

## CHAPTER XX.

### THE CAREER IS SUSPENDED.

On the Wednesday afternoon following this--it was hard upon the botanical examination--Mr. Lewisham was observed by Smithers in the big Education Library reading in a volume of the British Encyclopaedia. Beside him were the current Whitaker's Almanac, an open note-book, a book from the Contemporary Science Series, and the Science and Art Department's Directory. Smithers, who had a profound sense of Lewisham's superiority in the art of obtaining facts of value in examinations, wondered for some minutes what valuable tip for a student in botany might be hidden in Whitaker, and on reaching his lodgings spent some time over the landlady's copy. But really Lewisham was not studying botany, but the art of marriage according to the best authorities. (The book from the Contemporary Science Series was Professor Letourneau's "Evolution of Marriage." It was interesting certainly, but of little immediate use.)

From Whitaker Lewisham learnt that it would be possible at a cost of £2, 6s. 1d. or £2, 7s. 1d. (one of the items was ambiguous) to get married within the week--that charge being exclusive of vails--at the district registry office. He did little addition sums in the note-book. The church fees he found were variable, but for more

personal reasons he rejected a marriage at church. Marriage by certificate at a registrar's involved an inconvenient delay. It would have to be £2, 7s. 1d. Vails--ten shillings, say.

Afterwards, without needless ostentation, he produced a cheque-book and a deposit-book, and proceeded to further arithmetic. He found that he was master of £61, 4s. 7d. Not a hundred as he had said, but a fine big sum--men have started great businesses on less. It had been a hundred originally. Allowing five pounds for the marriage and moving, this would leave about £56. Plenty. No provision was made for flowers, carriages, or the honeymoon. But there would be a typewriter to buy. Ethel was to do her share....

"It will be a devilish close thing," said Lewisham with a quite unreasonable exultation. For, strangely enough, the affair was beginning to take on a flavour of adventure not at all unpleasant. He leant back in his chair with the note-book closed in his hand....

But there was much to see to that afternoon. First of all he had to discover the district superintendent registrar, and then to find a lodging whither he should take Ethel--their lodging, where they were to live together.

At the thought of that new life together that was drawing so near, she came into his head, vivid and near and warm....

He recovered himself from a day dream. He became aware of a library attendant down the room leaning forward over his desk, gnawing the tip of a paper knife after the fashion of South Kensington library attendants, and staring at him curiously. It occurred to Lewisham that thought reading was one of the most possible things in the world. He blushed, rose clumsily and took the volume of the Encyclopaedia back to its shelf.

He found the selection of lodgings a difficult business. After his first essay he began to fancy himself a suspicious-looking character, and that perhaps hampered him. He had chosen the district southward of the Brompton Road. It had one disadvantage--he might blunder into a house with a fellow-student.... Not that it mattered vitally. But the fact is, it is rather unusual for married couples to live permanently in furnished lodgings in London. People who are too poor to take a house or a flat commonly find it best to take part of a house or unfurnished apartments. There are a hundred couples living in unfurnished rooms (with "the use of the kitchen") to one in furnished in London. The absence of furniture predicates a dangerous want of capital to the discreet landlady. The first landlady Lewisham interviewed didn't like ladies, they required such a lot of attendance; the second was of the same mind; the third told Mr. Lewisham he was "youngish to be married;" the fourth said she only "did" for single "gents." The fifth was a young person with an arch manner, who liked to know all about people she took in, and subjected Lewisham to a searching cross-examination. When she had spitted him

in a downright lie or so, she expressed an opinion that her rooms "would scarcely do," and bowed him amiably out.

He cooled his ears and cheeks by walking up and down the street for a space, and then tried again. This landlady was a terrible and pitiful person, so grey and dusty she was, and her face deep lined with dust and trouble and labour. She wore a dirty cap that was all askew. She took Lewisham up into a threadbare room on the first floor, "There's the use of a piano," she said, and indicated an instrument with a front of torn green silk. Lewisham opened the keyboard and evoked a vibration of broken strings. He took one further survey of the dismal place, "Eighteen shillings," he said. "Thank you ... I'll let you know." The woman smiled with the corners of her mouth down, and without a word moved wearily towards the door. Lewisham felt a transient wonder at her hopeless position, but he did not pursue the inquiry.

The next landlady sufficed. She was a clean-looking German woman, rather smartly dressed; she had a fringe of flaxen curls and a voluble flow of words, for the most part recognisably English. With this she sketched out remarks. Fifteen shillings was her demand for a minute bedroom and a small sitting-room, separated by folding doors on the ground floor, and her personal services. Coals were to be "sixpence a kettle," she said--a pretty substitute for scuttle. She had not understood Lewisham to say he was married. But she had no hesitation. "Aayteen shillin'," she said imperturbably. "Paid furs day ich wik

... See?" Mr. Lewisham surveyed the rooms again. They looked clean, and the bonus tea vases, the rancid, gilt-framed oleographs, two toilet tidies used as ornaments, and the fact that the chest of drawers had been crowded out of the bedroom into the sitting-room, simply appealed to his sense of humour. "I'll take 'em from Saturday next," he said.

She was sure he would like them, and proposed to give him his book forthwith. She mentioned casually that the previous lodger had been a captain and had stayed three years. (One never hears by any chance of lodgers stopping for a shorter period.) Something happened (German) and now he kept his carriage--apparently an outcome of his stay. She returned with a small penny account-book, a bottle of ink and an execrable pen, wrote Lewisham's name on the cover of this, and a receipt for eighteen shillings on the first page. She was evidently a person of considerable business aptitude. Lewisham paid, and the transaction terminated. "Szhure to be gomfortable," followed him comfortingly to the street.

Then he went on to Chelsea and interviewed a fatherly gentleman at the Vestry offices. The fatherly gentleman was chubby-faced and spectacled, and his manner was sympathetic but business-like. He "called back" each item of the interview, "And what can I do for you? You wish to be married! By licence?"

"By licence."

"By licence!"

And so forth. He opened a book and made neat entries of the particulars.

"The lady's age?"

"Twenty-one."

"A very suitable age ... for a lady."

He advised Lewisham to get a ring, and said he would need two witnesses.

"Well--" hesitated Lewisham.

"There is always someone about," said the superintendent registrar. "And they are quite used to it."

Thursday and Friday Lewisham passed in exceedingly high spirits. No consciousness of the practical destruction of the Career seems to have troubled him at this time. Doubt had vanished from his universe for a space. He wanted to dance along the corridors. He felt curiously irresponsible and threw up an unpleasant sort of humour that pleased nobody. He wished Miss Heydinger many happy returns of the day,

apropos of nothing, and he threw a bun across the refreshment room at Smithers and hit one of the Art School officials. Both were extremely silly things to do. In the first instance he was penitent immediately after the outrage, but in the second he added insult to injury by going across the room and asking in an offensively suspicious manner if anyone had seen his bun. He crawled under a table and found it at last, rather dusty but quite eatable, under the chair of a lady art student. He sat down by Smithers to eat it, while he argued with the Art official. The Art official said the manners of the Science students were getting unbearable, and threatened to bring the matter before the refreshment-room committee. Lewisham said it was a pity to make such a fuss about a trivial thing, and proposed that the Art official should throw his lunch--steak and kidney pudding--across the room at him, Lewisham, and so get immediate satisfaction. He then apologised to the official and pointed out in extenuation that it was a very long and difficult shot he had attempted. The official then drank a crumb, or breathed some beer, or something of that sort, and the discussion terminated. In the afternoon, however, Lewisham, to his undying honour, felt acutely ashamed of himself. Miss Heydinger would not speak to him.

On Saturday morning he absented himself from the schools, pleading by post a slight indisposition, and took all his earthly goods to the booking office at Vauxhall Station. Chaffery's sister lived at Tongham, near Farnham, and Ethel, dismissed a week since by Lagune, had started that morning, under her mother's maudlin supervision, to

begin her new slavery. She was to alight either at Farnham or Woking, as opportunity arose, and to return to Vauxhall to meet him. So that Lewisham's vigil on the main platform was of indefinite duration.

At first he felt the exhilaration of a great adventure. Then, as he paced the long platform, came a philosophical mood, a sense of entire detachment from the world. He saw a bundle of uprooted plants beside the portmanteau of a fellow-passenger and it suggested a grotesque simile. His roots, his earthly possessions, were all downstairs in the booking-office. What a flimsy thing he was! A box of books and a trunk of clothes, some certificates and scraps of paper, an entry here and an entry there, a body not over strong--and the vast multitude of people about him--against him--the huge world in which he found himself! Did it matter anything to one human soul save her if he ceased to exist forthwith? And miles away perhaps she also was feeling little and lonely....

Would she have trouble with her luggage? Suppose her aunt were to come to Farnham Junction to meet her? Suppose someone stole her purse? Suppose she came too late! The marriage was to take place at two.... Suppose she never came at all! After three trains in succession had disappointed him his vague feelings of dread gave place to a profound depression....

But she came at last, and it was twenty-three minutes to two. He hurried her luggage downstairs, booked it with his own, and in another



minute they were in a hansom--their first experience of that species of conveyance--on the way to the Vestry office. They had said scarcely anything to one another, save hasty directions from Lewisham, but their eyes were full of excitement, and under the apron of the cab their hands were gripped together.

The little old gentleman was business-like but kindly. They made their vows to him, to a little black-bearded clerk and a lady who took off an apron in the nether part of the building to attend. The little old gentleman made no long speeches. "You are young people," he said slowly, "and life together is a difficult thing.... Be kind to each other." He smiled a little sadly, and held out a friendly hand.

Ethel's eyes glistened and she found she could not speak.