CHAPTER XII

LEN FORGETS TO THANK

ON the night the result of the election was declared—with the borough almost as greatly excited as it would have been over a like event of a political nature, private carriages about the main streets with inappropriate occupants, and hoardings covered with posters—Mrs Latham prepared elaborately, taking her chances, as she said, and determined to carry Len off to a late meal whether he were successful or not. She and Kitty had canvassed for him; the elder lady, I believe, giving reckless promises in regard to diminution in rates and when these failed, using threats, and although I gave them certain thoroughfares exclusively for their attention, they complained that other women were engaged on similar tasks, being evidently under the impression that their efforts, and their efforts alone would be sufficient. As a fact, we had a good deal of help from ladies who drove from town, of an evening, interviewing me as though I were a paid junior clerk and starting on their tasks with an enthusiasm which could not be expected to last. The Mrs Woodrow, once seen entering the Regent Street restaurant with Len and his friends, proved the best and most determined worker, and her ignorance of my relationship to the candidate permitted interchange of half-confidential remarks with companions on the motives for her energetic methods which at the time diverted me greatly. Two young women from Upper Berkeley Street made a formal report to my brother concerning my behaviour towards them; entrusted with a book and cards for two long streets, they returned within half an hour with a satisfactory note against every name, and their complaint against me was grounded on

the circumstance that I ventured to express a doubt whether, in the short period, they had really made a call and obtained a promise at every house.

"I'll deal with him in a suitable manner," Len said, appeasing them. "Thank you ever so much for your valuable help. If I succeed, I shall feel I owe it all to you."

And coming back after they had driven off, remarked privately,

"Soft soap, little man. Use soft soap, not hard yellow! Get one of the reliable people to go through those streets."

Difficult with these erratic assistants to judge prospects, and I found myself denounced as a kill-joy for hinting that we should be beaten by a small majority. An easy matter enough for folk to dance into the Committee Rooms at ten o'clock at night, when I had been at the harrying work for four hours, with four more hours in front of me, and talk in high voices, declaring (with no knowledge) that Len could not lose, that we were certain to knock the other side into a cocked hat, to give fatuous suggestions concerning placarding private houses, to bring some ridiculous rumour concerning the past life of our opponent and imagine it was a priceless contribution, and bounce out again in order to fulfil some less serious appointment in town, shouting encouraging assurances; I had to become the brake on this rapid movement in order that we might proceed safely and with proper circumspection.

Len looked rather tired of it all on the last day, and Mrs Woodrow's coachman before driving him round in her open carriage, mentioned to me that I myself should require fresh air and lively society ere regaining the appearance of an ordinary man. Mr Latham had been growing more useless at the office, worse than useless in dealing with outdoor matters, and for more than a month of week-days I found myself able to take no more than three hours sleep at night; on the Sundays I endeavoured to make up for this by taking a late breakfast in bed, accepting later from the two young

women lodgers an address on the subject of sloth. Towards the afternoon of the last day—Latham had given me the Saturday off—I awoke with a start in the Committee Rooms (which had a pronounced odour of oranges left behind by the last unsuccessful occupant of the shop) and found the last lines, written before dozing off, sloped in a foolish way down to the corner of the note-paper. Milly, on entering, adopted a pleasant method for arousing me; she changed her affectionate manner for one of distress, and running out came back with materials for the manufacture of beef-tea.

"Drink up every drop of it," she ordered, emphatically. "I'd no idea it was taking it out of you like this. Why, you've lost all your colour!"

A great day, and my memory of it should be clear and distinct, but I can only see people rushing in and out of the converted fruit shop, hats on the backs of heads and losing their tempers and voices, can see the reverse side of the notices on the window headed—

VOTE THUS:
DREW X
MARTINGALE

I can hear Milly saying now and again,

"Do you feel better, dear?"

And my answer that I was never in a sounder condition in all my life. The London women rustling in with "Mr Henry, will you please see to this at once?" and Mrs Woodrow protesting against unnecessary questions. The clock, going slowly, because I glanced at it so often, to eight o'clock, and presently everyone announcing with a sigh of relief that it was all over now, except the counting and the shouting. Len came in and flung himself on a second-hand sofa that had two bricks for the fourth leg, and told me he felt sure he had lost; this meant, he declared, that the people at head-quarters would look upon him as a hoodoo, one to bring misfortune to any other and more important

contest and likely to be passed over accordingly for some name possessing a greater appearance of luck. Len's depression had the effect of arousing me. Admitting that I, too, did not feel certain the result would be in his favour, at any rate, no one could say it had been a poor fight; few would dare to hint he had not done better than any one else could have done. Ernest Fowler was about taking impressions, and we could rely upon him for placing the candidature in a favourable light in one of the Monday morning papers.

"You're troubled, Len," I went on, "because you think your own folk will be disappointed. You musn't consider too much the feelings of other people."

His hands clasped behind his head, he turned on the second-hand sofa and looked at me curiously.

"Some complain of being misunderstood," he said, slowly, "I confess I rather like it. But it's just as well you should understand that I'm not at all the kind of person you imagine. I'm selfish; selfish all through. I don't care a hang about any one in this world, excepting myself. There isn't a man, woman, or child in this world I would consider for a moment in any situation where I myself am concerned." He jumped from the sofa and began to stride up and down; the rest had left us for a time, the street door was closed.

"I don't believe it, Len, and I'll tell you why. If you were what you describe yourself, how do you account for the fact that you have so many friends?"

"Haven't you discovered that trick, either? You're a dull dog, if ever there was one. Why it's the easiest matter to get friends if you only make it clear that you don't want them! I never approach new people on my hands and knees. I meet them amiably enough, but I manage to convey the impression that I don't greatly care if I see them again or not. When a closer acquaintance follows, I take an early opportunity of pointedly neglecting them. Sometimes, in extreme cases, I flout them. (Good old fashioned-word,

flout; there's no other that quite takes it place.) Sometimes, as I've told you before, I drop them. Why, Henry, do you know the population of Great Britain and Ireland? One could make fifty new friends to-day and throw them off to-morrow, and go on doing that all through one's life without exhausting the total number." He took up a paper-weight, and with a run, delivered it as one sends a cricket-ball, over arm; it crashed through a window at the back of the shop. "Now come along and see how I accept defeat."

I felt glad one of the lent carriages stood outside. We drove through the crowded streets, where folk shopped as though no incident of great urgency was impending; occasionally some one recognised my brother and started a cheer, and this would arrest the Saturday night chaffering, and the shouts would be taken up by young men on the top of a tram-car. I glanced at him as he raised his hat; he was once again smiling, good-tempered, almost affectionate. A small crowd made way for our carriage, and as we stepped out a man smashed my hat down over my ears; Len followed swiftly and made his way into the building, disregarding the mingled roar.

"Gentlemen," said the returning officer at the centre of a table, a quarter of an hour later, addressing those of us who stood about the room. We took off our hats and pressed forward, as he recited the formula, made the announcement.

"Ah!" we said, turning to each other at mention of the first name. "What did I tell you?"

My brother's voice from the right of the table moved a vote of thanks, and said that he had thoroughly enjoyed the struggle. He begged to offer the hand of friendship to Mr Martingale in whom he recognised an honourable opponent, one worthy of better steel then he could provide. The honourable opponent declared he had done his best, hoped Mr Drew would recollect that a member appointed to the Council should represent the borough, and not merely the slightly preponderating number of voters who had polled for him; Len said "Hear, hear!" with great fervour. The

returning officer begged to acknowledge the vote, and trusted he was not transgressing the bounds of official reticence and decorum in expressing the earnest hope that high honours were waiting for both candidates.

"Not both!" whispered the room.

Outside the hall, a thunder of cheers altogether disproportionate to the size of the crowd; at a club house near, some one writing the figures with a walking-stick dipped in ink.

"You are pleased?" said the folk around Len.

"I am pleased," he replied, "because it may give me a chance of doing some good to my fellow creatures."

"First," said Mrs Latham, hospitably, "first you're coming home with me and Kitty—and Henry can come, too—and you shall have something nice to eat and drink. Shan't tell you what there is, but you won't be disappointed."

"I am disappointed," he answered. "Deeply disappointed. For I foolishly promised some one to drive back to town."

"Mrs Woodrow?" asked Kitty, in her sharp way.

"How clever of you to guess," he said.

He shook hands, thanking them, went around saying the exactly right word. A new roar told us the carriage had taken him off.

"He might have said a word to you, Henry," remarked Mrs Latham. "I'm sure you deserved it, if anybody did; fairly knocked up, you look; if it wasn't for the business, I should say you ought to get away for a bit. Kitty, you're looking pale too. Fact of the matter is— What's that?"

"I wish," said Kitty, with deliberation, "I very much wish he had been defeated!"

I talked all the way home in the tram-car, informing perfect strangers of the result, and wondering at the casual attention they gave. At Shardeloes Road, my mother, waiting at the front door, received my shouted news with

a delighted "No, not really!" and taking me in, made me give all the details.

"And he thanked you, Henry, for all you'd done. I'm sure Len wouldn't forget to do that."

"He was as nice as he possibly could be."

"Of course he was. And he sent a message to me?"

"A long message for you, mother." I let my head go slowly on one side, and fainted.

I must admit to feeling extremely proud both at the attention given, and at the fact that my slight illness was the result of working on behalf of Len. Neighbours called after church, and their voices, tuned in sympathetic key, came up from the passage with such phrases as "severe mental strain," and "change of air," and "burning the candle at both ends." Mrs Fowler brought along a volume called "The Household Physician," and she and my mother pored over it, endeavouring to ascertain the precise complaint which affected me, sometimes nearly securing a title, but baffled by a symptom that would not agree. Milly was not allowed to come upstairs—in itself a flattering circumstance—but the two waited upon me throughout the day with frequent appeals to confess I was feeling better; the lady lodgers conversed with me discreetly from the landing, prompted by such a determined resolution to cheer that I had to ask mother to induce them to cease. Ernest Fowler came late in the afternoon and read the descriptive article he had written about the County Council Election, and I insisted he should delete the reference to the candidate's brother. Ernest said he thought this would have gratified me; I pointed out to him that it would not gratify Len. Mr Fowler honoured our house with a visit, and I heard his deep voice remarking that the boy ought to get away for a bit; he thought he could, by exercise of what he called chickery-pokery, manage to obtain railway passes. My mother said, "But who's to go with him?" and Mr Fowler answered, "Why, you, ma'am, of course," and my mother said, "Good gracious, you're talking as though

I was a lady of title; what next, I wonder? I couldn't leave the house and fly off to the seaside; you must be off your head, man, to suggest such a thing!" Mr Fowler, leaving this, made a recommendation.

"I like the lad," he remarked, "or else I wouldn't think of interfering. It's all against my nature."

My mother said she knew what doctors were; once they were allowed to put a foot inside the house, the trouble was to induce them to stop their visits, but Mr Fowler's voice rumbled on, and half-an-hour later Dr Viney of Amersham Road, who had recently attended Mr Latham, came up to the room and told me all about his wife's uncle of South America; sent out there, it appeared, thirty years before because nothing could be done with him at home, and now returned simply covered with money from top to toe. Dr Viney asked nothing about my sensations, or the cause of my indisposition, and I thought he had forgotten all about the real object of his visit, but he sent in later a bottle of medicine, and I found he had told my mother a sea voyage would probably be necessary. We took this suggestion, and, in the pleasant, lazy time that followed, discussed the matter, whittling it down and reducing the expenditure involved. Mother had, with great trouble, written to Len, and every evening promised that he would be almost certain to come to see me.

Mr Fowler, when we had reduced Viney's recommendation to the lowest possible point, brought green slips which would frank me "and another" to Portsmouth and back. A delicate question arose. I wanted Milly to go with me, and my mother consulted Mrs Fowler, who said at once it would never do. To this, word was sent asking whether Mrs Fowler could manage to be my companion for the week; the answer came that Milly's mother would have been only too pleased, but that Ernest had a birthday on the Thursday. My cousin at Peckham was tried; she, it appeared, did not dare to lose sight, for so long a period, of her young gentleman, and Aunt Mabel endorsed this as

wise, and sane, and cautious on the part of her daughter. Mrs Latham called, and I ventured to put a suggestion before her.

"Been to Brighton often," she admitted, "but never Portsmouth. It would be rather nice to be able to say before I died that I'd been to Portsmouth. What do you think about bringing Kitty along?"

"Capital!"

"Couldn't trust her with many, but I could trust her with you. Only thing is, there's leaving Latham all to himself."

"You've got him in good training. By this time, I expect he's lost the taste for it."

"You see," she argued, as though in opposition, "it's all very well, but it would be to the advantage of the business to get you back, fit and well again. You may say what you like, but the truth is we can't manage very well without you. Saw a poster of ours the other day at the end of Malpas Road, and when I first caught sight of it, I really thought I'd gone off my head. Latham had passed by it a dozen times, and hadn't noticed it was the wrong way up."

"You and Kitty come away with me and look after me, and I'll guarantee that in less than no time I shall be ready for work again. We needn't stay in Portsmouth. We can take trips across to the Isle of Wight."

"In a steamer?"

"In a steamer."

"Not me!" replied Mrs Latham, with a shiver.

Thus it was arranged. An important gathering saw us off at New Cross Station, much as though we were Royalty going away for a considerable tour; Mr Fowler had reserved a compartment under the impression I was too weak to bear the presence of strangers. Milly cried, and my mother cried, because Milly cried. Ernest made a note on the back of an envelope, "The Platform Manner." Mrs Latham lifted a fore-finger to her husband as the train started, saying warningly, "Now mind!" and Mr Latham, flourishing his hat, replied, "Shan't forget, old dear!"

We certainly had an excellent time. I found I had greatly under-estimated Kitty; the early exuberance of manner had toned down, and on the journeys across to Ryde, and along the expensive little railway, she talked sensibly, and with a new manner of refinement. In the sun, and seated on the Esplanade at Sandown, one afternoon, I spoke to her of some extensions in the business, and she agreed that branches might be added; she liked the idea of calling the firm "Advertising Contractors," and listened interestedly to the account of consultations between Ernest and myself on the subject of relations with daily and weekly newspapers. Kitty was not sure her father would approve, without months of persistent argument, but thought that if I could get Len on my side and induce him to say a word to Mr Latham, the task would be easier, to which I replied that I had long since made up my mind never to bother Len, never to take up his valuable moments or obstruct him in any way; if one could help him, well and good, but I was determined not to trouble him with any sort of appeal to give assistance to me. Kitty went along to hear the Concertina King give his performance near the hotel, and a tall thin man, seated at the other end of the seat, folded up his morning journal and offered it to me. Impossible for him to avoid overhearing our conversation, and he hoped it would not be considered a liberty if he introduced himself. Mr Stemson, of Queen Street, Cheapside, down here for a mouthful of ozone, and going back on the morrow to enter into the thick of it once more in London. London gave you something, but was a bit inclined to be hard-fisted over the bargain, demanding a good deal in return. He gained I was interested in his own particular department of business, and speaking as one over forty to one not much over twenty—I felt greatly pleased by this slight exaggeration—urged me not to become a slave, never to allow the chains to be permanently fixed on wrists and ankles. For himself, he could admit that no matter where he happened to be, he talked advertisements, thought advertisements, dreamt advertisements. Could not

look at a white cliff without working out a scheme for securing it and arranging at once with a Meat Extract Firm, or a Soap Manufacturer; felt unable to glance at any prominent building, religious or secular, without a similar thought coming into his mind; gazing at the restive sea during the last half-hour he had found himself thinking, not of the shades of blue and green, but of a set of imitation life-buoys with the words conspicuously showing "Aregro Capsules for the Hair." I responded to all this by a description of my own work, and Mr Stemson nodded, suggesting an amendment only when I travelled beyond his powers of belief. He gave me his card, and I was able to offer him one that, owing to cheapness of production, had become slightly smudged. Mr Stemson asked me what I thought of the idea of kiosks along sea fronts illuminated at night, and we had a lively debate on the subject. I was so much accustomed to meeting only folk who had known me as a lad, that it proved particularly agreeable to be treated as an equal in years and understanding.

"Give me a call when you're in the City," he said, rising. "(I see your young lady is coming back for you.) Give me a call about lunch time. If any notions occur to you, drop me a word, and make an appointment."

I found myself becoming eager to get back to work, but Mrs Latham declared the change was doing me an immense amount of good, and in regard to Latham, why no news was good news. Kitty supported my resolution, until the Sunday morning, when I had written my daily letter to mother and to Milly, we strolled past bow-windowed terraces to the Floating Bridge, crossed to Gosport after gazing at H.M.S. *Victory*, and looked at the steam yacht *Annabel*, discussing its probable destination, wondering how much money it cost to keep going. We were about to turn away, and give others a chance of looking on, when an hotel omnibus arrived: my brother Len stepped down, turning at once to assist Mrs Woodrow, and leaving the rest to manage as they pleased. Kitty wanted me to call out,

but I said "No." Mrs Woodrow, apparelled for a sea-voyage, did not look attractive to our eyes, and Kitty whispered that she no longer felt jealous of her; some people near us decided Mrs Woodrow was Len's aunt, and that, judging by the nephew's attention, she had house property. A boat came alongside from the *Annabel*, and the entire party stepped in. Kitty and I sent a kiss as the yacht made its way out into the open.

After that, she did not encourage me in the desire to get back to town, preferring to remain where she could see the water and make guesses concerning the whereabouts of the *Annabel*. We laughed a good deal over Mrs Woodrow's appearance, prophesying that this would not improve as the voyage proceeded, and she made up some verses to the tune of "Weel may the keel row."

One afternoon Mrs Latham came running after us, fluttering a telegram and screaming as we were stepping across to the Ryde steamer. She was too breathless to say more, and I took the telegram from her.

"Return first train. Latham very seriously ill. May not last twenty-four hours. VINEY"