

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE CROWNING VICTORY.

That night about seven Ethel came into their room with a waste-paper basket she had bought for him, and found him sitting at the little toilet table at which he was to "write." The outlook was, for a London outlook, spacious, down a long slope of roofs towards the Junction, a huge sky of blue passing upward to the darkling zenith and downward into a hazy bristling mystery of roofs and chimneys, from which emerged signal lights and steam puffs, gliding chains of lit window carriages and the vague vistas of streets. She showed him the basket and put it beside him, and then her eye caught the yellow document in his hand. "What is that you have there?"

He held it out to her. "I found it--lining my yellow box. I had it at Whortley."

She took it and perceived a chronological scheme. It was headed "SCHEMA," there were memoranda in the margin, and all the dates had been altered by a hasty hand.

"Hasn't it got yellow?" she said.

That seemed to him the wrong thing for her to say. He stared at the document with a sudden accession of sympathy. There was an interval. He became aware of her hand upon his shoulder, that she was bending over him. "Dear," she whispered, with a strange change in the quality of her voice. He knew she was seeking to say something that was difficult to say.

"Yes?" he said presently.

"You are not grieving?"

"What about?"

"This."

"No!"

"You are not--you are not even sorry?" she said.

"No--not even sorry."

"I can't understand that. It's so much--"

"I'm glad," he proclaimed. "Glad."

"But--the trouble--the expense--everything--and your work?"

"Yes," he said, "that's just it."

She looked at him doubtfully. He glanced up at her, and she questioned his eyes. He put his arm about her, and presently and almost absent-mindedly she obeyed his pressure and bent down and kissed him.

"It settles things," he said, holding her. "It joins us. Don't you see? Before ... But now it's different. It's something we have between us. It's something that ... It's the link we needed. It will hold us together, cement us together. It will be our life. This will be my work now. The other ..."

He faced a truth. "It was just ... vanity!"

There was still a shade of doubt in her face, a wistfulness.

Presently she spoke.

"Dear," she said.

"Yes?"

She knitted her brows. "No!" she said. "I can't say it."

In the interval she came into a sitting position on his knees.

He kissed her hand, but her face remained grave, and she looked out upon the twilight. "I know I'm stupid," she said. "The things I say ... aren't the things I feel."

He waited for her to say more.

"It's no good," she said.

He felt the onus of expression lay on him. He too found it a little difficult to put into words. "I think I understand," he said, and wrestled with the impalpable. The pause seemed long and yet not altogether vacant. She lapsed abruptly into the prosaic. She started from him.

"If I don't go down, Mother will get supper ..."

At the door she stopped and turned a twilight face to him. For a moment they scrutinised one another. To her he was no more than a dim outline. Impulsively he held out his arms....

Then at the sound of a movement downstairs she freed herself and hurried out. He heard her call "Mother! You're not to lay supper. You're to rest."

He listened to her footsteps until the kitchen had swallowed them

up. Then he turned his eyes to the Schema again and for a moment it seemed but a little thing.

He picked it up in both hands and looked at it as if it was the writing of another man, and indeed it was the writing of another man. "Pamphlets in the Liberal Interest," he read, and smiled.

Presently a train of thought carried him off. His attitude relaxed a little, the Schema became for a time a mere symbol, a point of departure, and he stared out of the window at the darkling night. For a long time he sat pursuing thoughts that were half emotions, emotions that took upon themselves the shape and substance of ideas. The deepening current stirred at last among the roots of speech.

"Yes, it was vanity," he said. "A boy's vanity. For me--anyhow. I'm too two-sided.... Two-sided?... Commonplace!

"Dreams like mine--abilities like mine. Yes--any man! And yet ...--The things I meant to do!"

His thoughts went to his Socialism, to his red-hot ambition of world mending. He marvelled at the vistas he had discovered since those days.

"Not for us--Not for us.

"We must perish in the wilderness.--Some day. Somewhen. But not for us....

"Come to think, it is all the Child. The future is the Child. The Future. What are we--any of us--but servants or traitors to that?...

* * * * *

"Natural Selection--it follows ... this way is happiness ... must be. There can be no other."

He sighed. "To last a lifetime, that is.

"And yet--it is almost as if Life had played me a trick--promised so much--given so little!...

"No! One must not look at it in that way! That will not do! That will not do.

"Career! In itself it is a career--the most important career in the world. Father! Why should I want more?

"And ... Ethel! No wonder she seemed shallow ... She has been shallow. No wonder she was restless. Unfulfilled ... What had she to do? She was drudge, she was toy ...

"Yes. This is life. This alone is life! For this we were made and born. All these other things--all other things--they are only a sort of play....

"Play!"

His eyes came back to the Schema. His hands shifted to the opposite corner and he hesitated. The vision of that arranged Career, that ordered sequence of work and successes, distinctions and yet further distinctions, rose brightly from the symbol. Then he compressed his lips and tore the yellow sheet in half, tearing very deliberately. He doubled the halves and tore again, doubled again very carefully and neatly until the Schema was torn into numberless little pieces. With it he seemed to be tearing his past self.

"Play," he whispered after a long silence.

"It is the end of adolescence," he said; "the end of empty dreams...."

He became very still, his hands resting on the table, his eyes staring out of the blue oblong of the window. The dwindling light gathered itself together and became a star.

He found he was still holding the torn fragments. He stretched out his hand and dropped them into that new waste-paper basket Ethel had bought for him.

Two pieces fell outside the basket. He stooped, picked them up, and put them carefully with their fellows.