SPLENDID BROTHER

CHAPTER I

LEN AT THE PIER

SEVERAL times during the late afternoon my mother fancied she heard the bell ringing, and I was sent to make inquiries, whilst the rest of the party took as subject for discussion, "Whatever would happen if we missed the boat?"

Aunt Mabel and her two daughters had the view that if you went to law you could make the company pay damages; my mother held it would be possible to get back by the North Kent line, admitting however this might entail some argument at the station. I found myself ordered to put a question to every gentleman in the Gardens who appeared likely to own a watch; one, to whom I incautiously appealed a third time, offered to present me with his Waterbury.

"Just as a token of long friendship," he suggested. "What, you won't accept it? Very well, then. Only," with sudden change of manner, "if you come asking me again, I shall, in all probability, wring your blooming young neck for you. I'm getting tired of you! I find your conversation monotonous. You harp too much on the same subject. I shan't weep if I never see you again. Understand?"

The cousins and I gained permission to have a last look round, and left the parents to themselves; my mother telling Aunt Mabel what slow payers New Cross people were, and aunt telling my mother that the business at Peckham had now become little better than an expensive hobby, one to be taken up only by those possessing a large private income. We saw the two dusty, untidy bears again, offering them crumbs at which they sneered; looked at the white-washed busts which, being labelled, could be identified as Shakespeare, and Byron and Milton; listened to the band set up under a canopy near the dancing platform where couples bewailed each other's awkwardness—"Isn't there plenty of room on the boards without stepping on my toes every time?"—gazed at the theatre with Britannia in card-board atop the proscenium. We had a game of "Touch you last," and this continued so long, and we were so anxious the day should not find itself abridged, that on hearing our names screamed in tones first threatening, then appealing, we affected deafness.

"Ashamed of you!" cried my mother, catching me by the jacket. "Perfectly ashamed of you, Henry. Don't you know the boat is on the very point of starting?"

Although more leisurely folk assured us as we flew by that we had oceans of time, we did not relax the pace until the river steps were reached, and there, perceiving no boat was present, the entire party turned upon me. This was all my doing. So long as ever they lived they would never forgive me for this. All I thought of was my own personal, selfish enjoyment.

"Here she comes," said the brass-buttoned man, answering my inquiry and pointing down the river. "That's her! Go down the steps and be ready when she gets alongside. Mother," familiarly to Aunt Mabel, "you look puffed."

My aunt stayed to tell the official first, that he too would present an appearance of exhaustion if he had been running at the rate adopted by her; second, that ginger whiskers were not, in themselves, a sign of intelligence; third, that she had a good mind to report him to his superiors. The man nodded and advised her to get as near 'midships as possible, so that the *River Spring* should have a fair chance; he turned to set the bell clanging once more, spoiling Aunt Mabel's retort.

"All this unpleasantness," said my mother, completing an unfinished sentence as the steamer gave the wooden pier a bump that made us all stagger, "would have been avoided if only Len had been able to come with us."

An old lady beaming down upon us from the stone steps, played, I remember, on her concertina the first bars of "The Anchor's Weighed" as we prepared to start. The official with red whiskers cried "Any more for London, last boat for London, any more going on for the little village? Right away!"

A fortunate thing for me that the ladies found seats in the fore-part of the steamer; I, too, occupied a place there at first, but was ordered to give this up to a young woman carrying a baby. This proved an auspicious incident, for they ceased the work of reproving me, and concentrated attentions on the youngster, astonished to find it was but eight months old, and not a girl. The band, coming along from the first-class end, started playing "In Trinity Church I met my doom," and the baby awoke and yelled vigorously. I was directed to go away for ten minutes; no more, no less: this gave opportunity for reflection.

Memory is something that can be cultivated, and I wish now I had given it more attention. There are people who, given any date of (say) twenty years ago, can tell you where and how they spent it, furnish particulars of meals, the folk encountered, what they said to the people and what people said in reply. For myself, I find that in looking back I can remember mile-stones of the journey, all the important days seem clear; intervening spaces are sometimes blurred and indistinct. The particular day in question has no secrets from me even at the present moment. The thoughts that went through my mind as I stood at the side of the boat come back; the scent of guano (I think) from the shore; the cement works, the powder magazine, the slow approaching dusk, the lights, the babble of talk on board, the whine of the stringed instruments, the coming of the first violin with a tumbler and a deferential suggestion which compelled me to answer blushingly that I had no coppers,—"Gold or silver will do, sir; do the thing well and put in a bank-note!"—all this is as though it happened yesterday. When some of the voyagers began to dance, and looking over my shoulder I observed my two cousins were being asked for the favour of a waltz, no desire to join in such frivolous games affected me. This was Monday. I had left the schools in Edward Street on the previous Friday afternoon with a handshake from the head master, and a wish for success. The head master said he supposed I was going to be a clerk, and when I remarked, with a mannish air, that the market appeared to be overcrowded, he replied this was the everlasting condition of all markets, and that unless something were done to keep the foreigner out, England would go to the dogs; at Catford, where he lived, he had a German family on either side. We came to no decision in the matter, so far as any practical steps were concerned, but I felt greatly complimented, and to my friend Ernest Fowler gave the head master's opinions as my own Ernest said that what was wanted seemed to him to be a fixed standard wage.

The cousins, flushed by the dancing, came up fanning themselves with handkerchiefs and telling each other not to be so stupid; Aunt Mabel wished me to rejoin the company of herself and my mother instantly. I put on my cap, which had been taken off to allow the breeze to give coolness and deliberation to my thoughts, and went across. The young woman's baby was asleep with a look of repletion on its creased little features.

"Sit you down," ordered my mother, in hopeless tones. "Your aunt has something to say to you, and if you know how to behave, do for goodness sake leave off sniffing, and listen to what she's got to say." She surveyed me, and turned to her sister. "We shall never make a man of him," she remarked, audibly, "try as we may!"

"I've been talking you over, Henry," said Aunt Mabel, resting her ringed hands on her lap, "and I've come to the decision that something's got to be done."

My mother gave a murmur of approval.

"From what one hears, there seems to be a risk that you're not going to turn out well."

My mother asked me how I dared to interrupt.

"Leave him to me," begged Aunt Mabel. "I have a pretty fair knowledge of the world. Lost my husband in '85 and ever since I've carried on the business, as you may say, off my own bat. I don't say trade is good, because it isn't, and people seem to begrudge the money more than they used to—there's never a call for mutes nowadays—but I make enough to keep myself and the girls and the men going, and when a good job comes along, why we thank Heaven for it."

My mother gave an "Ah!" that had a touch of piety, adding that it was what we must all come to sooner or later.

"If I hear," went on my Aunt Mabel determinedly, "of other firms taking a job at a lower price than we could possibly quote without losing money over it—and I never have been the one to use whales for bait—why I simply say they're welcome to it, and hope the relatives will be satisfied after the affair is all over. You may talk until you're black in the face," she wagged a forefinger at me, threateningly, "but you will never persuade me that undercutting is good for any of the parties concerned, and I don't care who you tell that to. Over and over again I've had people call round to settle up and they've said 'Mrs Martin,' and I've said 'Yes, ma'am,' or 'Yes, sir,' as the case might be."

My mother, leaning forward, gave a sharp tug to restore my wandering attention.

"'Mrs Martin,' they've said, 'thank you for the receipt, and thank you very much for all the kindness and care and consideration and attention and willingness to oblige,' and so forth and so on. And I say, 'Pray don't mention it, but if you get a chance of recommending, when the opportunity occurs, you'll be doing me a favour by speaking about me,' and so forth and so on."

I took an attitude of respectful enthusiasm.

"Never a one to believe in advertisement," she proceeded, "at the same time I do put a bit in the *South London Press* every other week, and if you like to go and find the one of my girls that's got my purse, you'll find a newspaper-cutting inside. 'Ebenezer Martin, Meeting House Lane, Peckham, S.E. Funerals provided. Our motto, Economy with Efficiency. Distance and destination no object.' There," said Aunt Mabel, leaning back and dismissing me, "that's all I have to say, and if you, Henry, can't take good advice when it's offered, why so much the worse for you. Is this Greenwich we're coming to?"

The boat gave up half a dozen passengers and received two in exchange, a stout florid man and his daughter. Whilst those on board watched at the side and disputed concerning the exact positions of the Ship and the Trafalgar, I said to the person next to me, "You don't know who that is?" The neighbour taking cigar from his mouth retorted rapidly, "Why, hang it all, if it isn't old what's-his-name of Hatcham; rare man of business and can't tell a capital A from a pig's foot. Great boxing chap, years ago. Didn't recognise him at first in a straw hat. If that's his daughter she'll come into money when the old man drops out. He's a caution though; look at him now."

The steamer backed from the pier, and Mr Latham was waving a red pocket handkerchief to imaginary friends, calling out farewells in a husky voice and ignoring his daughter's urgent request not to play the fool. Passengers, bored with each others' eccentricities, made a circle and looked on with a new interest; the girl glanced around nervously and beckoned to me.

"Help me, Henry Drew," she whispered, "to look after him. He's met more friends than are good for him. Father," turning to him, "here's one of the boys at the schools not far from us."

"My lad," he said, closing one eye, and regarding me acutely, "stick to your ed'cation. Ed'cation's finest thing out for a boy. Without ed'cation, you're nowhere. Onless," he hedged, "onless you've got brain like mine. If you've got brain like mine you can go anywheres and do anything. Isn' that so Kitty, my girl?"

"Sit up at this end of the boat, father," she ordered insistently, "and have a talk to Henry. I want to stroll about and see whether there's anyone here I know. Otherwise, my day will be wasted."

"Don't get into mischief, Kitty," he said, sleepily. She touched up the heavy fringe on her forehead, glanced at me and went. "Great 'sponsibility, girls," he remarked, taking off his straw hat and giving it into my charge. "Don't you never 'ave nothing to do with 'em. Give 'em the go-by. You stay 'ere and look after me, and see I don't fall overboard nor do nothing foolish. The last three pennorth," he added, self-reproachfully, "the last three pennorth! That's what done it!"

"Mr Latham," briskly giving him a shake, "do you think you could find a job for me in your business? I've left the board school, and I want to start work directly. I could run errands to begin with, and then perhaps you would take me inside, and you'd find me ready to do anything for about seven shillings a week."

"Make it ten. Always like round figures."

"I'd get there any time in the mornings you liked to mention, and if you wanted me to stay late at nights, I shouldn't grumble, and I shan't expect to be paid extra."

"Pardon me," he remarked, with laborious politeness. "You'll scuse me for interrupting, but I always make practice to pay for overtime. Speaking as man to man, I feel I ought to warn you of that. Let's have a fair and straight understanding. Latham Bros. doesn't work for nix and don't expect others to work for nix." He looked about. "Where are we now? Forest Hill?"

We were going by the Royal Victualling Yard, and he endeavoured, without much success, to repeat the information. To the new question, Mr Latham replied with an offer of his hand and a grip which made my eyes water.

"That's fixed up," he said, drowsily. "Your fortune's good as made. Did you back Sainfoin for the Derby? Have a smoke."

The captain on the bridge decided, after looking at me and inspecting the cigar, that he would keep it for another opportunity, and as the steamer came round the bend opposite Limehouse pier, we had a most interesting conversation on the topic of the British Navy, the advisability of getting to close quarters with Russia. The captain assured me the impudent attitude of that country annoyed him to such an extent that he sometimes woke in the middle of the night, and gave hours to the task of circumventing the artifices of M. Gortschakoff. I pointed out that this statesman resigned eight years previously, but the captain said he did not trust them. Young couples went by, relaxing their affectionate demeanour as they neared us; I observed Kitty Latham had found a companion and his remark—"Do you live somewhere about here, Miss?"—suggested their acquaintanceship was not of long duration. The captain having exhausted his views on European affairs left me, and I rested in the shadow against the bridge, thinking over the highly satisfactory arrangement made with Mr Latham. The news would not be communicated until we reached Woodpecker Road, and even there the announcement might be deferred if circumstances and surroundings appeared unsuitable. Mother would be compelled to admit that I had made a start for myself; Mrs Croucher, of next door, would say I was born under a lucky star; Ernest Fowler would declare he ought to have been consulted; Milly, his sister, would say "Bravo, Henry!" The news might induce Milly Fowler to reconsider her decision to go out, so soon as she left school, to business; a deplorable intention which had prevented me from speaking to her for three weeks.

"You are an idiot, really," complained my cousins, in duet.

"Fancy him," said one, "mooning here instead of enjoying the trip."

"Shall tell mother," declared the second, "that next time he'd better not be asked."

"Far better to invite some one who would pay attention to us. Oh, my goodness!" Kitty Latham was going by with her companion, and the sound of a kiss came from their direction. "Come along, Henry, this is no place for you. Your poor mother would be half out of her mind if she knew we were here, looking on at the tag, rag and bob-tail."

Having endured a considerable amount of advice that day I now, with a knowledge of my future denied to the girls, felt justified in remonstrating and in ordering them not to interfere. They seemed disinclined to believe their ears; their ejaculations became confused, and I followed up the advantage by assuring them I was now quite capable of taking care of myself; adding that I preferred my own company to theirs. They went off, promising to communicate details of the mutiny to their own mother and to mine, and it seemed certain the story would lose little in the telling. This mattered nothing to me. A wage earner (I thought of giving my mother eight and keeping two for clothes and general luxuries)—a wage-earner could run down to Greenwich by tram-car, or by boat to Rosherville, on special occasions, so far as Margate, and ask the consent of no one. Here were imminent my first chances of seeing the world, and I promised myself to take full and complete advantage. It made thoughts go for parallel to the freeing of slaves in America. At the moment one scarcely envied Len.

"Wake up, sir," I said to Mr Latham. "We're close on the new bridge."

"Bless my soul!" he cried. "Seem to have popped off for a moment. How are you? All right?" I hinted that my health had not changed from the state in which he had found it half an hour previously. "Course," he said, "of course, I remember. Had a long talk, didn't we, about old times. Where's Kitty? Go and find Kitty, my lad, and bring her 'ere to her poor old father. Don't stand there staring!" with violence. "Go and do as I tell you!"

The alteration in manner was welcome as proving he already regarded me in the light of one to be ordered.

Kitty Latham I found and spoke to with the respect due to the daughter of one's employer; the young man said tenderly, "Do please let us see each other again," and she answered lightly, "Perhaps, and perhaps not!" leaving the youth desolate.

"She's the apple of my eye," declared Mr Latham, talking now, after his nap, hoarsely but quite soberly. "Bit flighty, but there's no harm in it. You have to allow a bit with women, as I daresay you know. Don't do to hold the reins too tight or else they begin to kick and jib and baulk, and you have a deuce and all of a business to steady them. Made the mistake with her mother, but I was young then, and didn't rightly understand dealing with the fair sex. Ask anyone who knows me, and they'll tell you that sometimes I've made a blunder; I defy them to say they've ever known me make the same blunder twice. That's where experience comes in."

I was about to put a question concerning the hour and date for beginning work, when he turned away. "Precious little use though talking about these matters to you, my lad," he remarked, abruptly. "When I was your age, I thought I knew all there was to be known. Apart from book education."

A shout from my friend the captain on the bridge. Screams from women at the sudden arrest of the steamer, and snatch-up of straw hats on the part of men, much as though these articles were life-belts. From below in the water came a storm of furious language; entire crew of our steamer (with the exception of the captain) and many of the passengers rushed to answer this, whilst the captain swore at everybody. The boat went down slightly on that side, and I heard my mother shrieking for me; as I ran quickly here and there in the dark, stumbling over coils of rope and cannoning into people, my principal thought was that here had occurred something which would get into the newspapers.

My mother was in tears, crying that this came of gallivanting about, instead of remaining at home looking after the business; it was a judgment upon her and upon us all. Aunt

Mabel, similarly distressed, declared she had anticipated the accident from the very first, refraining only from mentioning it in a desire not to spoil the day; admitted, however, with tears, that it had never occurred to her she would finish her life in a watery grave. My two cousins clung around me, each pleading that she should be saved first. Above the din and the wailing and the cries came the full voice of the captain on the bridge, ordering his men, with adjectives that I was acquainted with and some new to me, to stop interchange of threats and return to their duties; he used language of only a slightly modified nature to the frightened passengers. I tried to console my womenfolk, pointing out the nearness of the banks on either side, my own presence, the well-known sturdiness of Thames steam-boats; I held my mother's hand tightly and she leaned her head upon my shoulder, and moaned.

"Go and ask the captain if there's any danger," ordered my Aunt Mabel, hysterically. "Go at once, and tell him I sent you!"

Up to the moment of obeying this request, my self-command and my courage were perfect, constituting a matter for surprise to myself. But, running along I looked over the starboard side and a light from the window of a riverside public-house gave me a glimpse of the murky, muddy water—it is very different now—and some of my calm began to disappear; the swimming baths at home had advantages not shared by the Thames. It was when I succeeded in gaining the attention of the captain and when, having gained his ear I managed to bawl the inquiry, and he replied that the sooner everybody contrived to get on the tug, the more likely they were not to find themselves floundering about in the river, that all my self-possession vanished. The memory of that occasion has often made me wonder whether the wisest and most useful acts are not sometimes performed in a state of slight aberration of mind. It is certain that I lost my head, for later on I had scarcely any idea what had been done, and the facts had to be supplied by other people.

It seems I ran against Mr Latham and dragged him to the larboard side of the steamer. There the three men on the big black tug below which had run into us (or into which we had run), were still roaring their bitter contempt for the steamer and for everyone on board, announcing vehemently that they would not lend a hand to assist unless the captain first admitted the mistake was entirely his. Away on the Wapping side a few empty boats washed to and fro gently, but no one was within hailing distance. I can remember making a workmanlike knot of a thick rope, and I recall Mr Latham saying—

"Down you go, youngster, you're a lighter weight than what I am."

Kitty Latham told me later that immediately I swung down upon the tug I whirled my arms about and sent the three men back; certainly one of the begrimed men later showed me his blood-streaming nose, and asked me what was meant by it. On the tug, it appears, I found a long wooden shoot, and Kitty Latham's new companion, the next to come down the rope, helped me to fix it against the side of the tilted steamer; at once began a rapid descent of women, who no sooner reached the coal begrimed deck than they bewailed acutely the injury done to summer frocks. Mr Latham, arriving close upon my mother, recovered from the shock and, going to one of the grubby-faced men said—

"Now I'm going to have it out with you. What's the idea of——Hullo, George?"

"Evening, sir," said the tug man, sheepishly. "Didn't know you was amongst 'em. Beg pardon, I'm sure."

Mr Latham assumed command and issued orders, exchanged shouted messages with the captain (who begged him to convey a communication at London Bridge) gave an order to his friend on the tug.

"But we was going down river, sir."

"And now you're going up for a change. Back water, or put her about, or turn her astern, or whatever the right expression is."

"Should like first of all to get at the rights of this."

"You drop us all at the Old Swan pier, George, and then you can come back and argy it out to your heart's content. 'Ear what I say?"

As the crowded tug turned about two ladies told my mother she ought to be very proud of me, but she only shook her head and remarked that cleaners and dyers expected to be paid, and where the money was coming from, goodness only knew. We went under the new bridge where the workmen called out for information, and I, selected to reply, endeavoured to make the account as thrilling and romantic as possible, but one of the workmen said aggrievedly, as we went on, "What, and ain't nobody been drownded?" and it seemed one might have dared to be more extravagant. Carefully through the craft sleeping opposite the Customs-House, under London Bridge, and — "Thank goodness," said the passengers with great relief, "we're near civilisation at last!"

Mr. Latham gave particulars to the pier-master, and in the confusion that ensued no tickets were collected. Aunt Mabel, whilst still taking credit for considerable foresight, blamed herself for having taken returns

"Where's Len?" asked my mother, anxiously. "Len promised to be here to meet us and we're late!"

"Len can generally be relied upon," said my cousins.

"Is Len expected?" inquired Kitty Latham, with vivacity.

Len came swinging down the cobble stones of Old Swan Lane as we made our way towards the bridge steps. Len, in best clothes, hailing us cheerfully from a distance and giving to all of us, assuredly to me, the usual sensation of relief.

"Been looking for you all over the place," he cried, handing to each lady of our party a bunch of violets with the bow I often tried to practise when alone. "And one for you, Kitty," he added.

"Henry would never have thought of this," said my mother, sniffing delightedly at the flowers.

"Been an upset of some kind, hasn't there? Heard people talking about it as I rushed over the bridge."

"Your brother," said Kitty Latham, walking by the side of Len, "behaved capitally when the accident occurred."

"If Len had been there," said my mother, looking at her elder son admiringly, "it wouldn't have occurred at all!"

The day had been a notable one, but the incident which pleased me most came at the very end. We went down by the Brighton Railway, and Aunt Mabel, declining to come indoors at Woodpecker Road and have a brush, on the grounds that when you go down a hill you invariably have to ascend it on the home journey, directed that the others were to go in, and I was to accompany her and the two girls to New Cross Gate where a pair horse tram-car would take them to their destination. At the junction of roads, the car waited, and as they turned to say their farewells, the gratifying remark was made.

"Girls, say good-bye," ordered my aunt. "But you must only shake hands with him; he's getting too big to be kissed!"

Near the top of Clifton Hill, two of the boat passengers were being interrogated by a young man with a notebook, whom I had sometimes observed at fires in the neighbourhood; folk stood around to gain details and anxious to add particulars to assist the press. One of these stepping forward offered the information that the Christian name was Leonard; undoubtedly Leonard; knowing both the Drew lads by sight he could guarantee that Leonard was the one who had done the trick. I was about to interpose when it occurred to me that the error really did not matter, besides it might gratify Len.