

CHAPTER XI

LEN PLAYS FOR LOVE

WARNED by the frightful risk incurred, the old terms of friendship with Ernest were not only restored but their strength increased; when he suggested we should go in his holidays for a canal trip through London I readily made all the arrangements.

Having written a description of the trip which I thought not particularly good, and in some parts exaggerated, with incidents that never occurred, and references to some slight disasters occurring to me which might well have been omitted, he insisted on sending it in to an evening journal, and at the railway bookstall one afternoon I was amazed to find on a placard "London from a Gondola, by Ernest Fowler." I cultivated other acquaintances at this period, and in my diary of the year are such entries as "Met James Markham," and "Met Thomas H. Grey," and "Dropped George Manktelow." A new acquaintance, forced upon me, I discovered at Mr Latham's house on my return from the canal trip.

He had improved greatly in health under our supervision, but had become more irascible in temper, contending that we should now release him from his promise, declaring he felt so well that a hogshead a day could not harm him; threatened, when we refused to concede anything, to turn me out into the street, and on being dared by Kitty to do this, muttered mysterious warnings to the effect that he still had something up his sleeve, that Jimmy Latham looked a fool, but was, in reality no fool, that to catch him you had to be out and about before sunrise; few people in this world could place their hands on their hearts and declare, with

truth, that they had ever bested Jimmy. His daughter informed me afterwards that on the second day of my absence he dressed himself in Sunday suit, picked a red rose from the garden, and in reply to her question told her he was going out on a matter of business.

"Mind your promise, father!"

"Just what I intend to do, my girl," he said.

Two hours later a four-wheeler came rocking along the road in Hatcham and Kitty's father stepping out, introduced a tall, stout lady as "My Second."

Mrs Latham received me, with one eye indicating distrust and the other shewing wariness. (She informed me some months later that in her day a slight squint was considered quite the thing, admitted however that fashions altered.) Mrs Latham asked at once whether I was always trotting about enjoying myself, or whether it was my custom to give occasionally a few moments of attention to the work of the firm; during the day, when writing in the office, I rarely glanced around to the frosted glass upper half of the door without seeing her there, whereupon she cried in menacing tones,

"Yes, I'm a watching you!"

And went, evidently feeling that she was using energetic measures, and forwarding the best interests of the establishment. One afternoon, when I was particularly busy, she came in and, hoisting herself with difficulty to the top of a high stool said rapidly, "Now then, Master Drew, let me see how you keep your accounts, unless I'm very much mistaken there's some hanky-panky going on here, Mr L. places too much reliance on you to my manner of thinking, I've had to deal with dishonest barmen in my time," and the explanation she received was so involved and confusing, that she gave up all effort to understand, saying I had made it quite plain to her; she felt bound to admit the system appeared satisfactory so far as it went. Kitty she ruled with steel. Kitty's movements were watched. No opportunities now for Kitty to run up to town of an afternoon; to go to Lewisham High

Road of an evening ; whenever she announced her intention of starting out, her stepmother would say,

“Half a minute, my child, for me to put on my bonnet, and I’ll come with you, if I don’t take exercise I shall be losing my figure, nothing like a walk to keep anybody slim, shan’t be half a moment !”

Mr Latham perhaps suffered most under the new autocracy. He frequently told me it was not her money he wanted, although, mind you, a bit of property constituted no drawback with a wife, especially a second wife ; what he had assumed was that a lady, accustomed to generous distribution of beverages, one who had been in the public line since she was so high, would certainly look indulgently on a slight excess in consumption, as you might say. Instead of which, Mr Latham pointed out, she had docked him of everything inside the house, absolutely everything, and when he returned from some matter of outdoor business, insisted upon kissing him, not, he declared, as a sign of affection, but simply in order to detect whether he had obeyed or disobeyed her commands. Friends, condoling with his unfortunate predicament, made recommendations ; he retorted that cloves were of no use when you had to deal with a woman of such vast experience. Mr Latham wept in describing all this, and I do think that our method of gradual diminishment was kinder and wiser than the plan adopted by the new lady, for he became greatly depressed and told Kitty that but for my presence, he would give it all up ; assured me that but for Kitty’s help and encouragement, he would fill his pockets with stones and dashed well drop himself into the canal. Kitty still wrote to Len every day, although I gave it as my opinion that this was a mistake ; in my own case, I should feel that so many communications, excepting they came from Milly, amounted to the proportions of a nuisance.

“Must keep myself in his memory,” she argued. “You don’t understand, little brother-in-law, but I do. He meets a lot of people, he must come across a number of girls, and if sometimes he should find himself thinking twice about one

of them, why, along comes my letter, and he thinks instead about me. Sure you'll find I'm right!"

In time the new Mrs Latham either conquered her suspicion, or this was overpowered by a desire for company; anyhow, she began to make a practice of coming into the office whilst I was there, dragging a rocking-chair after her, a task to which I gave assistance so soon as she hove in sight. It proved possible after a while, and indeed easy, to go on with my work and yet appear to give complete attention whilst she described at great length, and with wonderful fidelity, incidents which occurred during her service at the counter; the stout lady had that remarkable gift of description sometimes met in unexpected quarters, with never a word too much, never an important detail omitted. In the recitation of dialogue she proved sometimes over-garrulous, persisting in going back in a conscientious manner when anything had been omitted, with—

"Oh, but before that, I must tell you, I said to him——"

The story of her public life finished brilliantly in that she had been able, after doing it up, to dispose of the house—"Turn where you will, my dear, you're bound to see half a dozen reflections of yourself!"—to excellent advantage. I asked her once whether she had made her will; she answered that to take that step would mean going to bed immediately after writing her signature, and giving an order to my Aunt Mabel at Peckham. Mrs Latham hoped she knew better than give such a temptation to Providence. I repeated some of her stories to Ernest Fowler, who had announced his intention of retiring from literary life because of the difficulty of finding subjects which commended themselves to the fancy of editors, and assuredly I did not give them with anything resembling her vivacity, but Ernest listened, and a month later he was able to show me in the first number of a new magazine, chapter one of "The Crown and Anchor," with illustrations of which Ernest complained with as much bitterness as though he had been writing for years. He told me, in confidence, that a little more en-

couragement and he would give up his berth in the City ; this I repeated to my mother, in confidence, and she told Milly, and Milly told her mother and her father, and we held a family counsel one night at St Donatt's Road, with Ernest at the end of the table, all of us imploring him to do nothing rash ; I remember I argued very strongly. To be quite honest, I never at that time heard of a triumph on the part of any close acquaintance without experiencing a twinge of envy. Excepting, of course, in the case of Len.

The new Mrs Latham, something of a female detective, placed the drawing-room blotting-pad in front of the gilt-framed mirror, with results, and a blazing scene with Kitty ensued. Mrs Latham declared no girl of nineteen, or even older, being in her charge and under her superintendence, had ever been allowed to carry on ; the moment she found anything which resembled carrying on, she at once put her foot down ; a number of instances were quoted in support of this assertion. She demanded to know the lad's name, information which the looking-glass had not revealed ; Kitty refused to give it. Did I know ? I knew, but there was no intention on my part to give particulars which Kitty did not care to reveal. We felt we had triumphed, but that evening she obtained Len's name quite easily from Mr Latham : thereupon sent a note to Len, requesting the pleasure of his company at dinner, and announced to all that she would take the opportunity of giving him a good straight talk and no nonsense about it ; we consoled ourselves with the feeling that he would be certain not to accept. Mrs Latham gave frequent rehearsals of the address she proposed to deliver, beginning with "I shall say," and presently, warming to the subject, using another tense, as though giving a description of incidents past and gone.

But Len did come. He had not answered the invitation, but he did come, wonderfully dressed—silk hat, heavy overcoat, evening dress—and from the moment he entered the

room upstairs, Mrs Latham became a slave like the rest of us. Now and again, during the meal, I saw a glint in her left eye, and heard her give a slight cough, which seemed to intimate a resolve to enter upon plain blunt speech, but a word from Len changed all this; his manner to Kitty could scarcely have been improved, and his deference to Mrs Latham's political opinions—which were that one party was as bad as the other, and perhaps worse—seemed perfect. (Kitty said afterwards it was quite a treat to find me sitting still for once and not talking; she felt nervous all the time lest I should open my lips and spoil everything.)

“And dear mother?” he said, looking across at me. It was like him to observe that I was being neglected and to direct conversation in my quarter. “There are many drawbacks to all this knocking about in the world, but one of the worst, little man, is that I see nothing of you two. What I should like to do would be to run down every evening of my life. By the bye, are you doing much in the evenings now?” I murmured something about my German. “Tell you what you could do for me, only perhaps you wouldn't care to spare the time.”

They all said I could quite well spare the time. Mrs Latham added that any occupation was better than none, and made a quotation concerning idle hands.

“I'm going to be busy in the next three months. Excuse me, Mrs Latham, for talking shop.”

“Don't name it, Mr Drew.”

“Needn't bother you, Henry, with the particulars now, but it will be a tremendous help to me to have someone to write the thousand and one letters about ordinary subjects. Now, do you think you could manage to come straight from here of an evening not to my rooms in Tavistock Place——”

“I thought——”

“Not to my rooms in Tavistock Place,” he went on, with a glance at Kitty who also showed surprise, “and give a useful hand for an hour or so? Don't decide now! Think it over and send a line to my club.”

"Where is your club?" asked Kitty Latham.

"I'll give the particulars to Henry."

"Are letters sent on to you from the old address?"

"Very glad to say that they are sent on," he answered, with an inclination of the head towards her. Her good temper returned.

They looked at me imploringly and began to speak together; I stopped them and said that perhaps they would allow me to answer Len for myself. Of course I should be willing to do as he suggested; the only question was, when to begin?

"And the terms!" interposed Mrs Latham, with the relish of a business woman. "I always like, in matters of this kind, to have a definite arrangement, saves such a lot of argument later on."

"Please, please, Mrs Latham," I said.

"Known cases where the best of friends have parted because one side thought so much, and the other side was under the impression that it was only so much."

Len and I exchanged a nod, and allowed them to talk. We understood each other a great deal better than they understood us, but it evidently gratified them to discuss the matter. Mr Latham said that if so be as His Nibs liked to come a bit earlier in the morning, why then it could be made convenient, as you might say, for him to pop off a bit earlier at night, providing always that he left everything straight and ship-shape, for there was no use in pretending that he, Mr Latham, was the man he had been at the time when people allowed him a certain amount of liberty. Mrs Latham contributed to the scheme by suggesting that I should eat at the house every week-day, and offered, in the exceptional circumstances, to arrange this free of any charge on the understanding that I took what was put before me without criticism; I pointed out that my mother's chief joy was in preparing my evening meal, and in persuading me to over-eat myself, but the Lathams said they felt certain, once the matter had been fully and correctly explained, she

would fall in with the proposition. Kitty asked whether she could not accompany me and make herself useful; Len thanked her cordially, but one had to be extremely careful nowadays.

"Quite right, Mr Drew," agreed Mrs Latham. "Young girls are a great deal too forward in my opinion. In my time we used to be exactly the opposite, and I'm sure we used to get proposals of marriage much more frequently, in consequence."

"Seems difficult to imagine," remarked Kitty, "that you ever possessed a retiring nature."

"Silence, miss!"

"Is it all settled then?" asked Len, briskly. "Good! Knew you'd stand by me."

"It will seem like Great Tower Street times to be working together again, Len."

"Ah," he said, reminiscently. "That reminds me. I think we'll call you Mr Henry again, just to emphasise the resemblance. I met old G. W. P. the other night at a dinner at the Cecil, and he became quite communicative. Seemed rather hurt about you, but I think I contrived to get back into his good favour."

"Trust you for that," I laughed. "Believe if you met a ghost, you'd get something to your advantage out of him."

Mrs Latham had once seen a ghost, and described the incident faithfully, from the moment when she heard a slight commotion downstairs in the bar, and slipped on her dressing-gown, to the moment when she hit the ghost on its right wrist with a tankard and said, "Look here, Cheesman, my lad, I engaged you to do a job of whitewashing, but that doesn't justify you trying to open the till!" We decided that this, an interesting occurrence in its way, did not rightly come under the heading of ghost encounters. Mr Latham told us that in strolling along by the canal at night, he had sometimes thought a person was following, could have sworn he heard the tap-tap of footsteps on the damp path, but looking around saw no one, and was forced to the conclusion

that there were ghosts and ghosts, some so vague that it was impossible for the human eye to make anything of them, others of a more tangible description. Perhaps they varied, just as human beings did. Mrs Latham ventured to assume that these experiences had occurred, mainly after the hour of half past twelve at night, but he assured her that on the contrary he had found them since everybody had taken a hand in the game of doctoring him and treating him as though he were a child in arms, unable to sit up and take nourishment. Kitty had never seen a ghost, and did not want to see a ghost; bad enough to dream sometimes of terrifying incidents without finding them transferred to waking hours.

"The ghost I'm afraid of meeting some day," said Len, pushing his chair, crossing one knee over the other and gazing at the backs of his white hands "is—don't you listen to this, little man—is that of a boy. I shall come across him quite suddenly. It will make me realise—Is your clock right, Mrs. Latham?"

"Unless someone has been fiddling about with it. Go on, Mr Drew. You're not in a hurry to be off yet."

"It will make me realise what a muddy world this is, and how impossible it is to go through it without getting splattered. I shall see the ghost at about this time one evening, and looking at him my life will seem like just one day, one rather long day. The small figure will be myself as I was at eight o'clock in the morning with my mother coming into the room and reminding me to say my prayers, and saying them first line by line for me to repeat, begging God to bless me and to keep me whiter than snow, and then—then I shall get up and look in the glass. Look in the mirror, and compare."

We were quiet for a few moments.

"This won't do," he cried, suddenly. "Is it my fault that we are becoming gloomy? Never shall it be said that I was the one to throw a wet blanket over the company.

Kitty, find a pack of cards. Those old country cards you used to have."

"Shall we play for money?" she asked, over her shoulder.

"Stimulates the game," said Mrs Latham, "to have a trifle depending on it."

"We will play for love," decided my brother. Kitty laughed. "Mrs Latham, if I can but win your undying affection, I shan't mind what sort of ghosts I meet."

"A caution you are!" declared the gratified lady. "You remind me of one or two gentlemen who used to come into the saloon bar on Sunday evenings!"

We settled details of the work, and before I ran home to tell my mother the great news. Len warned me there might be a considerable number of tasks for me to perform; if at any time I found these too extensive or too trying, I was to approach him and state the fact, and he would see that something was done. He relied upon me, and hoped I should not fail him.

"Good chap," he said, in going off. He patted my shoulder. "I may be able to repay you some day. When you find yourself in a corner, just you blow a whistle and I'll hurry up to your assistance." He kissed Mrs Latham's hand, and she delayed him at the front door to explain the chronological order and respective history of her numerous rings.

"Well," she said to me, returning, "if you aren't proud of a brother like that, all I can say is you ought to be perfectly well ashamed of yourself!"

Mother admitted I was right in saying she would begrudge the preparation of my evening meal, and I told her she must be careful not to stint herself in consequence, but to still arrange a good dinner and sit down and eat it; she shook her head and said it always seemed a waste to prepare for oneself, and assured me she could manage quite well on what the ladies upstairs left; this would enable her to make a saving in household expenditure. I called her a miserly

old party, and expressed a suspicion that she had somewhere a well-filled Post Office Savings Bank book ; she urged me not to make fun out of a serious matter. The prospect of co-operation between Len and myself gave her complete joy.

"He'll help you on, Henry," she said, confidently. "I'm not saying you're not doing well for yourself, and I don't blame you for not succeeding as well as your brother, because it always has to be kept in mind that he's one in a hundred."

"One in a thousand."

"More than that," she declared, "if the truth was known. I scarcely dare talk about him to the two young ladies, but I think a lot, and the woman you made me have to come here on Mondays to do the washing says, that if all I tell her about him is true, there's no reason why one day he shouldn't become——" My mother lowered her voice and spoke the words in awed tones.

"That's just exactly what I'm going to help him to be," I assured her enthusiastically. "I'm prepared to work till I drop, so that Len should realise his ambition. This is only the first stage that is coming. Let's have a look at that old photograph of the house at Blackheath."

We gazed once more at the family group on the lawn. My father, bearded and bare-headed, with Len, a small boy holding his hand ; a tiny figure on my mother's lap—

"You always were a mite, Henry."

—Behind us two nurses. Cords of a swing dependent from a tree ; the first hoops of croquet with a striped stick ; a square solid important house at the side with a verandah. Standard rose trees lining a broad gravelled path.

"And that's where Len is going to bring me to, before I die," said my mother, kissing the picture, "as sure as eggs are eggs. That reminds me—you might run down to the Broadway and get three ; one each for the ladies, and one for you !"

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It has nothing to do with Len, but an incident happened about this time that will never go out of my memory. Preceded by a considerable taking of thought and cautious investigation it became, at one stage of the proceedings, something like a dream, so that I had to give myself a severe mental shake, and realise that it was being performed during my waking moments. This is what occurred.

A large long envelope, sealed on the flap, and fastened so accurately that it was not easy to insert a penknife came to the Shardeloes Road address. I placed the oblong green-covered book casually in my inside pocket, and went on with my breakfast with what was intended for easy composure; my mother, on a point of order, called attention to the irregularity of trying to take salt with a fork. On the way to the Latham's, I met three young men with whom I had nodding acquaintance and stopped each in turn, mentioning, after preamble, that I should have to find time to go to the bank. The announcement failing to disturb their calm, I repeated it in more emphatic tones.

"Well," said the first, "what of it? I suppose the old buffer leaves everything to you now."

"He still keeps all the money part of the business in his hands. As a matter of fact, I want to look in on my own account."

"Ho, ho!" in tones of congratulation. "Come to that, has it? Don't forget me in your will."

Kitty came into the office, and looked at everything on the desk, excepting the book which had been placed there in full view; I found it necessary, in order to attract attention, to request her not to touch it, and she at once took up the book. Kitty was in one of her restless moods, and instead of asking questions, replaced it, and went on to rustle through the contents of a file. I remarked that I should have to find time later, to go on the bank. She asked whether I had heard from Len, and I replied in the negative, adding that I should have to find time to go on to the bank.

"Let me sit here," she said, "whilst you are at your work." I found another high stool, and she perched herself atop swinging one slippered foot as she sat there. "Your manners are improving, Henry."

"And your temper."

"You think that?" she asked, eagerly. "I'm so glad. To tell you the truth, I've been doing my best to keep it under. And you notice that I'm different, do you? Do you think Len has noticed? Tell me!"

"I said you could sit, but I didn't tell you you could talk. Must get along with my work, or else I shan't find time to go on the bank. I want to look in, on my own account."

To my great annoyance, Kitty only said, "Oh!" and began to draw, on a blotting-pad, portraits of young men with unconvincing moustaches.

Late in the afternoon, I set about the important task. Made a rough copy on a memorandum, and taking a fresh nib, wrote very carefully on the first leaf of the book; under the signature I made a flourish, specially invented, and calculated to defy imitation. In detaching the perforated slips I, unfortunately, smudged one of the figures. The clock struck the half-hour, and fearful that I might arrive and find the doors closed in my face—thus postponing the wonderful operation until the morrow—I hastily wrote another and dashed out, only to be intercepted by a thousand and one inquiries, not one equalling in importance the task upon which I was engaged.

"Can you oblige me?" I panted, arriving at the counter. It was not the depository I had arranged; the intention had been to lounge in carelessly, push the cheque under the brass protection, and say, "Let me have that, sharp, please," as though I had been in the habit of cashing cheques of my own for years past.

"Afraid not," said the bearded clerk, in tones of regret.

One could see, in a flash, that the worst had happened. My savings, placed in an establishment of good repute, had vanished; the bank had stopped payment; what the papers

would call a financial crash had occurred. It was clear the situation demanded courage, but calling upon it, I found my stock unable to answer the demand. I gripped at the brass wires, and put a question in fluttering tones.

"We're slaves to convention," explained the bearded clerk, handing back the cheque," and old prejudices die hard. The rule is that we never give money in exchange for a cheque which isn't complete. Just you put your signature to it and it will be right. All gold?"

I have since cashed a good many cheques, but I do not know that I have ever succeeded in approaching a bank counter without trepidation, or retired from one without a certain amount of relief.

