

CHAPTER VII.

THE RECKONING.

And after the day of Love came the days of Reckoning.

Mr. Lewisham. was astonished--overwhelmed almost--by that Reckoning, as it slowly and steadily unfolded itself. The wonderful emotions of Saturday carried him through Sunday, and he made it up with the neglected Schema by assuring it that She was his Inspiration, and that he would work for Her a thousand times better than he could possibly work for himself. That was certainly not true, and indeed he found himself wondering whither the interest had vanished out of his theological examination of Butler's Analogy. The Frobishers were not at church for either service. He speculated rather anxiously why?

Monday dawned coldly and clearly--a Herbert Spencer of a day--and he went to school sedulously assuring himself there was nothing to apprehend. Day boys were whispering in the morning apparently about him, and Frobisher ii. was in great request. Lewisham overheard a fragment "My mother was in a wax," said Frobisher ii.

At twelve came an interview with Bonover, and voices presently rising in angry altercation and audible to Senior-assistant Dunkerley through the closed study door. Then Lewisham walked across the schoolroom, staring straight before him, his cheeks very bright.

Thereby Dunkerley's mind was prepared for the news that came the next morning over the exercise books. "When?" said Dunkerley.

"End of next term," said Lewisham.

"About this girl that's been staying at the Frobishers?"

"Yes."

"She's a pretty bit of goods. But it will mess up your matric next June," said Dunkerley.

"That's what I'm sorry for."

"It's scarcely to be expected he'll give you leave to attend the exam...."

"He won't," said Lewisham shortly, and opened his first exercise book. He found it difficult to talk.

"He's a greaser." said Dunkerley. "But there!--what can you expect from Durham?" For Bonover had only a Durham degree, and Dunkerley, having none, inclined to be particular. Therewith Dunkerley lapsed into a sympathetic and busy rustling over his own pile of exercises. It was not until the heap had been reduced to a book or so

that he spoke again--an elaborate point.

"Male and female created He them," said Dunkerley, ticking his way down the page. "Which (tick, tick) was damned hard (tick, tick) on assistant masters."

He closed the book with a snap and flung it on the floor behind him. "You're lucky," he said. "I did think I should be first to get out of this scandalising hole. You're lucky. It's always acting down here. Running on parents and guardians round every corner. That's what I object to in life in the country: it's so confoundedly artificial. I shall take jolly good care I get out of it just as soon as ever I can. You bet!"

"And work those patents?"

"Rather, my boy. Yes. Work those patents. The Patent Square Top Bottle! Lord! Once let me get to London...."

"I think I shall have a shot at London," said Lewisham.

And then the experienced Dunkerley, being one of the kindest young men alive, forgot certain private ambitions of his own--he cherished dreams of amazing patents--and bethought him of agents. He proceeded to give a list of these necessary helpers of the assistant master at the gangway--Orellana, Gabbitas, The Lancaster Gate Agency, and the

rest of them. He knew them all--intimately. He had been a "nix" eight years. "Of course that Kensington thing may come off," said Dunkerley, "but it's best not to wait. I tell you frankly--the chances are against you."

The "Kensington thing" was an application for admission to the Normal School of Science at South Kensington, which Lewisham had made in a sanguine moment. There being an inadequate supply of qualified science teachers in England, the Science and Art Department is wont to offer free instruction at its great central school and a guinea a week to select young pedagogues who will bind themselves to teach science after their training is over. Dunkerley had been in the habit of applying for several years, always in vain, and Lewisham had seen no harm in following his example. But then Dunkerley had no green-grey certificates.

So Lewisham spent all that "duty" left him of the next day composing a letter to copy out and send the several scholastic agencies. In this he gave a brief but appreciative sketch of his life, and enlarged upon his discipline and educational methods. At the end was a long and decorative schedule of his certificates and distinctions, beginning with a good-conduct prize at the age of eight. A considerable amount of time was required to recopy this document, but his modesty upheld him. After a careful consideration of the time-table, he set aside the midday hour for "Correspondence."

He found that his work in mathematics and classics was already some time in arrears, and a "test" he had sent to his correspondence Tutor during those troublous days after the meeting with Bonover in the Avenue, came back blottesquely indorsed: "Below Pass Standard." This last experience was so unprecedented and annoyed him so much that for a space he contemplated retorting with a sarcastic letter to the tutor. And then came the Easter recess, and he had to go home and tell his mother, with a careful suppression of details, that he was leaving Whortley, "Where you have been getting on so well!" cried his mother.

But that dear old lady had one consolation. She observed he had given up his glasses--he had forgotten to bring them with him--and her secret fear of grave optical troubles--that were being "kept" from her---was alleviated.

Sometimes he had moods of intense regret for the folly of that walk. One such came after the holidays, when the necessity of revising the dates of the Schema brought before his mind, for the first time quite clearly, the practical issue of this first struggle with all those mysterious and powerful influences the spring-time sets a-stirring. His dream of success and fame had been very real and dear to him, and the realisation of the inevitable postponement of his long anticipated matriculation, the doorway to all the other great things, took him abruptly like an actual physical sensation in his chest.

He sprang up, pen in hand, in the midst of his corrections, and began

pacing up and down the room. "What a fool I have been!" he cried. "What a fool I have been!"

He flung the pen on the floor and made a rush at an ill-drawn attempt upon a girl's face that adorned the end of his room, the visible witness of his slavery. He tore this down and sent the fragments of it scattering....

"Fool!"

It was a relief--a definite abandonment. He stared for a moment at the destruction he had made, and then went back to the revision of the time-table, with a mutter about "silly spooning."

That was one mood. The rarer one. He watched the posts with far more eagerness for the address to which he might write to her than for any reply to those reiterated letters of application, the writing of which now ousted Horace and the higher mathematics (Lewisham's term for conics) from his attention. Indeed he spent more time meditating the letter to her than even the schedule of his virtues had required.

Yet the letters of application were wonderful compositions; each had a new pen to itself and was for the first page at least in a handwriting far above even his usual high standard. And day after day passed and that particular letter he hoped for still did not come.

His moods were complicated by the fact that, in spite of his studied reticence on the subject, the reason of his departure did in an amazingly short time get "all over Whortley." It was understood that he had been discovered to be "fast," and Ethel's behaviour was animadverted upon with complacent Indignation--if the phrase may be allowed--by the ladies of the place. Pretty looks were too often a snare. One boy--his ear was warmed therefor--once called aloud "Ethel," as Lewisham went by. The curate, a curate of the pale-faced, large-knuckled, nervous sort, now passed him without acknowledgment of his existence. Mrs. Bonover took occasion to tell him that he was a "mere boy," and once Mrs. Frobisher sniffed quite threateningly at him when she passed him in the street. She did it so suddenly she made him jump.

This general disapproval inclined him at times to depression, but in certain moods he found it exhilarating, and several times he professed himself to Dunkerley not a little of a blade. In others, he told himself he bore it for her sake. Anyhow he had to bear it.

He began to find out, too, how little the world feels the need of a young man of nineteen--he called himself nineteen, though he had several months of eighteen still to run--even though he adds prizes for good conduct, general improvement, and arithmetic, and advanced certificates signed by a distinguished engineer and headed with the Royal Arms, guaranteeing his knowledge of geometrical drawing, nautical astronomy, animal physiology, physiography, inorganic

chemistry, and building construction, to his youth and strength and energy. At first he had imagined headmasters clutching at the chance of him, and presently he found himself clutching eagerly at them. He began to put a certain urgency into his applications for vacant posts, an urgency that helped him not at all. The applications grew longer and longer until they ran to four sheets of note-paper--a pennyworth in fact. "I can assure you," he would write, "that you will find me a loyal and devoted assistant." Much in that strain. Dunkerley pointed out that Bonover's testimonial ignored the question of moral character and discipline in a marked manner, and Bonover refused to alter it. He was willing to do what he could to help Lewisham, in spite of the way he had been treated, but unfortunately his conscience....

Once or twice Lewisham misquoted the testimonial--to no purpose. And May was halfway through, and South Kensington was silent. The future was grey.

And in the depths of his doubt and disappointment came her letter. It was typewritten on thin paper. "Dear," she wrote simply, and it seemed to him the most sweet and wonderful of all possible modes of address, though as a matter of fact it was because she had forgotten his Christian name and afterwards forgotten the blank she had left for it.

"Dear, I could not write before because I have no room at home now where I can write a letter, and Mrs. Frobisher told my mother

falsehoods about you. My mother has surprised me dreadfully--I did not think it of her. She told me nothing. But of that I must tell you in another letter. I am too angry to write about it now. Even now you cannot write back, for you must not send letters here. It would never do. But I think of you, dear,"--the "dear" had been erased and rewritten--"and I must write and tell you so, and of that nice walk we had, if I never write again. I am very busy now. My work is rather difficult and I am afraid I am a little stupid. It is hard to be interested in anything just because that is how you have to live, is it not? I daresay you sometimes feel the same of school. But I suppose everybody is doing things they don't like. I don't know when I shall come to Whortley again, if ever, but very likely you will be coming to London. Mrs. Frobisher said the most horrid things. It would be nice if you could come to London, because then perhaps you might see me. There is a big boys' school at Chelsea, and when I go by it every morning I wish you were there. Then you would come out in your cap and gown as I went by. Suppose some day I was to see you there suddenly!!"

So it ran, with singularly little information in it, and ended quite abruptly, "Good-bye, dear. Good-bye, dear," scribbled in pencil. And then, "Think of me sometimes."

Reading it, and especially that opening "dear," made Lewisham feel the strangest sensation in his throat and chest, almost as though he was going to cry. So he laughed instead and read it again, and went to and

fro in his little room with his eyes bright and that precious writing held in his hand. That "dear" was just as if she had spoken--a voice suddenly heard. He thought of her farewell, clear and sweet, out of the shadow of the moonlit house.

But why that "If I never write again," and that abrupt ending? Of course he would think of her.

It was her only letter. In a little time its creases were worn through.

Early in June came a loneliness that suddenly changed into almost intolerable longing to see her. He had vague dreams of going to London, to Clapham to find her. But you do not find people in Clapham as you do in Whortley. He spent an afternoon writing and re-writing a lengthy letter, against the day when her address should come. If it was to come. He prowled about the village disconsolately, and at last set off about seven and retraced by moonlight almost every step of that one memorable walk of theirs.

In the blackness of the shed he worked himself up to the pitch of talking as if she were present. And he said some fine brave things.

He found the little old lady of the wallflowers with a candle in her window, and drank a bottle of ginger beer with a sacramental air. The little old lady asked him, a trifle archly, after his sister, and he

promised to bring her again some day. "I'll certainly bring her," he said. Talking to the little old lady somehow blunted his sense of desolation. And then home through the white indistinctness in a state of melancholy that became at last so fine as to be almost pleasurable.

The day after that mood a new "text" attracted and perplexed Mrs. Munday, an inscription at once mysterious and familiar, and this inscription was:

Mizpah.

It was in Old English lettering and evidently very carefully executed.

Where had she seen it before?

It quite dominated all the rest of the room at first, it flaunted like a flag of triumph over "discipline" and the time-table and the Schema. Once indeed it was taken down, but the day after it reappeared. Later a list of scholastic vacancies partially obscured it, and some pencil memoranda were written on the margin.

And when at last the time came for him to pack up and leave Whortley, he took it down and used it with several other suitable papers--the Schema and the time-table were its next-door neighbours--to line the bottom of the yellow box in which he packed his books: chiefly books for that matriculation that had now to be postponed.