If I let you go--you will do nothing. All this ambition, all these interests will dwindle and die, and she will not mind. She will not understand. She will think that she still has you. Why should she covet what she cannot possess? Why should she be given the thing that is mine--to throw aside?"

She did not look at Lewisham, but before her, her face a white misery.

"In a way--I had come to think of you as something, belonging to me ... I shall--still."

"There is one thing," said Lewisham after a pause, "it is a thing that has come to me once or twice lately Don't you think that perhaps you over-estimate the things I might have done? I know we've talked of great things to do. But I've been struggling for half a year and more to get the sort of living almost anyone seems able to get. It has taken me all my time. One can't help thinking after that, perhaps the world is a stiffer sort of affair ..."

"No," she said decisively. "You could have done great things."

"Even now," she said, "you may do great things--If only I might see you sometimes, write to you sometimes--You are so capable and--weak. You must have somebody--That is your weakness. You fail in your belief. You must have support and belief--unstinted support and belief. Why could I not be that to you? It is all I want to be. At least--all I want to be now. Why need she know? It robs her of nothing. I want nothing--she has. But I know of my own strength too I can do nothing. I know that with you ... It is only knowing hurts her. Why should she know?"

Mr. Lewisham looked at her doubtfully. That phantom greatness of his, it was that lit her eyes. In that instant, at least he had no doubts of the possibility of his Career. But he knew that in some way the secret of his greatness and this admiration went together. Conceivably they were one and indivisible. Why indeed need Ethel know? His imagination ran over the things that might be done, the things that might happen, and touched swiftly upon complication, confusion, discovery.

"The thing is, I must simplify my life. I shall do nothing unless I simplify my life. Only people who are well off can be--complex. It is one thing or the other--"

He hesitated and suddenly had a vision of Ethel weeping as once he had seen her weep with the light on the tears in her eyes.

"No," he said almost brutally. "No. It's like this--I can't do anything underhand. I mean--I'm not so amazingly honest--now. But I've not that sort of mind. She would find me out. It would do no good and she would find me out. My life's too complex. I can't manage it and go straight. I--you've overrated me. And besides--Things have happened. Something--" He hesitated and then snatched at his resolve, "I've got to simplify--and that's the plain fact of the case. I'm sorry, but it is so."

Miss Heydinger made no answer. Her silence astonished him. For nearly twenty seconds perhaps they sat without speaking. With a quick motion she stood up, and at once he stood up before her. Her face was flushed, her eyes downcast.

"Good-bye," she said suddenly in a low tone and held out her hand.

"But," said Lewisham and stopped. Miss Heydinger's colour left her.

"Good-bye," she said, looking him suddenly in the eyes and smiling awry. "There is no more to say, is there? Good-bye."

He took her hand. "I hope I didn't--"

"Good-bye," she said impatiently, and suddenly disengaged her hand and turned away from him. He made a step after her.

"Miss Heydinger," he said, but she did not stop. "Miss Heydinger." He realised that she did not want to answer him again....

He remained motionless, watching her retreating figure. An extraordinary sense of loss came into his mind, a vague impulse to pursue her and pour out vague passionate protestations....

Not once did she look back. She was already remote when he began hurrying after her. Once he was in motion he quickened his pace and gained upon her. He was within thirty yards of her as she drew near the gates.

His pace slackened. Suddenly he was afraid she might look back. She passed out of the gates, out of his sight. He stopped, looking where she had disappeared. He sighed and took the pathway to his left that led back to the bridge and Vigours'.

Halfway across this bridge came another crisis of indecision. He stopped, hesitating. An impertinent thought obtruded. He looked at his watch and saw that he must hurry if he would catch the train for Earl's Court and Vigours'. He said Vigours' might go to the devil.

But in the end he caught his train.