CHAPTER XIII

I POST A LETTER TO LEN

ONLY a stroke, said Viney, and when we echoed the remark reproachfully with emphasis on the first word, he said we ought to have seen the case of a man named Chesson in '88; the August of '88. Would Mr Latham recover, we asked? Viney replied by pointing out what a capital year it had been for strawberries; he had some growing on a kind of slope that caught most of the sunshine, and he could assure us, whether we cared to believe it or not, that a few specimens reached the proportions of a baby's fist. I followed him out of the house, and, after a deal of trouble, induced him for once to make a definite admission. There existed small likelihood, he said, at length, of the patient being able to leave his bed; no possibility that he would ever come out of his room.

Latham looked a queer, clumsy mass in the old-fashioned four-poster with hangings; he opened his eyes slowly, and when Kitty put her hand in his, kissing his forehead, he held it, and gave a look which meant that he desired her and no one else for companion. We cleared out the partly emptied bottles under the bed—"The master told me he was going to make up for lost time," remarked the servant, "but I thought it meant he was only going to take a quiet glass or two!"—and in the yard completely emptied them on a dust heap to the open disgust of two of our men who mixed paste before setting out; they referred pointedly to the motto of "Waste not, want not," adding that a blend made up of the varied contents would constitute the very beverage to make a chap's hair curl. Latham, it appeared, immediately

after the departure of his wife and daughter, sent an order to a merchant's in New Cross Road for a bottle of every known wine and every available spirit; one could imagine the gleeful anticipation with which the poor old fellow approached his task.

Here then was Kitty, almost a prisoner in the bedroom; here was Mrs Latham weeping bitterly, reproving me for taking them away to Portsmouth, and declaring the business would now go to rack and ruin; here was I with the duty of seeing that it went on as usual, or better. Some things he had always kept in his own hands, never permitting me or anyone else to have access to them, and I had to master these, to ascertain particulars of certain contracts entered into verbally (which could only be done by assuming perfect knowledge) and introducing a quiet revolution into the general methods. I admit I enjoyed all this, and especially did I relish the selection of a clerk from a set of lads just leaving the Board School; in the preliminary interview with my old master in Edward Street, I perhaps over-played the part and exhibited too much patronage, for he reminded me sharply of my age, and complained that I had not grown much since the day I left. A lad of Milton Court Road I selected, after subjecting him to a severe *viva voce* examination, in the course of which I discovered how much one had forgotten since school-days, finding myself compelled to fall back on geography of a more local nature, demanding to know which route he would take if sent from New Cross Gates to Brockley Tips, from Brockley Tips to the clock at Lewisham. The lad proved my equal here, admitting that much of his information had been gained whilst playing the game of hares and hounds. I told him there must be more sports so far as he was concerned; life was real, life was earnest— He deftly finished the quotation.

"I want you," I said, "to be assiduous, and well-behaved and civil."

"Right, sir!"

"Above all things," still under the impression that I was saying something original, "above all things, loyal."

"Can't sing, sir, if that's what you're driving at."

I went on from the schools to see the lad's mother whom I addressed, in the course of conversation as "My good woman!"

For some weeks I had to remind myself that it was necessary to appear grave and serious; relish of the sense of power, importance of calling on people with a free hand, reception of visitors who wanted to see Mr Latham—all these had to be hidden, and I practised, in the mirror set over the mantelpiece at office, an expression of gravity which sometimes slipped into ferociousness; Mrs Croucher meeting me one day, gave the highly satisfactory criticism to my mother that I was growing old before my time. Len returned from the yachting trip, and my mother pasted in the book all the reports of the "Scene at the Council" in which he had taken a spirited part; I wrote giving him the particulars of recent events, because Kitty was no longer able to send her daily letter, and Len took the trouble to send back a note, which I have always kept and shall always keep, congratulating me on the improvement in my situation, and sending an affectionate message of sympathy to Kitty. I told her the arrest of the communications was likely to be very useful in strengthening the bonds between herself and Len, and Kitty, admitting there might be something in the argument, assured me it was no easy task to refrain from writing to any one whom you loved. The truth of this I discovered for myself when Milly went away for three weeks to an aunt in Devonshire.

There existed an inducement, now that I was general commanding, not only to show considerable austerity in dealing with the men, and a cold aloofness towards the youthful clerk, but also to adventure into new forays, to make some dashing attack in a fresh direction. Here, Ernest Fowler acted as wise counsellor, and it proved im-

possible to deny that he, formerly a youth who changed opinions more frequently than he changed shirt cuffs, had become a clear-headed person, able to give good advice and give it swiftly. (I envied him at this period because he was singularly favoured, not only in the circumstance that he was making golden guineas out of his contributions to the Press, but in the fact that his hair was becoming thin on the top, a conjunction of fortunate incidents that dowered on one man seemed to me hardly just.) To him were submitted several plans for extending the business, such as transferring the office to New Cross Road and opening there an agency for advertisements in public journals; the securing of contracts for catalogues and the printing of these with the aid of a staff of artists able to draw anything from Chippendale chairs to young women in corsets; complete control of some trade paper; an arrangement with the tramway companies for the space available inside and outside of their cars. Without pretending that the ideas were good, one can fairly say they were numerous; most of them came to me in the mornings when I was shaving.

"You met a man named Stemson down in the Isle of Wight," interrupted Ernest.

"My dear chap," I said, "I hope you give me credit for some sense. I'm not likely to be imposed upon by a chance acquaintance of that kind. For all I know or you know, he may have been simply humbugging, just as I was."

"I know a man who wants to be a doctor," he went on.

"Different matter altogether."

"And he tells me that there's the choice of starting a new practise and trying to make it pay, and the choice of scraping every penny together and buying one which is already in existence; the first he says is tiresome up-hill work and many struggle on without ever reaching the top. Now you are talking about making a similar attempt. For one thing Latham is still alive, and I don't know that you have the power and I'm not sure that you have the right to splash

out with his money; in the second place it seems highly probable that with your limited experience——"

"I'm getting tired of that phrase!"

"With your limited experience you may come a cropper, you may break your neck, you may find yourself left on the cold, hard snow. You Drews have got all this ambition, or daring, or whatever you like to call it, in your blood, but you ought to remember where it dumped your father in the end."

"It won't be long before Len is in the house at Blackheath."

"A young colt like you is capable of good work, but you ought to be harnessed to a steady-going horse. I can't tell you whether Stemson of Queen Street is the kind of partner you want, but if I were in your place, and if I had all your notions, I should go and see him."

I had to call on a firm in Queen Victoria Street, shortly after that with estimates for the posting in South-East London of a bill with a picture of Napoleon crossing the Alps in a pair of their nine and elevenpenny boots. Noting the name of a street that went across in the direction of Southwark Bridge, I searched for Mr Stemson's number, and going up in a lift found his offices. They were what is called well appointed, with leather couches and plenty of newspapers; I made mental comparison between them and the office of Latham & Co, and a good deal of confidence went out at finger-tips. Mr Stemson was not in, said one of the gentlemanly clerks; was indeed out at lunch, and the clerk did not feel justified in stating the hour he would be likely to return. Where did Mr Stemson usually take his midday meal? The clerk politely regretted that this information was not in his possession.

There were two or three likely looking restaurants near, but it would have been undignified to go in and look around; the disappointment was to be regarded as an omen that Mr Stemson and I were not to do business together. In an underground tea-room, gained by diving steeply from

the pavement, I ordered a cup of white coffee and a scone; the waitress turning to the customer on the other side of the table remarked—

"Let me see, you said a coffee and a scone, too, didn't you?"

"If you don't mind," he answered, deferentially.

"But one of your clerks," I exclaimed, turning to him, "told me you were having lunch."

"I am," replied Mr Stemson. "Why, it's the little fellow I met at Sandown. How are you? Can you play draughts?"

We had a game, and he beat me and passed his ticket over as indication that I had to settle for his refreshment. He said this constituted the only diversion and the one exercise he permitted himself; a single game with a worthy opponent enabled him to go back refreshed to his work. At other tables junior clerks were talking loudly of impending feats in cricket and speaking with tones of patronage about Yorkshire; some of their elders conversed in lower tones on the topic of ladies, and how to win them; Mr Stemson, owner of the fine offices I had seen, sat opposite to me speaking in mournful tones of the consequences that resulted when, a week previously, he had taken, to oblige an important client, in the day-time, three whiffs at a cigarette.

"Let me see," he said, after promising to consider my sage advice to leave tobacco alone in future. "What were we talking about when we last met? I remember I was interested in you, but, for the life of me, I can't recollect why."

I refreshed his memory, taking care to adhere carefully to exact truth. Explained the work at present being done by Latham's, hinted at my views and desires regarding the future. Mr Latham might go off at any moment and, regretting his loss for many reasons, one wanted to make sure it would not mean looking for work.

"Have you any capital?"

"Fifteen pounds twelve."

"That's something," he said with gravity, "but it is not what, in the City, would be called a feather bed to fall back upon. What you want, I suppose, is to find a man who will make a bid for the Latham business and keep you?"

"Amalgamating it perhaps with his own."

"There are not many idiots this side of Temple Bar," he remarked, regretfully.

"Can't you consider it, Mr Stemson?"

He looked at me for a time, and then shook his head. "Shouldn't know where to put my hand on the cash," he declared, mournfully. "If anyone came to me at the present moment and asked me for five shillings, I should have to go and borrow it from one of my clerks. That's a fact! The little I have is all out, and if I tried to realise any of it I should find it had all vanished like——" He pointed to the smoke from a neighbour's cigar.

"If I were you, I should want to leave something for my wife and children."

"When a man has neither," he replied, "he has no incentive to make money. How much do you think they would ask for the business?" I named a figure. "Gracious!" he exclaimed, in a shocked manner, and putting on his hat walked slowly out and up the staircase.

It seemed difficult to guess whether he expected me to follow or not, but I did not move, and Ernest Fowler was good enough to hint in the evening that he applauded my reserve. Ernest, reminding me of a previous experience, said that in business preliminaries of the kind, a certain coyness always had to be expected, and the highest art consisted in pretending not to want to sell, when you eagerly desired to sell; to affect a similiar indifference when anxious to buy; he prophesied a letter would come from Stemson & Co., at the moment when the firm decided that Latham's did not intend to take the next step. A letter did come a week later, signed by E. W. Rentworth, Managing

Clerk, saying he was instructed by Mr Stemson to say that if I happened to be in the neighbourhood during the course of the following month, would I be so good as to favour him with a call; on the counsel of Ernest, for whose new sagacity I was beginning to entertain a regard, a reply went that the claims of business and the continued illness of my superior would prevent me from coming to the City for some considerable time; I begged to thank him for his letter, and remained his obedient servant. It was reported to me that two men had been observed going about the neighbourhood, noting the extent and quality of our stations, and the number and value of the posters; they interrogated my informant who replied that since the governor had been laid up, the business had gone up by leaps and bounds. Mr Stemson wrote a friendly note in his own handwriting, requesting the favour of my company to take pot-luck with him at seven o'clock on Thursday, the twenty-first, in the garret he occupied at Palace Court, Bayswater. Not evening dress.

"Don't ask me," wailed Mrs Latham, irritably, when I tried to acquaint her with the condition of affairs. "I'm pestered nearly out of my mind as it is. You must do what you think best."

"Have I your permission to do so?"

"Do go away," she implored. "Surely you're old enough to take some cares off my shoulders; if you don't feel capable of looking after everything, why we'd better shut up at once. You're not going to fail us in the hour of need, Henry."

I had no wish to do anything of the kind; all one wanted to do was to feel certain that whatever happened she and Kitty would not turn round and blame me.

"Come upstairs," she said, "and let's see if we can get any sense out of him."

Kitty looked pale, and this was nothing to be surprised at, for she had been in close attendance on her father for several weeks, taking her meals in the room and declining the

suggestions made that she should sometimes go for a walk. Mr Latham was asleep; in a corner the three of us consulted in undertones.

"I don't want to think," whispered Kitty, glancing affectionately at the pillow, "that we're going to lose him. He's the only relative I have, and he's always been a dear, good father to me."

"Last person in the world," declared Mrs Latham, "to wish anybody any harm, but you must admit he's only in the way."

"He's not in my way," retorted the girl, sharply.

"Oh! indeed," remarked the other. "You haven't the intelligence to see that you're not only losing time, but you're also losing some of your good looks."

Kitty rushed across to the dressing-table, and examined the reflection of her features apprehensively. The movement aroused the old man, and I went to the bed-side. His eyelids made two or three efforts before they succeeded in remaining open, and when he recognised me, a slow smile went around his mouth; he tried to speak and I wiped his lips with Kitty's handkerchief. Bending, I explained the situation as briefly as possible, urging him to say what he wished me to do and to mention the sum to be asked; it was impossible to see whether he understood, and Kitty, returning, endeavoured to make the matter clear to his comprehension. He gave a long sigh, and the large old head went aside wearily.

"No use, little brother-in-law," she whispered. "If you have the courage, do just as you think he would do, and make up your mind to stand the consequences. And tell me, do you think I am going off in my appearance? Do you think Len would think so? Tell me candidly. It won't make any difference in my manner to father."

I re-assured her, mentioning that Len was not the kind of man to allow his affection to change because a girl behaved devotedly to her parent. He might not be demonstrative, but once Len had given his word, it would require something in the nature of an earthquake to induce

him to alter. I am afraid I invented a remark alleged to have been made by Len to me, concerning her looks, to the effect that a slight pallor would constitute an improvement; Kitty went back cheerfully to her monotonous task at the bed-side.

Mr Stemson's garret consisted of a suite of rooms on the second floor, in Palace Court, and pot luck proved a meal of astonishing dimensions and gorgeousness, with three maid-servants waiting at table and an aunt seated at one end who, having ascertained that I claimed no relationship to a peer of a somewhat similar name, made no attempt to conceal obliviousness to my presence. Mr Stemson's frugality during the day seemed part of an elaborate plan to encourage and preserve keenness for the evening meal, but he persisted in bewailing a want of appetite, and before the meal urged me to join him in a bitters; without the assistance of this, he declared, he would be unable to so much as glance at a single dish without a feeling of deep repulsion. A finer trencherman, once knife and fork set to work, I never wish to see. His aunt, from her end of the table, warned him more than once when he apologised for keeping us waiting whilst he returned his plate for a second help, that he would suffer for his extravagance, but he replied in a manner which, for him, neared the point of joviality, that he did not care, and that a slight attack of indigestion formed small punishment when such an excellent cut of lamb was about. I had never before been in a house where so much luxury existed: it reminded me of accounts my mother sometimes gave of the establishment at Blackheath, and when I had opened the door for the aunt, who said, absently—

"Thank you, Lord Crewe."

—I went back to take her comfortable chair and dragged it towards Mr Stemson with all my confidence restored; prepared to talk on equal terms with any one belonging to the City of London. I did not dare to take one of the black cigars which Mr Stemson offered; he mentioned in explanation of their amazing length, that his medical man

had ordered him to restrict himself to one and only one, after dinner.

"Before we have a chat," holding my claret up to the light in a style that I discovered later went out about twenty years before, "I want to tell you that everything must stand over for a time. Apart from that, I've been going very carefully into details, and the sum mentioned to you——"

"Look here, young Drew," he said, sharply. "I'm accustomed to dealing with business matters in a business-like way. You gave me a figure, and I can't prevent you from cancelling the offer or doing anything else you like to do, but I may have the opportunity, in course of time, of paying you out, and it's only fair to say this is the course I shall certainly pursue. I'm a man with a lot of irons in the fire, and some of them are red-hot. When I take one out to use, you can be pretty sure it is not I who am going to play pantaloon."

"Don't want you to think I'm behaving unfairly, Mr Stemson."

"Behave just as you please," he retorted.

"Supposing I managed to persuade the parties concerned, what would be my position?"

It astonishes me even now to regard my composure that evening during the hour's conversation; to be just, some of the credit should be given to the wine. Looking back I can hear myself interrupting with "That's all very well, but—" and "You'll excuse me, but I think you lose sight of—" and "I don't agree with you at all." By half-past nine we had settled everything, and I feel sure that with one more sip of Burgundy, I should have experienced a sudden fit of youthful candour, confessing the terms obtained were far better than I had expected. Instead, I suggested we should go into the drawing-room, where the aunt, now disregarding my early denials, begged me to tell her, in confidence, whether there was any truth in the veiled statements hinted at in society journals concerning Lady Violet Maberly.

I authorised her to give the scandal flat and complete contradiction.

It appeared to me an evening for walking home, and Mr Stemson conceded that, if he were wise, he would accompany me across the park; this would be excellent for his health but he decided, after consideration, to go straight to bed; as we became better acquainted, I was to induce him, gently, to take exercise. I found myself on the old track, recognising all the signs in Old Kent Road from The World Turned Upside Down to the Rising Sun; identified once more the churches and chapels, and keeping a wary look-out for hoardings. I told my favourites amongst the nine hundred houses that I was hurrying on in the world, getting a trifle nearer, in the race, to my brother. The hour was late, but three people had to be told of the success of my great commercial undertaking; I went first to Milly's house where the family, waiting up, received the news with gratifying compliments, declaring that my clothes had the scent which clung to garments worn by men about town; before going on to my mother and to rest, I strode across to Hatcham. There a light showed through the brown blinds of poor old Latham's room, and in collecting small pebbles I thought of the time that must come to everyone when, retiring on half pay from active service, or on no pay at all, they have to endure the knowledge that younger people are taking up the fight.

"That you, Henry?"

"Yes, Kitty. Everything's gone capitally. Tell you about it in the morning, but I thought you'd like to know."

"So glad. Post this letter to Len." I caught the note as it fell from the window. "I've asked him to call, but I don't know whether he will or not."

"Bet you sixpence he calls before the month is out."

"Hope I lose," she said, fervently.

Their meeting proved to be one of the few occasions when I was able to give good advice to Len. It seemed to my mother and myself the moment had arrived when it was

necessary to give a party, and invite the Peckham relatives, the Fowlers, some friends of mine and their sisters, to all of whom I had become indebted for hospitality. My opinion (dogmatically explained in discussing such preliminaries as claret, sandwiches, the clearing out of the front room, and a white drugget over the carpet) my own opinion was that we could safely invite many more than we desired to be present, and a high stroke of diplomacy consisted in selecting a Saturday night when many were likely to have urgent engagements. As the replies came in, all beginning with either "Delighted to accept—" or the more formal and precise "So-and-so presents compliments and begs to say that it will give great pleasure—" my mother took a grave view of the situation, going so far as to recommend that one of us should, at the last moment, simulate illness; she felt unable to look forward with equanimity to the prospect of seeing the guests submitting to the treatment experienced by sardines. To this I demurred—being now of the age when any argument advanced by a parent seemed to demand flat contradiction—and offered to transform the kitchen, with my own hands, into something like a boudoir, to which couples might retire for conversation and rest. This scheme drove my mother and Mrs Croucher into the scullery; Mrs Croucher remarked caustically that it seemed a pity, whilst we were about it, not to take the New Cross Public Hall and do the thing well; as an alternative she suggested a marquee in Greenwich Park. I took an afternoon off in order to direct affairs at Shardeloes Road; lost my temper half a dozen times and recovered it; helped to bring in rout seats and to shift furniture, snatched at a cup of tea; fussed about with a hammer doing scarcely anything with great determination; inspected the commissariat arrangements and gave several hints of no value whatever; ran on errands and forgot the object; behaved generally as one on the very edge of mental failure.

"Now you look here, Henry," said my mother, definitely. "If you don't go straight upstairs and wash and dress, your Milly will come and catch you in your shirt-sleeves."

Thanks, not to myself but to the others, we were all ready, lights up, fires burning well, scarlet shades on candles, and a scent of Tangerine oranges pervading the house, before the first knock came. There had been time to instruct Mrs Croucher in the task of announcing guests, and to persuade her to commit the names to memory, a sheer waste as it proved for the brief interval between accepting and delivering them, in a loud voice to us, enabled her to give her own version; Kitty became (to her intense annoyance) Miss Nathan, the Fowlers became the Growlers, and some people called Smithers were announced as—

"Mr and Miss Sniffer."

When I remonstrated, privately, she told me, publicly, that if I thought I could do it better, I had her permission to take the job on myself. Milly gave me a glance of warning, and turned the disasters to account by insisting they should all retain for the evening the names given; a forfeit to be paid by any one who slipped back into accuracy. Milly it was too who first played, taking a position that no one else seemed anxious to occupy, and on the delicate question arising of who should be at the pianoforte whilst dancing was in progress, Milly declared her intention of giving up the music stool to nobody; to my objection that this would leave me without a partner she instructed me, in an undertone, in the duties of a host, one of which appeared to be that he was expected to dance with every lady guest.

"I didn't know, Milly."

"You have a great deal to learn," she said. A remark which considerably increased my astonishment.

"Len coming?" asked Kitty Latham, as we met in the rather cramped quadrilles.

"Your usual question."

"Answer me, please."

"Of course, he isn't coming."

"You might have told me that before."

The crowd was certainly great, and my mother's anxiety that everyone should be able, if so minded, to sit down perturbed her greatly, but she observed, after a while, that everyone rather enjoyed the circumstance of being a unit in a considerable number, a relish, I have since found, not restricted to New Cross. The pressure was eased when a few couples strolled away to the transformed kitchen, where a screen masked the cooking range, and basket chairs gave an appearance of elegant ease; the sneeze with which my mother was afflicted at the doorway when she had occasion to go through, enabled couples to take up unconvincing attitudes of decorum.

We were talking about Len, my mother and I in duet, with assistance from Kitty, when at the front door came knocking, that instead of halting after three or four raps went on in a mad, tempestuous fashion. Mrs Croucher was summoned, and fluttered through the passage. We counted the guests and could not discover that any were missing. Confused voices at the open front door.

"Your eldest," announced Mrs Croucher, "and I think he's boozed."

Len stayed about twenty minutes, seated on the sofa in the corner, his arm around Kitty's waist and talked without a stop during the whole of the time. The entertainment was arrested, and our guests stood about watching him, half inclined to show amusement when he found himself in a difficulty with certain words, but the sight of my mother's face checked them.

"Can't stop longer," he said, presently, attempting to rise. "Must be off. Give us kiss, Miss Latham."

I put on my over-coat, and told him I would walk so far as the station. Outside, he gripped my arm, and I persuaded him to give up the effort of pushing a gate which required to be pulled.

"What do you mean," I demanded, warmly, "by coming here in this state? Do you know that you've spoiled my party?"

"Lil' man 'noyed?"

"I am extremely annoyed," I declared. Wondering, all the while, at my courage in speaking to him in this way. "I don't know what possessed you to do it. Most unkind."

"Mos' unkind?"

"Look here, Len. Can't you pull yourself together? Can't you sober yourself and come back and pretend it was a lark. Think of mother!" I added, appealingly.

He did not speak until we were near a chemist shop in Lewisham High Road, when he gave me an order. I brought out the small glass and he drank the contents; stood at the railings for a few moments with his hat off. Then straightened himself, did this wonderful brother of mine; led the way, returning to Shardeloes Road. At the door, he took a pocket-comb from his pocket.

"Now for the second syllable," he remarked, cheerfully, re-entering the crowded room. "Mother, you don't mean to say you couldn't see I was only pretending? Awfully sorry if I over-did it."

Kitty asked me next day to tell her the truth. My reply compelled her to remark that one might as well try to get secrets from a brick wall.