

CHAPTER XXV.

THE FIRST BATTLE.

Lewisham's inquiries for evening teaching and private tuition were essentially provisional measures. His proposals for a more permanent establishment displayed a certain defect in his sense of proportion. That Melbourne professorship, for example, was beyond his merits, and there were aspects of things that would have affected the welcome of himself and his wife at Eton College. At the outset he was inclined to regard the South Kensington scholar as the intellectual salt of the earth, to overrate the abundance of "decent things" yielding from one hundred and fifty to three hundred a year, and to disregard the competition of such inferior enterprises as the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and the literate North. But the scholastic agents to whom he went on the following Saturday did much in a quiet way to disabuse his mind.

Mr. Blendershin's chief assistant in the grimy little office in Oxford Street cleared up the matter so vigorously that Lewisham was angered. "Headmaster of an endowed school, perhaps!" said Mr. Blendershin's chief assistant "Lord!--why not a bishopric? I say,"--as Mr. Blendershin entered smoking an assertive cigar--"one-and-twenty, no degree, no games, two years' experience as junior--wants a

headmastership of an endowed school!" He spoke so loudly that it was inevitable the selection of clients in the waiting-room should hear, and he pointed with his pen.

"Look here!" said Lewisham hotly; "if I knew the ways of the market I shouldn't come to you."

Mr. Blendershin stared at Lewisham for a moment. "What's he done in the way of certificates?" asked Mr. Blendershin of the assistant.

The assistant read a list of 'ologies and 'ographies. "Fifty resident," said Mr. Blendershin concisely--"that's your figure. Sixty, if you're lucky."

"What?" said Mr. Lewisham.

"Not enough for you?"

"Not nearly."

"You can get a Cambridge graduate for eighty resident--and grateful," said Mr. Blendershin.

"But I don't want a resident post," said Lewisham.

"Precious few non-resident shops," said Mr. Blendershin. "Precious

few. They want you for dormitory supervision--and they're afraid of your taking pups outside."

"Not married by any chance?" said the assistant suddenly, after an attentive study of Lewisham's face.

"Well--er." Lewisham met Mr. Blendershin's eye. "Yes," he said.

The assistant was briefly unprintable. "Lord! you'll have to keep that dark," said Mr. Blendershin. "But you have got a tough bit of hoeing before you. If I was you I'd go on and get my degree now you're so near it. You'll stand a better chance."

Pause.

"The fact is," said Lewisham slowly and looking at his boot toes, "I must be doing something while I am getting my degree."

The assistant, whistled softly.

"Might get you a visiting job, perhaps," said Mr. Blendershin speculatively. "Just read me those items again, Binks," He listened attentively. "Objects to religious teaching!--Eh?" He stopped the reading by a gesture, "That's nonsense. You can't have everything, you know. Scratch that out. You won't get a place in any middle-class school in England if you object to religious teaching. It's the

mothers--bless 'em! Say nothing about it. Don't believe--who does?
There's hundreds like you, you know--hundreds. Parsons--all sorts. Say
nothing about it--"

"But if I'm asked?"

"Church of England. Every man in this country who has not dissented
belongs to the Church of England. It'll be hard enough to get you
anything without that."

"But--" said Mr. Lewisham. "It's lying."

"Legal fiction," said Mr. Blendershin. "Everyone understands. If you
don't do that, my dear chap, we can't do anything for you. It's
Journalism, or London docks. Well, considering your experience,--say
docks."

Lewisham's face flushed irregularly. He did not answer. He scowled and
tugged at the still by no means ample moustache.

"Compromise, you know," said Mr. Blendershin, watching him
kindly. "Compromise."

For the first time in his life Lewisham faced the necessity of telling
a lie in cold blood. He glissaded from, the austere altitudes of his
self-respect, and his next words were already disingenuous.

"I won't promise to tell lies if I'm asked," he said aloud. "I can't do that."

"Scratch it out," said Blendershin to the clerk. "You needn't mention it. Then you don't say you can teach drawing."

"I can't," said Lewisham.

"You just give out the copies," said Blendershin, "and take care they don't see you draw, you know."

"But that's not teaching drawing--"

"It's what's understood by it in this country," said Blendershin.

"Don't you go corrupting your mind with pedagogueries. They're the ruin of assistants. Put down drawing. Then there's shorthand--"

"Here, I say!" said Lewisham.

"There's shorthand, French, book-keeping, commercial geography, land measuring--"

"But I can't teach any of those things!"

"Look here," said Blendershin, and paused. "Has your wife or you a

private income?"

"No," said Lewisham.

"Well?"

A pause of further moral descent, and a whack against an obstacle.

"But they will find me out," said Lewisham.

Blendershin smiled. "It's not so much ability as willingness to teach, you know. And they won't find you out. The sort of schoolmaster we deal with can't find anything out. He can't teach any of these things himself--and consequently he doesn't believe they can be taught. Talk to him of pedagogics and he talks of practical experience. But he puts 'em on his prospectus, you know, and he wants 'em on his time-table. Some of these subjects--There's commercial geography, for instance. What is commercial geography?"

"Barilla," said the assistant, biting the end of his pen, and added pensively, "and blethers."

"Fad," said Blendershin, "Just fad. Newspapers talk rot about commercial education, Duke of Devonshire catches on and talks ditto--pretends he thought it himself--much he cares--parents get hold of it--schoolmasters obliged to put something down, consequently assistants must. And that's the end of the matter!"

"All right," said Lewisham, catching his breath in a faint sob of shame, "Stick 'em down. But mind--a non-resident place."

"Well," said Blendershin, "your science may pull you through. But I tell you it's hard. Some grant-earning grammar school may want that. And that's about all, I think. Make a note of the address...."

The assistant made a noise, something between a whistle and the word "Fee." Blendershin glanced at Lewisham and nodded doubtfully.

"Fee for booking," said the assistant; "half a crown, postage--in advance--half a crown."

But Lewisham remembered certain advice Dunkerley had given him in the old Whortley days. He hesitated. "No," he said. "I don't pay that. If you get me anything there's the commission--if you don't--"

"We lose," supplied the assistant.

"And you ought to," said Lewisham. "It's a fair game."

"Living in London?" asked Blendershin.

"Yes," said the clerk.

"That's all right," said Mr. Blendershin. "We won't say anything about the postage in that case. Of course it's the off season, and you mustn't expect anything at present very much. Sometimes there's a shift or so at Easter.... There's nothing more.... Afternoon. Anyone else, Binks?"

Messrs. Maskelyne, Smith, and Thrums did a higher class of work than Blendershin, whose specialities were lower class private establishments and the cheaper sort of endowed schools. Indeed, so superior were Maskelyne, Smith, and Thrums that they enraged Lewisham by refusing at first to put him on their books. He was interviewed briefly by a young man dressed and speaking with offensive precision, whose eye adhered rigidly to the waterproof collar throughout the interview.

"Hardly our line," he said, and pushed Lewisham a form to fill up. "Mostly upper class and good preparatory schools here, you know."

As Lewisham filled up the form with his multitudinous "ologies" and "ographies," a youth of ducal appearance entered and greeted the precise young man in a friendly way. Lewisham, bending down to write, perceived that this professional rival wore a very long frock coat, patent leather boots, and the most beautiful grey trousers. His conceptions of competition enlarged. The precise young man by a motion of his eyes directed the newcomer's attention to Lewisham's waterproof collar, and was answered by raised eyebrows and a faint tightening of

the mouth. "That boulder at Castleford has answered me," said the new-comer in a fine rich voice. "Is he any bally good?"

When the boulder at Castleford had been discussed Lewisham presented his paper, and the precise young man with his eye still fixed on the waterproof collar took the document in the manner of one who reaches across a gulf. "I doubt if we shall be able to do anything for you," he said reassuringly. "But an English mastership may chance to be vacant. Science doesn't count for much in our sort of schools, you know. Classics and good games--that's our sort of thing."

"I see," said Lewisham.

"Good games, good form, you know, and all that sort of thing."

"I see," said Lewisham.

"You don't happen to be a public-school boy?" asked the precise young man.

"No," said Lewisham.

"Where were you educated?"

Lewisham's face grew hot. "Does that matter?" he asked, with his eye on the exquisite grey trousering.

"In our sort of school--decidedly. It's a question of tone, you know."

"I see," said Lewisham, beginning to realise new limitations. His immediate impulse was to escape the eye of the nicely dressed assistant master. "You'll write, I suppose, if you have anything," he said, and the precise young man responded with alacrity to his door-ward motion.

"Often get that kind of thing?" asked the nicely dressed young man when Lewisham had departed.

"Rather. Not quite so bad as that, you know. That waterproof collar--did you notice it? Ugh! And--'I see.' And the scowl and the clumsiness of it. Of course he hasn't any decent clothes--he'd go to a new shop with one tin box! But that sort of thing--and board school teachers--they're getting everywhere! Only the other day--Rowton was here."

"Not Rowton of Pinner?"

"Yes, Rowton of Pinner. And he asked right out for a board schoolmaster. He said, 'I want someone who can teach arithmetic.'"

He laughed. The nicely dressed young man meditated over the handle of his cane. "A bounder of that kind can't have a particularly nice

time," he said, "anyhow. If he does get into a decent school, he must get tremendously cut by all the decent men."

"Too thick-skinned to mind that sort of thing, I fancy," said the scholastic agent. "He's a new type. This South Kensington place and the polytechnics are turning him out by the hundred...."

Lewisham forgot his resentment at having to profess a religion he did not believe, in this new discovery of the scholastic importance of clothing. He went along with an eye to all the shop windows that afforded a view of his person. Indisputably his trousers were ungainly, flapping abominably over his boots and bagging terribly at the knees, and his boots were not only worn and ugly but extremely ill blacked. His wrists projected offensively from his coat sleeves, he perceived a huge asymmetry in the collar of his jacket, his red tie was askew and ill tied, and that waterproof collar! It was shiny, slightly discoloured, suddenly clammy to the neck. What if he did happen to be well equipped for science teaching? That was nothing. He speculated on the cost of a complete outfit. It would be difficult to get such grey trousers as those he had seen for less than sixteen shillings, and he reckoned a frock coat at forty shillings at least--possibly even more. He knew good clothes were very expensive. He hesitated at Poole's door and turned away. The thing was out of the question. He crossed Leicester Square and went down Bedford Street, disliking every well-dressed person he met.

Messrs. Danks and Wimborne inhabited a bank-like establishment near Chancery Lane, and without any conversation presented him with forms to fill up. Religion? asked the form. Lewisham paused and wrote "Church of England."

Thence he went to the College of Pedagogues in Holborn. The College of Pedagogues presented itself as a long-bearded, corpulent, comfortable person with a thin gold watch chain and fat hands. He wore gilt glasses and had a kindly confidential manner that did much to heal Lewisham's wounded feelings. The 'ologies and 'ographies were taken down with polite surprise at their number. "You ought to take one of our diplomas," said the stout man. "You would find no difficulty. No competition. And there are prizes--several prizes--in money."

Lewisham was not aware that the waterproof collar had found a sympathetic observer.

"We give courses of lectures, and have an examination in the theory and practice of education. It is the only examination in the theory and practice of education for men engaged in middle and upper class teaching in this country. Except the Teacher's Diploma. And so few come--not two hundred a year. Mostly governesses. The men prefer to teach by rule of thumb, you know. English characteristic--rule of thumb. It doesn't do to say anything of course--but there's bound to be--something happen--something a little disagreeable--somewhen if things go on as they do. American schools keep on getting

better--German too. What used to do won't do now. I tell this to you, you know, but it doesn't do to tell everyone. It doesn't do. It doesn't do to do anything. So much has to be considered. However ... But you'd do well to get a diploma and make yourself efficient. Though that's looking ahead."

He spoke of looking ahead with an apologetic laugh as though it was an amiable weakness of his. He turned from such abstruse matters and furnished Lewisham with the particulars of the college diplomas, and proceeded to other possibilities. "There's private tuition," he said. "Would you mind a backward boy? Then we are occasionally asked for visiting masters. Mostly by girls' schools. But that's for older men--married men, you know."

"I am married," said Lewisham.

"Eh?" said the College of Pedagogues, startled.

"I am married," said Lewisham.

"Dear me," said the College of Pedagogues gravely, and regarding Mr. Lewisham over gold-rimmed glasses. "Dear me! And I am more than twice your age, and I am not married at all. One-and-twenty! Have you--have you been married long?"

"A few weeks," said Lewisham.

"That's very remarkable," said the College of Pedagogues. "Very interesting.... Really! Your wife must be a very courageous young person.... Excuse me! You know--You will really have a hard fight for a position. However--it certainly makes you eligible for girls' schools; it does do that. To a certain extent, that is."

The evidently enhanced respect of the College of Pedagogues pleased Lewisham extremely. But his encounter with the Medical, Scholastic, and Clerical Agency that holds by Waterloo Bridge was depressing again, and after that he set out to walk home. Long before he reached home he was tired, and his simple pride in being married and in active grapple with an unsympathetic world had passed. His surrender on the religious question had left a rankling bitterness behind it; the problem of the clothes was acutely painful. He was still far from a firm grasp of the fact that his market price was under rather than over one hundred pounds a year, but that persuasion was gaining ground in his mind.

The day was a greyish one, with a dull cold wind, and a nail in one of his boots took upon itself to be objectionable. Certain wild shots and disastrous lapses in his recent botanical examination, that he had managed to keep out of his mind hitherto, forced their way on his attention. For the first time since his marriage he harboured premonitions of failure.

When he got in he wanted to sit down at once in the little creaky chair by the fire, but Ethel came flitting from the newly bought typewriter with arms extended and prevented him. "Oh!--it has been dull," she said.

He missed the compliment. "I haven't had such a giddy time that you should grumble," he said, in a tone that was novel to her. He disengaged himself from her arms and sat down. He noticed the expression of her face.

"I'm rather tired," he said by way of apology. "And there's a confounded nail I must hammer down in my boot. It's tiring work hunting up these agents, but of course it's better to go and see them. How have you been getting on?"

"All right," she said, regarding him. And then, "You are tired. We'll have some tea. And--let me take off your boot for you, dear. Yes--I will."

She rang the bell, bustled out of the room, called for tea at the staircase, came back, pulled out Madam Gadow's ungainly hassock and began unlacing his boot. Lewisham's mood changed. "You are a trump, Ethel," he said; "I'm hanged if you're not." As the laces flicked he bent forward and kissed her ear. The unlacing was suspended and there were reciprocal endearments....

Presently he was sitting in his slippers, with a cup of tea in his hand, and Ethel, kneeling on the hearthrug with the firelight on her face, was telling him of an answer that had come that afternoon to her advertisement in the Athenaeum.

"That's good," said Lewisham.

"It's a novelist," she said with the light of pride in her eyes, and handed him the letter. "Lucas Holderness, the author of 'The Furnace of Sin' and other stories."

"That's first rate," said Lewisham with just a touch of envy, and bent forward to read by the firelight.

The letter was from an address in Judd Street, Euston Road, written on good paper and in a fair round hand such as one might imagine a novelist using. "Dear Madam," said the letter, "I propose to send you, by registered letter, the MS. of a three-volume novel. It is about 90,000 words--but you must count the exact number."

"How I shall count I don't know," said Ethel.

"I'll show you a way," said Lewisham. "There's no difficulty in that. You count the words on three or four pages, strike an average, and multiply."

"But, of course, before doing so I must have a satisfactory guarantee that my confidence in putting my work in your hands will not be misplaced and that your execution is of the necessary high quality."

"Oh!" said Lewisham; "that's a bother."

"Accordingly I must ask you for references."

"That's a downright nuisance," said Lewisham. "I suppose that ass, Lagune ... But what's this? 'Or, failing references, for a deposit ...' That's reasonable, I suppose."

It was such a moderate deposit too--merely a guinea. Even had the doubt been stronger, the aspect of helpful hopeful little Ethel eager for work might well have thrust it aside. "Sending him a cheque will show him we have a banking account behind us," said Lewisham,--his banking was still sufficiently recent for pride. "We will send him a cheque. That'll settle him all right."

That evening after the guinea cheque had been despatched, things were further brightened by the arrival of a letter of atrociously jellygraphed advices from Messrs. Danks and Wimborne. They all referred to resident vacancies for which Lewisham was manifestly unsuitable, nevertheless their arrival brought an encouraging assurance of things going on, of shifting and unstable places in the defences of the beleaguered world. Afterwards, with occasional

endearments for Ethel, he set himself to a revision of his last year's note-books, for now the botany was finished, the advanced zoological course--the last lap, as it were, for the Forbes medal--was beginning. She got her best hat from the next room to make certain changes in the arrangement of its trimmings. She sat in the little chair, while Lewisham, with documents spread before him, sat at the table.

Presently she looked up from an experimental arrangement of her cornflowers, and discovered Lewisham, no longer reading, but staring blankly at the middle of the table-cloth, with an extraordinary misery in his eyes. She forgot the cornflowers and stared at him.

"Penny," she said after an interval.

Lewisham started and looked up. "Eh?"

"Why were you looking so miserable?" she asked.

"Was I looking miserable?"

"Yes. And cross!"

"I was thinking just then that I would like to boil a bishop or so in oil."

"My dear!"

"They know perfectly well the case against what they teach, they know it's neither madness nor wickedness nor any great harm, to others not to believe, they know perfectly well that a man may be as honest as the day, and right--right and decent in every way--and not believe in what they teach. And they know that it only wants the edge off a man's honour, for him to profess anything in the way of belief. Just anything. And they won't say so. I suppose they want the edge off every man's honour. If a man is well off they will truckle to him no end, though he laughs at all their teaching. They'll take gold plate from company promoters and rent from insanitary houses. But if a man is poor and doesn't profess to believe in what some of them scarcely believe themselves, they wouldn't lift a finger to help him against the ignorance of their followers. Your stepfather was right enough there. They know what's going on. They know that it means lying and humbug for any number of people, and they don't care. Why should they? They've got it down all right. They're spoilt, and why shouldn't we be?"

Lewisham having selected the bishops as scapegoats for his turpitude, was inclined to ascribe even the nail in his boot to their agency.

Mrs. Lewisham looked puzzled. She realised his drift.

"You're not," she said, and dropped her voice, "an infidel?"

Lewisham nodded gloomily. "Aren't you?" he said.

"Oh no," said Mrs. Lewisham.

"But you don't go to church, you don't--"

"No, I don't," said Mrs. Lewisham; and then with more assurance, "But I'm not an infidel."

"Christian?"

"I suppose so."

"But a Christian--What do you believe?"

"Oh! to tell the truth, and do right, and not hurt or injure people and all that."

"That's not a Christian. A Christian is one who believes."

"It's what I mean by a Christian," said Mrs. Lewisham.

"Oh! at that rate anyone's a Christian," said Lewisham. "We all think it's right to do right and wrong to do wrong."

"But we don't all do it," said Mrs. Lewisham, taking up the cornflowers again.

"No," said Lewisham, a little taken aback by the feminine method of discussion. "We don't all do it--certainly." He stared at her for a moment--her head was a little on one side and her eyes on the cornflower--and his mind was full of a strange discovery. He seemed on the verge of speaking, and turned to his note-book again.

Very soon the centre of the table-cloth resumed its sway.

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The following day Mr. Lucas Holderness received his cheque for a guinea. Unhappily it was crossed. He meditated for some time, and then took pen and ink and improved Lewisham's careless "one" to "five" and touched up his unticked figure one to correspond.

You perceive him, a lank, cadaverous, good-looking man with long black hair and a semi-clerical costume of quite painful rustiness. He made the emendations with grave carefulness. He took the cheque round to his grocer. His grocer looked at it suspiciously.

"You pay it in," said Mr. Lucas Holderness, "if you've any doubts about it. Pay it in. I don't know the man or what he is. He may be a swindler for all I can tell. I can't answer for him. Pay it in and

see. Leave the change till then. I can wait. I'll call round in a few days' time."

"All right, wasn't it?" said Mr. Lucas Holderness in a casual tone two days later.

"Quite, sir," said his grocer with enhanced respect, and handed him his four pounds thirteen and sixpence change.

Mr. Lucas Holderness, who had been eyeing the grocer's stock with a curious intensity, immediately became animated and bought a tin of salmon. He went out of the shop with the rest of the money in his hand, for the pockets of his clothes were old and untrustworthy. At the baker's he bought a new roll.

He bit a huge piece of the roll directly he was out of the shop, and went on his way gnawing. It was so large a piece that his gnawing mouth was contorted into the ugliest shapes. He swallowed by an effort, stretching his neck each time. His eyes expressed an animal satisfaction. He turned the corner of Judd Street biting again at the roll, and the reader of this story, like the Lewishams, hears of him no more.