

CHAPTER XIV

LEN WALKS WITH ME

THE world began to move, and this period can be looked upon as the one where I really turned back my sleeves. Failure in the initial effort ought to have made it difficult to regain self-confidence; as it was, I showed, no doubt, an undue amount of assurance. The great advantage came in the possession of a free hand. With Mr Latham upstairs, taking interest only in his daughter Kitty (his eyes as she went about the room followed her slowly, so that he was sometimes gazing at the fire-place when she had returned to the bed-side) there was no one interfering in the arrangements made between Cheapside and Hatcham. Two things proved specially gratifying; one that my mother no longer considered it necessary to shake her head over my proceedings and to warn against failure, the other that at Queen Street I was allowed to walk straight to the inner fortress without parleying at the drawbridge. One can guess what the clerks there thought of the introduction of a bumptious outsider (I, in their place, should have thought as they did), but the friendliness shown by Mr Stenson induced them to refrain from any open protest. An incident which helped me, even in their view, was the matter of a prize offered by some Printers' Institute for the most attractive and artistic advertisement; to be candid, it seemed scarcely possible mine was the most artistic, for I had only taken enough drawing lessons to ensure the correctness of perspective but, to be equally candid, the idea was a good one, and Ernest Fowler ought to have accepted my offer of one half of the amount. I told him it would be my duty and my pleasure to do him a turn later on, and from this it will be seen

that so far as New Cross was concerned, I assumed, at this time, an air of patronage.

In the same spirit, I informed the two lady lodgers one evening that they would be acting wisely in looking about for new quarters; they wailed aloud, declaring they could never find another place to suit them, and this in spite of the fact that they had scarcely ceased to grumble from the moment of entering the house a few years previously. My mother coming in from the task of using a water can in the garden begged to be informed what the row was about, and I told her a senior clerk of Queen Street was to be transferred to New Cross to take charge of the Latham branch, exercise control over the junior whom I had hitherto lorded, and to command the outdoor staff. She requested the two ladies to retire from the conference; they obeyed with handkerchiefs at eyes.

"Now, Henry, my dear," she said, folding the hem of the table-cloth carefully, "me and you are not going to have any dispute, because you're nearly a man, and I'm nearly an old woman. You wanted to go away once before, and I'm afraid you changed your mind only to please me. So you're going to decide just as you like because you know best—and I do believe that's the first time I ever made the remark to you, although, often, often I've said it to Len—you know best, and I'm not going to stand in your light in any way whatsoever. But I've mapped out my life, and, if you don't mind we'll let it go on just as I've meant it to go. If you take me up to London, and we go into rooms, I shall simply be a fish out of water. There won't be enough for me to do; I shall get interfering with the landlady, if there is one, and it'll be nothing but rows, rows, rows, morning, noon, and night. Here, I am my own mistress, and I've got the two young ladies to look after; they like ordering me about of an evening, and I like being ordered about. They pay regular, and I don't mind telling you that I've put by a bit and—" her head trembled with pride, "I can manage. Haven't troubled Len for a long time, and now I needn't trouble you!"

I protested. I should always insist on making a weekly contribution.

"Well, you can begin," she conceded, "as Len did, and when you get tired or forget, you can stop, as he did. To tell you the truth, Henry, I was a bit upset when he left off so quickly, but it's worked out all right, and I know as well as you do he's going to make it up for me. Till that time comes, I'm quite willing to wait. He won't be long! I shall stay on here until he drives up in his carriage and pair, and gives a loud rat-tat at the door and I open it, and he gives me a hug and a kiss and says, "Come along, mother, I've bought the old house at Blackheath, and you're going to live with me there!"

"He'll be married by that time, mother."

"I've watched the girl," she replied, precisely, "and I see great improvements. At one time I thought she was too flighty—she certainly don't compare with Milly—but she's improved, or else I have, or else both, and I foresee we'll pull together all right. I shall have the room nearly at the top of the house that your poor father used to call the library, and if so be as the children get fond of me why——"

My mother wiped her eyes, and went up the staircase to put an end to the suspense endured by the two ladies.

Thus it was settled. In a journal devoting itself to the letting of houses and rooms, I found an address in Tavistock Place, Bloomsbury, which seemed to have lingered in the recesses of my memory, and taking Milly up there late one afternoon, we found these were the identical apartments which Len, for a space, after leaving Osnaburgh Street, occupied; the landlady explained proudly that Mr Drew had grown too big for them. Informed by Milly of my relationship to Len, the woman—a tall refined person, one not in the least resembling the Bloomsbury landladies of tradition, and glancing at me sharply when I nearly missed an aspirate—said no references would be required; some of the furniture

left behind by my brother could be placed at my disposal ; she wondered I had not been amongst the many visitors the other Mr Drew entertained. The sitting-room had two long windows reaching to the floor from which one could see a corner of the square (Milly declared that Bloomsbury squares were, at their best, as beautiful as anything in London) the bedroom was reached through folding-doors or, if I preferred, these could be closed and the pianoforte placed there. A swift shower coming on as we talked the landlady sent up tea and toast for us, and Milly played something out of *The Gondoliers*, and we kissed each other to the joy of our respective hearts, until we found that a small crowd of children had assembled on the pavement at the opposite side of the roadway ; they gave a groan of disappointment when we showed their presence had been recognised. Milly held private conversation with the landlady concerning the weekly rent, and was able to announce that, by representing the small amount of attendance I should require, by guaranteeing that only one pair of boots would be placed outside the door nightly, and by giving generous testimonials concerning the excellence of my character and general behaviour, she had succeeded in reducing the amount by eighteen pence. We went on afterwards, I remember, to the Savoy Theatre, occupying such important seats that Milly had to take her hat off ; on the way home in the train we hummed the melodies. (Yesterday a piano-organ started one or them as I began to write and there was sent out, from sheer thankfulness, half a crown ; the Italian lady, to my regret, misinterpreted my intention and moved the instrument to a point well out of hearing.)

I took the earliest opportunity of writing at full length to Len on note-paper that bore the new address, and he replied congratulating me on following in his footsteps, but warning me to be careful in dealing with Mr Stemson ; Len had some transactions with him at one time, and regretted it deeply. This perturbed me until, having ordered one of the clerks to look up the incident, I found Len had disputed

payment for work honestly done, and indeed never paid a penny for it; one could not well see, in these circumstances, of what he had to complain. Mr Stemson behaved fairly to me, and went so far one day to throw off his usual reserve and admit I was a man with a head, under which encouragement I increased my efforts to discover valuable suggestions. These came most generously in walking about London alone of an evening, especially when one became accustomed to the streets and could tramp without being allured by any shop windows, excepting those of booksellers. The bookshops had a special interest for me when Ernest Fowler brought out a book of short stories with a dedication on the front page to "My Friend, Henry Drew"; a natural interest encouraged me to assist the demand by going into discount shops and asking, "Do you happen to have a book called 'Intermediate Tales' that I hear talked about a good deal?" and when the assistant answered in the negative but offered to obtain it for me, the reply was that I wanted it for a particular purpose at the very moment; when they produced the volume I looked at the pages and said, "Beg your pardon, got the title wrongly; should have said 'Elevating Anecdotes,'" to which the assistant could only respond that he had never heard of such a book, and I, expressing regret at the incomplete stocking of the establishment, withdrew. Mentioning to Ernest that I could not understand where he found his plots, he reciprocated by declaring wonder at the fertility of my notions. It will be guessed that we were both gaining something in courtesy manners; the boyish plan of crude frankness had departed.

Ernest sat at the left-hand of the Chairman when the New Cross staff gave me a farewell supper. I wanted Len to occupy the position; his letter annoyed Milly, who declared he seemed to be under the impression that no one had a right to get on in the world but himself; I pointed out to her that the note had clearly been written in a hurry and begged her to read between the lines, drew special attention to the postscript which said, "Shall soon want your help

again." In regard to this, Milly declared with emphasis that I had once made myself seriously ill by over-working on behalf of Len, and she would not dream of allowing me to repeat the blunder. She agreed, with equal decision of manner, to my remark that we looked at Len from two entirely different points of view.

The newspaper extract before me has two head lines—"Gratifying Incident at New Cross. Departure of Mr Henry Drew," which occurred to me, at the time, as one of those statements which might be more adroitly expressed. Concerning the rest of the report my mother declined to discover any fault, and a marked copy went to Len, to Aunt Mabel at Peckham, to the married cousin, and to less immediate relatives.

"We hear much in these days of enmity between Capital and Labour, and it is interesting therefore to note that in our neighbourhood this feeling is singularly absent. Only on Thursday evening last at that well-known hostelry 'The Marquis of Granby,' so admirably situated as to form a landmark, a farewell supper was held by the staff and friends of the well-known and enterprising firm of Messrs Latham Bros., to Mr Henry Drew of Shardeloes Road, on his taking up a new position with a notable London firm of advertising agents with whose business that of Latham Bros. has recently been amalgamated. A *recherché* meal having been done full justice to, the cloth was removed, and—

"Mr THOMAS WILLS said this was an occasion when mirth was mingled with sorrow. He had first to express regret that the state of Mr Latham's health prevented him from being present, and from taking the chair which he (Mr Wills) so unworthily occupied. (No, no.) Mirth was mingled with sorrow because, whilst on the one hand they were here to congratulate a gentleman young in years, but he ventured to say old in wisdom (hear, hear), to congratulate him on a well-deserved advance; on the other hand they condoled with themselves in losing him. (Cheers.) There might have been

times, he for one did not wish to deny it, when a certain amount of argument took place over this, that, or the other, and he himself had gone so far as to express the opinion that Mr Henry Drew was too big for his hat. He begged to withdraw that assertion. (Cheers.) He now looked upon the guest of the evening as one who could see further through a brick wall than most people, and everyone ought to be anxious to give credit where credit was due. Far was it from him to say a word against absent friends, but facts were facts, and it had to be stated that the staff of Messrs Latham Bros. had been nearly doubled since Mr Drew took complete charge. On behalf of those assembled to do him honour, he (the Chairman) begged to tender every wish for continued success. (Loud cheers.)

"The Chairman here handed to the guest a handsome plush-lined case containing twelve knives and forks, expressing a humorous wish that these might not sever friendship, and that the future Mrs Drew would not blame them for giving her something extra to keep clean.

"MR HENRY DREW, in rising to respond, received an extraordinary ovation, together with musical honours. We deeply regret that exigencies of space prevent us from giving his speech *in extenso*; suffice it to say that he reviewed in a masterly way the subject of advertising from its earliest stages, mentioning a curious and little-known fact in connection with recently discovered papyri in Egypt. Coming to modern days he declared his belief that we were on the eve of a great movement when men would no longer be content with hiding their light under a bushel, but would set the bushel, bottom upwards, and the light on top. Business firms were beginning to recognise that they must in future act in a business-like manner, and where soap and pills had led, other trades he felt certain, would eventually follow. He thought our public hoardings would become as useful in their way as the National Gallery; contended the advertisement pages of our great public journals could be made, by dexterous handling, as attractive as those which contained the news of

the day. In conclusion, he begged to propose 'Literature,' coupling with the toast the name of one already distinguished in the world of letters.

"Mr ERNEST FOWLER, having responded in a brief, but amusing speech, gave 'Mine Host' and the respected proprietor returned thanks for the compliment in a voice broken with emotion. The rest of the evening was given up to melody in the course of which it was proved that those who wield the paste-brush are by no means devoid of musical talent, Mr Buckmaster obliging, by request, with 'Jim Crow.' A most enjoyable evening closed with 'Auld Lang Syne,' the entire company crossing arms in the approved manner."

My admirable landlady at Tavistock Place only intruded herself upon me once a month, bringing then a small black book, and leaving it, in conversing, near the writing-table, as though the rent were a matter of no importance; on these occasions, the talk always went (after preliminaries concerning weather, increase in rates, desirability of effecting a change in the Government) to the subject of Len. She made comparisons between us, pointing out that whereas he was never at home in the evenings excepting for the purpose of entertaining friends, I was always at home in those hours, bringing work from Queen Street, and that my powers of entertaining friends had not yet been tested. I tried to find from her the names of people who came to the house in Len's time but, a model of discretion, she replied this was no business of hers, that she was always prepared to allow young gentlemen, in their selection of acquaintances, a certain amount of latitude; the choice was either to do this and retain them, or to fall back on lady lodgers who would be ringing the bell in their rooms every hour of the day. The two servants could give me no information because they were new since Len's time, but one night in searching for space that would take some original drawings which I wanted to hold over, I found the sofa was also a long trunk with the lid made to open, and therein discovered

a number of photographs, evidently forgotten by my brother, and endorsed conspicuously with affectionate inscriptions. Also, in a corner of the sofa-trunk were bundles of letters, the top envelope of one in Kitty Latham's handwriting. I made a neat parcel of the entire lot and sent them on to Len at his club; he acknowledged receipt on a note dated from his new rooms. Fine to look at the address, and to think that my own brother lived there; something discouraging in the reflection that one could never catch up a man who advanced at this rate. Woodpecker Road, S.E., to Park Place, W., in about six years; it was quick travelling, and no one but Len could expect to make such a swift pace. In the note he said—

“Thanks for contents of package: if you find anything else of the kind, please burn and thus save troubling Parcels Delivery. The articles are of no value even to the owner.”

There had been, it appeared, some hitch in the arrangement for his candidature; people at head-quarters wanted him either to put down a sum of money and contest a safe seat, or to put down no money and go in for a forlorn hope; neither of these offers was he prepared to accept. Followed a passage which astonished me—

“I never see anything of you, little man. I hear about you at times, and it seems you are getting along admirably, but this is no excuse for ignoring the existence of those who like myself are plodding slowly. As I hinted a while ago, we shall want your help presently and then, it is to be supposed, there will be opportunity of meeting, but meanwhile it is surely possible for us to have a talk somewhere. I feel your behaviour towards me more acutely than you perhaps imagine.”

There could be no doubt about the fact that Len was pained; it seemed useless to try to persuade myself that the responsibility was mine. A telegram went at once urging him to come to my rooms, or to allow me to go to his; no

answer came. A few days later, unable to endure the thought that he might be still nursing a grievance, I wired again, paying for a reply; in return arrived the words, "Will arrange shortly." Ernest Fowler paid a visit to Tavistock Place one evening, partly to see me, mainly to enable him to prepare a series of short sketches called "My Landlady," and when he had recovered from disappointment—

"Made certain she would be a character," he remarked.

—We discussed my trouble, and Ernest offered to organize an evening in Beaufort Buildings off the Strand, ask some writing friends, and a barrister or two, invite Len, and instruct everybody to bend all their efforts in the direction of making a fuss over him. Ernest had been compelled to become a member of the Club, because a friendly editor told him St. Donatt's Road, S.E., did not present an encouraging endorsement on the face of manuscript, was likely, indeed, to prejudice any fair-minded man against the pages which followed.

"I'll do it for your sake," Ernest pointed out. "For myself I can manage without your brother, daresay he can rub along without me. I was introduced to him by someone the other day, and asked him whether he happened to know New Cross. Just to see what he said."

"What did he say?"

"Replied that he knew it by name."

"Well," I retorted, heatedly, "you have nothing to complain of. It's extraordinary to me, this dislike that seems to be exhibited towards my brother. One of those unreasoning animosities, like hatred of the Jews, that cannot be argued against."

"Then we won't argue about it," he said, good-temperedly. "We'll just let it be where it is. You find a date that suits him, and I'll see to the rest."

Ernest's evening was a triumph for everybody, and a complete joy to me; there ensued, it appeared, a certain restiveness because the affair was widely paragraphed the following day as "Complimentary Banquet to a Public

Man," but this was not the fault of Ernest, not my fault, and it seemed useless to expect in this world to succeed in pleasing everybody. We had a table for about ten people in the dining-room, and other members politely ate apart; in the front room my brother soon managed to get them all around him, selecting, with wonderful cleverness, the most alert and useful, bearing himself in a manner that made him equal to the best. It would have pleased me to have the opportunity of a talk with him; there were a thousand things we could have chatted about; I wanted to speak to him about myself, to hear about him. But it was good to sit and watch, to observe that his hair was showing prematurely a touch of grey at the sides, to see the note of daring in his collar, to take mental record of every gesture, to try to remember his anecdotes, to remark on his perfect and absolute confidence, to say approvingly, "Your bird, Len!" when he made a good shot. I wished once or twice he would draw me into the discussion, but it was clear the task of making new friends engaged all his efforts. He rose at the exactly right hour, when they wanted him to stay a little longer, and made appropriate and tactful good-byes.

"You're coming with me, little man," he said.

As we walked along the Strand, I hoped earnestly we might meet some business acquaintance, but the combination of incidents was too admirable to come true. He wore his fur-lined overcoat that stopped short of the extravagance of an agent in advance, and yet induced folk to look at him a second time; as we crossed Trafalgar Square and went by one of the lions, two men said in interested tones, after they had passed, "That's Drew. The tall chap is Drew!" Len desired information about his old rooms, about the landlady.

"Does she ever talk to you about me?"

"She's a reserved woman, Len."

"Didn't know," he remarked, "whether under your cross-examination——"

"Len!"

"Oh," he said, lightly, "you're as curious as the rest of the world about my doings. I am acquainted with no subject which has such a fascination for people as that of my private life."

"It has nothing to do with anybody but yourself."

"Precisely my argument. There's a great deal too much of this puritanical interference, and I'm determined not to tolerate it for a single moment. Anyone who tries that game on with me will wish he had never been gifted with the power of speech. I've crushed people in my time," he went on, vehemently, "and, as sure as we are walking here in Pall Mall, I'll do it again if the necessity arises."

"I never hear anything much said against you."

"You wouldn't," he remarked, looking down at me. "If anything of the kind were said in your presence, I feel sure you wouldn't hear it. You believe in me?" he asked, eagerly.

"Of course I believe in you!"

"Do you believe in anyone else to the same extent?" I mentioned, rather shyly, one name. "Oh, don't be so foolish as to put your trust in women," he cried. "I've found them out long ago. I've found everything out. Now I suppose—don't answer this unless you want to—I suppose you still say your prayers at night? Extraordinary!" he declared, when the admission had been given. "Why you're probably the only sane grown-up person in London who does it."

"There are plenty," I protested. "Even Kitty Latham told me once she prayed for you every night and morning."

"That reminds me," he said. "Methinks the lady doth protest too much. I shall have to go down there and explain matters fully."

"If you don't hurry," I said, chaffingly, "I shall be married before you are."

“This is where I live at present,” he remarked, taking out his latch key. “They are only doll’s rooms, and they are expensive, but the position is good.” From the letter-box he took a large number of communications, and started to walk upstairs. “Shut the door as you go,” he called over his shoulders. “You’re letting in a deuce of a draught.”

