CHAPTER X

ANOTHER IMITATION OF LEN

THE doctor came to see Mr Latham, the one medical man in the neighbourhood hitherto trusted because he generously assumed the patient was a moderate individual, and that any indisposition did not arise from excessive partiality to spirits. By departing from the rule, he found himself on this occasion ordered out of the house, pursued so far as his carriage by bitter reproaches.

"Won't take the trouble to study a case, Henery," Latham explained to me, "that's what I complain about in the medical profession. If me or you find a posting station wants overhauling, why we go and have a good look over it, and we say, 'Give her another support 'ere,' and 'Give her a stay there!' We don't say, 'Well, she's no use as a station; we shall have to haul her down and break her up for firewood!' That's what he wants to do with me. He's asking me to change my style, and my nature, and my daily occurrences and everything. It isn't reasonable! There's no sense in it!" Mr Latham raised a trembling hand impressively. "Rather than do which—" he began.

"You'll have to stop some of it," looking up from my writing.

"Some of what?"

"Some of the drink."

He gazed at me appealingly; it made proof of our altered relations that one could speak to him in this manner. For some time past I had given up calling him "sir."

"Get on with your work," he ordered, in a feeble, forcible

way. "You talk too much for a lad of your age. No business to take a liberty. I won't have it."

"Sign this letter."

He took the penholder, examining it with interest, and giving an order for more ink. Then squared shoulders, took a deep breath, and prepared to execute his one clerical task.

"No use," he cried, distressedly, throwing the penholder, nib downwards into the table. "Can't remember how it starts. Henery, you must do it for me. I shall have to see my solicitor and give you a power to sign or whatever they call it. Used to be able to write my name as well as anybody. All gone, now."

I sent off the letter; busied myself with inspecting some communications on a file, knowing well that a deliberate manner would prove impressive. Overhead Kitty played a triumphant air, from which I knew she had heard from Len that day. Months had gone since I received a letter from him.

"Henery," said Mr Latham, weakly, "you're very peculiar in your behaviour towards me. What's wrong?"

"You!"

He found his handkerchief and rubbed his eyes. "Out with it all," he begged. "Can't stand this suspense."

A long argument, and one which seemed likely to have no definite results until at the crucial moment I stood on a chair and with a ruler rapped at the ceiling. Kitty came down, her eyes sparkling with excitement, and the case being placed before her by us, alternately, and sometimes in duet, she announced that Henry Drew was quite right, that her father was in the wrong; Henry Drew's proposal ought certainly to be carried out, and to-day seemed the time to begin. He pleaded there existed no necessity for haste, a week or two one way or the other could make no great difference, but we were obstinate.

"When I get married," she contended, "I don't want to be conducted up the aisle of the church by a

shaky old gentleman who makes everybody laugh. I want it all to go off well. A girl doesn't have a wedding very often."

"Wish you'd hurry up with yours," he remarked, gloomily. "I've got a scheme of my own on hand, and every week makes my chances worse."

"Do you mean," laughed Kitty, "that you too want to get married?"

Her father retorted that he did not intend to tell us the lady's name, or her address, or give a description of her; all he felt inclined to say was that she had a broad, sensible mind, differing considerably in this respect from some he could mention. She, at any rate, understood that a man required a tonic now and again, recognised he could not do his best work without some assistance of the kind.

"So the sooner you, my girl, bring affairs to a climax, as you may say, the better for all parties."

"Meanwhile," I said, "we want your promise that you will never touch a drop without the consent of Kitty and myself, and we shall keep a proper record, day by day."

"It's treating me," he growled, "as though I was an infant in arms, but I suppose for the sake of peace and quietness, I'd better give in. Shan't hear the last of it, if I don't."

We reduced the quantity with care, and he admitted one day that the old ability to write a signature had returned. Kitty and I became good friends again over this business, and she showed to me on one occasion a part of a communication she had received from Len. I pointed out that he particularly requested at the end that she should burn the note; Kitty admitted she had hitherto complied with such instructions, but this was a beautiful letter that she wanted to preserve all her life, and it was with reluctance she eventually agreed with my contention that any request made by my brother ought to be strictly obeyed. Meanwhile, there was difficulty in erasing the Regent Street incident from my memory.

To the wedding of Aunt Mabel's elder daughter it was hoped he would come, but when the couple had left for Eastbourne and chances of his presence diminished, my Aunt said excusingly she supposed Len was much too important now to take any notice of the family; prophesied the time would come when he would cut me in the street, a suggestion which my mother and I contradicted warmly. Aunt Mabel protested she intended to say nothing against him; she had but hinted at that which stood to reason. If she were Len, and if she were getting on well in commercial life—neither of these things, she assured us, represented her own case—and if people were beginning to say of her that she ought to stand for the County Council, why she would count it a great nuisance to be called upon to run down to New Cross every evening of her life, or trot off to Peckham whenever there happened to be a wedding.

"You're both a great deal too hard on Len," argued Aunt Mabel. "Wonder he stands it so well as he does. I should lose my temper with you. Does he still pay anything to you, dear?"

My mother answered this had been stopped some time before.

"Don't blame him!" declared the other. "It always looked to me very much like imposition. Fair's fair, even where relatives are concerned!"

It was never possible to carry on a discussion with Aunt Mabel with any hope of success, and my mother and I exchanged a look which signified we were willing to be misunderstood. At the moment, when my aunt announced that if nobody cared for any more tea, the guests might as well see about clearing off—"It's been a tiring day for me," she remarked, "and I shan't be sorry to put my foot up on the sofa"—at that moment a hansom drove up, and we all rushed to the open window. There was Len, my splendid brother, telling the driver to come back in a quarter of an hour, and giving a ring at the side door fitting the importance

of the occasion. The maid was found and bundled downstairs.

"No, no!" cried his voice, as he came up the stairs. "Surely the affair was fixed for to-morrow! I had it down in my diary for to-morrow, of that I'm perfectly certain. My dear aunt!" Entering the room, where we stood in an expectant, delighted semi-circle. "How can I excuse myself for this deplorable blunder!"

"It isn't your fault," she assured him. "Come and sit down and make yourself comfortable."

He kissed mother, and turning begged her to introduce him to the grown-up gentleman.

"I can believe a lot of things," asserted Len, "that other people won't credit, but you are not going to persuade me this good chap with a slight moustache is my little brother Henry. I certainly heard from somebody that he was getting on remarkably well——"

"Kitty is not here," I interjected.

"Kitty who?"

"Kitty Latham."

"Mother," he went on, taking my arm, "this is the man who is going to take us back to Blackheath. We rely upon him."

"You'll get there first, Len."

"Nonsense!" he declared, lightly. "You mustn't believe all you see in the newspapers." He went across and spoke to my unmarried cousin; the other guests reminded him of a former meeting and he assured them he recollected the occasion well. Produced from the inside pocket of his frock-coat, a small morocco case, and begged Aunt Mabel casually to add it to the presents, and give to the bride on her return his apologies for the delay.

"Now let us talk," he said, confidentially, coming back to me. "Caught sight of you that evening at the Hall, and what I thought was that you would at least come out and see me down to the station. Felt rather hurt about that, Henry. Stupid of me, I know, but perhaps I'm inclined to be

sensitive. Since that I've never so much as caught a glimpse of you."

"Saw you once in Regent Street, Len."

"You saw me once," he repeated, deliberately, "in Regent Street, and you didn't speak to me? Mother! Aunt Mabel! Just listen to this! What do you think of a brother who—"

The unanimous decision was that my conduct admitted of no defence, and mother reproved me openly for not, at least, telling her of the incident; I could only declare that the event had gone rapidly from my memory, and everyone shook a head in a reproving manner.

"So sorry to have to hurry off," he said, addressing Aunt Mabel. "Quite looked forward, too, to spending a long day with you to-morrow."

"Come to-morrow, all the same," she said, hospitably.

"It's a long time," interposed my mother, "since he came to see me. We've got new wall paper in the passage, Len, that you've never looked at."

"I've put up shelves for books in my bedroom," I said.

"Let me write," he promised us, "and fix a date. Booked for a good lot of speaking just now. Gladstone's going to retire, I hear, and Rosebery won't be much of a success, and we shall all be in the thick of it soon." A shy youth who had not spoken before, said suddenly, "Who says so?" We stunned him with indignant glances. "Good-bye, mother dear. Good-bye, little man; don't snub me again if we meet in London."

"Any message for Kitty," I asked, in going down the stairs. For she would be sure to ask.

"Hang Kitty!" he answered, explosively. "Worst of women-folk is they never know when to cease being a nuisance!"

"She's fond of you, Len."

"Look here, Henry. Tell her I made lots of inquiries, and sent my love, and expressed a hope she wouldn't forget me. Will that do, do you think?"

"Thank you very much, Len."

He stepped into the cab. "I really will come down and see her one evening," he promised, looking over the splash-board. "After all there are many less amusing girls than Kitty. Wonder you've never fallen in love with her yourself. By-the-bye, how are the Fowlers?"

"Milly's very well," blushing. "Ernest is growing rather thick-headed, in my opinion."

"You haven't learnt the trick yet," he said. "One has to drop these people as one goes along, or else they get in the way."

There came proof that Len had not forgotten me the moment he parted—as he might well have done, considering the calls on his time and attention—in the fact that the next evening Carter Paterson delivered a parcel containing some garments for which he had no further use. By Milly's instructions I did not wear these (agreeing with her that at my age and in my position, it scarcely looked well to go about with sleeves of coats turned back, legs of trousers turned up) but they were preserved carefully and served to remind me of the days, after Blackheath, when I watched carefully the suit which happened to be in his possession, with the knowledge that sooner or later his lease would fall in and the property revert to me.

Ernest Fowler was specially trying at this period, in that he declined to take any further interest in politics (a subject I was taking up strongly because it seemed likely to be closely associated with Len) and insisted on talking of nothing but vegetarianism. Like all newly converted, he was not content with having himself found salvation, but required everyone to follow, and when we met for our walk of an evening, or when we encountered each other after classes, his first question always was—

"What have you had to eat to-day?"

The details furnished never met with his entire approval. Accustomed to his frequent changes of view, I did sometimes protest against his attempted interference with the

dictates of my ready appetite, and we had heated arguments together on the effect of (say) lentils on the brain, celery for the joints, and other subjects. I was beginning to despair of convincing him that right and common sense and everything were on my side, when I came across one day near the canal bridge in Old Kent Road, a young man being driven in a commercial-looking brougham packed to the windows with green card-board cases, who ordered his coachman to stop, and hailed me.

"You're Drew's brother," he said, leaning out of the window space. "Spotted you the moment I caught sight of you."

"Forget your name," I answered, "but you're the one who took a walking-stick and gave such capital imitations of musical instruments."

He found his letter-case and, rejecting the business side, took out a card and gave it me. In the corner was printed "Refined Comedian. Everything to Please and Nothing to Offend."

"Seen anything of him lately? I've written over and over again, and sent him bits from newspapers, but he never takes the leastest notice. Sure I don't know why," he went on, resentfully. "A chap's none the worse for being in the lace trade in Watling Street."

"Have all the others I met that evening dropped you, too?"

"Nothing of the kind. We're chums still, and he's treated us all in identically the same manner. Because he's getting on in the world, he seems to have picked up an entirely new set."

"Len knows best."

"A tactful remark to make," he protested. "I suppose it means you would have behaved in the same way if you had been in his place?" He gave the coachman an order to proceed. "Then all I can say is," he said, wrinkling his forehead in the effort of thought, "that—that I'm sorry for you."

The talk brought back to memory the recommendation made by Len at the close of the party. A card arrived at office from Ernest Fowler saying, "Be at New Cross Gate seven thirty," and I resolved to take no notice. The next day a card came, "Sorry my communication of yesterday did not reach you. Will call at Shardeloes Road eight to-night," and I left the house before that hour without telling my mother or the two lady lodgers where I was going. A long letter from Ernest after this; he felt at a loss to understand my behaviour; if he had said anything to offend me, he could but declare willingness to apologise, and make amends in any way suggested; to this I gave no attention. Milly told me Ernest seemed upset about something; I mentioned importantly it was no matter requiring interference from a third person, and our Sunday afternoon stroll through Greenwich Park was not the most successful we had experienced; the rest near our favourite tree was devoted to art work on the gravel, and only a fine feeling of power in thus causing disturbance to another saved me from sharing depression.

A good many people considered it incumbent upon them to make considerable efforts to bring us together. Ernest explained the whole of the circumstances to the two city warehouse ladies, and they lost no opportunity of lecturing me on the high value of friendship, the necessity of being true to one's old acquaintances, the fate awaiting those careless of the rights and claims of intimates. 'Ernest took the step of speaking to Kitty Latham, a circumstance which, known at St Donatt's Road, would have brought upon him the severe condemnation of the whole of his family, and she gave counsel. Complete absence of definite cause for the disagreement proved a valuable asset, for this enabled me to refuse to discuss the subject, asserting it was a matter concerning our two selves alone.

"The lad seemed very much worried," urged Kitty.

"So he ought to be."

"See him and talk it over. I'm feeling particularly happy

just now, and I want to see everyone else the same. To oblige me, little brother-in-law."

"You haven't called me that for a long time."

"There's been a reason," she answered, cheerfully. "What shall I tell young Fowler if he speaks to me about you again?"

"Tell him I prefer to chose my acquaintances, and not to have them forced upon me."

"Your brother wouldn't behave in that way."

"Just shows how much you know about it," I retorted. "If girls only discussed the subjects they were conversant with, there wouldn't be so much feminine chatter going on."

"If boys understood the meaning of words of more than two syllables," she replied, "they wouldn't make people laugh as they do now. I like a row as well as anyone, but once it's over, it's done with me. When Len calls here next, I'm going to have a quarrel with him."

"What about?"

"Anything!" she answered. "I shall only pretend to be cross with him, and then we shall make it up, and we shall be better friends than ever."

"Seems to me," I said, warmly, "that you've no right to worry and bother Len in that way."

"Now, who is interfering?" demanded Kitty.

Flattering, of course, to discover that Ernest made these extraordinary attempts to restore amicable relations, and I might have enjoyed it the more but that, to tell the truth, I missed his companionship; an experiment with a fellow-student at the classes where I was endeavouring now to learn enough German to be able to explain to Milly the meaning of the title of a song when we attended concerts, made me, for one evening only, the companion of a blade who persisted in speaking to unescorted young women in Lewisham High Road, with the eventual result that I reached home with a bowler hat, smashed and spoilt by the

umbrella belonging to one indignant school girl who had aimed at my friend. Another, whose gait seemed to preclude anything like extravagant gaiety of demeanour, walked with me at a snail's pace to Lee and back, discussing cures for corns.

The idea occurred to me that my self-respect demanded I should do something more wildly adventurous. Many of our hands had a regular habit of breaking out into irregularity about twice a month, and when after a day's absence the sportsman returned to be censured by Mr Latham or by me—

"Now you understand. If this happens again, serious notice will be taken."

—It was whispered around that So-and-so had been on the spree, and his colleagues took part in the spirit of desperate recklessness. The ex-soldiers amongst them always went on the bust (another way of describing the same event) the evening of the day on which they received their reserve allowance. The man himself on returning to work looked rather sad about the eyes, seemed disinclined for speech, and inclined to take melancholy views, but later exhibited a certain pride, and began to give particulars of the jamboree; the most triumphant method of closing the account was to be able to say—"And after that, I no more know what 'appened than this old can of mine does!" A murmur of envy and approval followed the declaration.

It was no common or ordinary splash that I, after deliberation, decided to make, and it seemed clearly impossible for me to model my procedure on that of the less important members of the staff. Difficulty arose in the fact that there was no one of my acquaintance to whom I could apply for suggestions who would not immediately respond with good advice and warning, urgent recomendations not to act the goat, to remember what was due to my position and to my people; the more counsels of this nature I imagined, the more determined I became to break

away from the even tenour of my life, and in particular, to prove myself as one resenting the behaviour of fortune. A second difficulty consisted in the fact that there was no use in assuming that I could, by any effort, become the worse for drink, or the better for drink. Drink never had much effect upon me, and when I took a little I found I had taken enough, and nothing but a miracle could enable me to take more. I think I had some notion that the results of excess, might, with an effort, be simulated, and the idea was to create something like the disorder effected on boat-race nights by gentlemen from Oxford and Cambridge. Obviously, this could not be done alone. Memory of the newspaper records failed to recall an instance where an undergraduate had, without the aid of colleagues, disturbed the peace. I sent for Buckmaster.

"Well, Mr Henry," said the old man, after listening attentively, and speaking with perfect respect, "if you don't mind placing yourself in my hands, I'll do the best I can to show you round. Don't want to brag, but there isn't many who know the ropes quite so well as I do. What about the date, sir?"

Buckmaster, that very evening, was waiting at the Marquis of Granby corner, shaven, dressed in the best clothes he possessed and a bowler hat presented by me which was not quite large enough for him, so that although the evening was calm and still enough to permit us to travel outside the tram-car, one hand was fully occupied in making sure of his head-gear. His cheeriness and confidence atoned for the entire absence of these qualities on my part, and I could not help noticing that as we neared the river at Westminster Bridge, Buckmaster's respectful manner diminished and he began to call me Drew; on the north side, when we started to walk into St James's Park, he slapped my shoulder and invited me to wake up. A suggestion that we should have a lark with the milk stall which, at that time, stood near to Spring Gardens was vetoed; he seemed discouraged and I pointed out that the hour was still young; he remarked

rather curtly that the hour was not alone in this respect. We went up the Duke of York's steps, and in St James's Street he shewed me the windows of the club to which he once belonged; I was about to suggest that his position had been that of a waiter when a stout, florid elderly gentleman came down the steps and seeing him cried, with great enthusiasm,

"Hullo, Bucky old boy, how are you? Going well and strong, that's right!"

And went on without waiting for an answer.

"Now just look here, my lad," said Buckmaster, as we turned east, through Piccadilly. "No earthly use our pretending that we shall find it all the same as it was in the old days. Everything changes in this world. But I rather flatter myself I can take you into one or two places where you wouldn't be able to go without me. It's too early for the Café Riche; Mott's, in Foley Street doesn't start till late, and what I'm going to do is to just stroll round with you and tell you where they are, so that if we don't get a chance of looking in at all of them to-night, you can come up here by yourself and—What's this place?"

"Piccadilly Circus."

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated Buckmaster.

He announced, when I had conducted him to the spot, that the Haymarket looked but very little changed, and recommended we should take, first the right hand side going down. To his disappointment, he could discover in the Haymarket none of the haunts of his youth, and begged me to take him to Leicester Square where he felt sure he would be on safer ground. One resort of notable quality we found occupied by a German sandwich shop. The Shades, a place he had been speaking of with relish, had given way to the Empire; the Judge and Jury entertainment could not be discovered, and this last blow forced poor old Buckmaster to admit — "Mr Henry, sir" — that an interval of thirty years had elapsed since he last visited the neighbourhood. We took chocolate in the Adelaide Gallery

near the station, and caught the nine forty-five for New Cross.

I had begun to think my action might be marred by impetuosity, when Milly announced that her parents, distressed by my absence from the house, had commanded her to give a formal invitation to supper. It was possible to see that a mistake had been made in selecting for the first essay a member of this particular family; Len would not have committed a blunder of the kind. To St Donatt's Road I went therefore, prepared to give in deliberately but generously, consenting, after proper deliberation, to offer to Ernest once again, the hand of friendship with a warning that he must be more careful, in future, not to strain the bonds. Ernest was not there, Mr and Mrs Fowler received me pleasantly, and during the meal we talked of the usefulness of sandwich boards as compared with give-away bills.

"Milly," said her mother, when they had cleared away, "just run out with this letter to the post before it's forgotten. Now, Henry Drew," turning to me, "tell father and tell me exactly what you mean by your behaviour."

"My behaviour, Mrs Fowler?"

"Don't repeat what I say; say what you have to say for yourself. Ernie is a good, dear boy; peculiar in some matters, no doubt, but he's quite as good as you are. His position is equal to yours. You will remember it wasn't so long ago you were sweeping out a small general shop."

"Gently, mother," interrupted her husband.

"You may get on better in the future than Ernest, or he may get on better than you; that remains to be proved. But if you can't manage to keep good friends with him, that shows quite clearly you're not a fit person——"

"Go slow, old girl," said Mr Fowler.

"Not a fit person to associate with the rest of us. So in future, Henry Drew, you don't come to this house unless you're invited, and you don't see Milly without our permission.

That's my last word, and your hat and stick are in the hall. Shut the garden gate as you go out, and if you meet Milly say 'Good-night' and walk on."

"Don't be too hard on 'em, mother. We were all young once."

"Mrs Fowler," I cried in desperation, "you mustn't punish me too severely. I can't give up Milly, and I don't want to give up you and Mr Fowler, and if I could only see Ernest this very minute, I'd make it right and shake hands with him like anything. Please don't be harsh. Don't do anything you'll be sorry for afterwards. That wasn't what I meant," going on hurriedly. "What I meant was, don't do anything I shall be sorry for afterwards. Send for Ernest now. Do please send for him. You can't understand what all this means to me."

"You'll find my boy," she said steadily, "three doors off. Go there and see him and apologise, and if he's willing, why father and myself will have no objection. And I daresay Milly, but you'll have to settle with her for yourself."

I pointed out later (anxious to re-assert myself after something like grovelling) as Milly accompanied me to the end of the road, that in theory my action had been correct and defensible; it stood to reason that as one made way in the world, an increased discretion was necessary. Len had been compelled to do this; everyone else, in like position, would have to do it in a greater or lesser degree.

"But you must observe this," I said, argumentatively. "It resolves itself into a sum of subtraction. One from twelve leaves eleven, but one from one leaves nought, and one from nought you can't. Before you begin to cut down the list of your friends, you must first take care to see that the list is a tidy large one; you must also make sure that you will find no difficulty in replacing them."

"I see what you mean," said Milly.

"Apart from which, there are the feelings of other people to be considered. How would it strike you if anyone you cared

for very much, resolved to drop you? What would your sensations be like if you had a letter from a dear friend, saying it was all at an end between you?"

"I suppose," she replied, "I should frown and bear it. Give me a kiss here, whilst we're in the shadow. You're a queer little chap, but you are my own dear boy!"