

CHAPTER XV

LEN IN A STRUGGLE

I MADE a practice of dividing my Sunday afternoons between my mother and the Fowlers, giving rather more than half to mother because I always saw Milly on an evening during the week; sometimes more frequently, as when orders came to the office for some concert that promised not to be financially successful, on which occasions I waited near the refreshment-rooms on the left hand side of Charing Cross Station—under the clock being reckoned too conspicuous—and, the North Kent train coming in, endured torments because she was not the first to come in sight through the barrier; when an emerald green opera cloak with a pretty face and a cream lace shawl atop arrived, I had to remind myself very sternly that the rules of good behaviour prohibited embracing in public. We exercised what in comparison with former times might be called reckless prodigality, for the least sign of rain or a trace of mud was held to justify disbursement of one and six for a hansom.

It was on a Sunday night that mother reminded me I had not called lately to see Mr Latham; she had met the doctor in Lewisham High Road, and he, after giving many details about his wife's cousin, mentioned that no alteration could be reported; Viney said the old chap would never move or speak again in this world, and the sooner he went to the next the better for all parties concerned, especially for the girl. Kitty was making herself ill over the long task of attending to him; she refused, it appeared, either to give this up or to allow Viney to write a prescription for her.

"Directly you've finished your tea, Henry, my dear," said mother, "and you need'nt spare the toast and the mustard and cress, for there's plenty more where they came from, you just on with your hat and gloves, and I'll pop into the Fowlers and tell them you'll be half an hour late. Living as the Lathams do, right away there in Hatcham, they must feel sometimes as though they were outside of civilisation. So you just on with your hat and——" My mother had adopted the method of saying everything three times.

I held in my pocket contributions for the book; these were received delightedly. To save time and to ensure that we missed nothing, I now subscribed to a press-cutting agency with a request that all references concerning Len should be posted to me, and my mother never ceased to express amazement at the ingenuity of the scheme; her wonder at the means adopted. One of the new batch possessed a personal touch that diverted us, and I begged her to allow me to take it and show to Kitty; it said, "We hear that Mr Leonard Drew, whose industry in political affairs is untiring, will shortly leave the bachelor ranks. We offer, in advance, our sincere congratulations."

The spring afternoon had exhausted itself; but for the desire to appear at my best and smartest in the old neighbourhood, one might have been tempted to turn up the collar of the frock coat. The public house at the corner was not opened; lamplighters appeared to have experienced some delay; the monotonous jingle of the muffin man's bell came from a side street. I increased my pace, going by the long row of small houses in Hatcham Park Road, where pianofortes played hymns in a resolute manner, and found myself almost breathless on arriving at the Latham's house. Stopping to restore something like composure before entering, I noticed the gas was on in the office: through the gauze blinds two figures could be seen. One of these was certainly Mrs Latham, for her shrill voice reached the railings, but not so clearly as to

enable me to distinguish the words. Mrs Latham in a bad temper, evidently ; in a raging, tearing mood so far as could be guessed, and I determined that if she were exhibiting this to the hurt and perturbation of Kitty, mine would be the task to interfere tactfully.

"Did you knock before?" asked the maid. "'Pon my word, there's such a shindy going on that no one can hear anything else. We miss you, Mr Drew. I always used to call you the little peace-maker, and, providing you don't think it a liberty, there wasn't much 'arm in the remark. Go into the back room and wait there till they've finished the round."

"Who is with her, Emily?"

"Some one you know," replied the girl, listening eagerly. "Lord!" with undisguised satisfaction, "isn't she giving him what for!"

Mrs Latham continued the exhibition of considerable prowess of speech. Always a fluent woman, it was not easy to guess whether this was a quarrel concerning some trifle, or whether it had to do with an event of Imperial urgency. From overhead came the sound of slow movements.

"Who was that, Emily?" cried Mrs Latham, sharply, in the passage. "Who was it knocked at the door? Answer me this minute." The girl furnished the information. "Tell him to come into the office. He's arrived at the very nick of time, as it happens. No, you don't!" To the visitor within. "Haven't near done with you yet."

My brother sat, easily and undisturbedly, on the edge of the varnished table, his hat resting on one knee which he clasped with both hands. He nodded as I entered, and, by a movement, invited me to take the horse-hair sofa.

"What's the night like?" he asked.

"Never you mind," interrupted Mrs Latham, flaming with anger, "what the night's like. I'm going to tell you what you are like, and I'm going to tell everyone else, too!"

"This good lady," explained Len, turning to me, "is slightly upset."

"Slightly," she echoed, ironically.

"Slightly upset because I have, in the gentlest possible manner, requested her to convey a message. Apparently, she considers such a task below her dignity, and my apologies are of no avail whatever. Have a try, and see what you can do."

"I am sure, Mrs Latham, my brother had no intention _____".

"He's¹ got intentions all right," she retorted, "and pretty bad ones they are, too. Ask him to tell you what it's all about. Go on; ask him."

"I came down here," he said, quietly, "in the hope of seeing Miss Kitty. It appears she wrote to me yesterday, and this excellent woman seems under the impression that I am responsible for work which is really within the control of the Postmaster General."

"I happen to know," she burst out, "that poor Kitty wrote to you to say she was coming up to see you this evening, and it's my belief you received the letter, and you dodged down here in order to escape seeing her."

"You can't prove that," I pointed out.

"Don't want to prove it. Plenty of things in this world that we can't prove are true. Bet you a shilling he's got the letter in his pocket this very minute."

"The woman," said Len, "is now going back to her earlier days when every discussion in the public bar ended in a wager."

"That's a wicked falsehood," she cried, infuriatedly. "No betting and no anything else that wasn't allowed by law ever went on whilst I was present. I had an eye everywhere." Len laughed. "And the inspector gave me his word of honour that mine was the best conducted place in the whole neighbourhood, and he wasn't a man to say anything he didn't mean."

"You will observe, Henry," said my brother, "that the

most incredible statements are accepted by this excellent person, whilst a simple assertion from me concerning a simple matter is rejected."

"Let's get back to the facts," ordered Mrs Latham. "Let's see exactly what we're talking about. That question of the letter is merely a side-issue. What you said twenty minutes ago——"

"Seems much longer."

"What you said twenty minutes ago was that you wanted me to mention to Kitty that you were going to be married. Married to some one else. Nice job to ask me to take on, isn't it?"

"Tell me!" I said, amusedly, to him. "Mrs Latham has got it all wrong, of course. Why, there's a notice in one of the papers——"

"The notice, oddly enough," he remarked, "is quite correct. Mrs Woodrow has been good enough to accept my invitation, and I thought it only fair and honourable and right to acquaint my friends with the circumstance. Came here first, hoping to receive congratulations; instead, I am overwhelmed by a perfect storm, an absolute tornado of reproaches. It astonishes me. It pains me. It hurts me very much."

"But surely," I said, uneasily, "you don't really mean it, Len."

"Why shouldn't I mean it?" A note in his tones that he had never before used in speaking to me; it was as though he boxed my ears. "Of course, I mean it. Nothing unusual in a man of my age, and my position, getting married, is there? I want a wife to help me in my social duties, and I want her to be a woman of refinement and education." Mrs Latham snapped out a suggestion. "Yes," he agreed, "and money. What do you suggest," turning sharply again to me, "by staring in this way?"

"Let me speak!" interposed Mrs Latham. "Who's that moving about; the girl I suppose. Henry, go and tell her not to listen at doors. Let me speak! This has nothing to

do with your brother, Mr Drew, and well you know it ; there's no reason why he should be called upon to do your dirty work. If it comes to a question of courage, supposing you let us see you stop on and face Kitty yourself."

He glanced at his watch, and ordered me to look out a train. A Sunday train ; not week-day.

"She's got a letter somewhere that will put you in a corner." He leaned forward interestedly without meeting her gaze. "That I know because I've seen it."

"A curious creature, this," he remarked to me. "Seems to have extraordinary eyesight." Mrs Latham waved aside the allusion.

"Seen it and it has a distinct promise, that I'll swear. Now, I've got money of my own, Mr Drew, and although you seem determined to keep up this lardy-dardy manner, I think you won't fail to grasp my meaning. I'm in a passion, but I know what I'm saying, and what I say I shall do. Every penny of that money shall be spent, if necessary, in order to show you up!"

"Job for you, Henry. You're in the advertising trade, aren't you?"

"Your letter or letters will be read in court," she announced, strenuously, "and if you think that's likely to do you any good with your Mrs Woodrow, or your politics——"

"Go and find the letter!"

"Shall do nothing of the kind."

"Go and find the letter!" he repeated, loudly. "Let me see exactly what was said in it."

"That letter," she replied, doggedly, "is Kitty's own property, and although I know where it is, because I read it to her father the other day, knowing it would please him, I'd no more dream of giving you a chance of putting it in the fire, than I would of trusting you in any other way."

"I'm going to see that letter before I go out of this house."

"Then you'll stay here a jolly long time."

"Which is Kitty's room?" he demanded sharply of me.
"Come upstairs and show me."

"I think, Len, she sleeps now in the room where her father is. You mustn't go in there."

"Mustn't!" he echoed, explosively. "People are not allowed to say 'mustn't' to me!"

We were at the door when I saw, through the upper glass partition, Mr Latham. The large, heavy white face of Mr Latham, damp with the amazing task of coming down the stairs without assistance, the card board cap a-top: his breath worked noisily. I opened the door and led him into the room towards the settee, but he stopped before reaching this, and gripping the mantel-piece, refused to go further.

"Now then!" in a gurgling voice. He pulled at his old-fashioned dressing-gown, and stood there facing Len with something of dignity in his manner, despite his eccentric appearance.

"Glad to find you better," remarked Len, advancing. "This is where a good constitution serves. By taking care of oneself during healthy years, one is so much better prepared——"

"Go out!" said Mr Latham to us. "You two go out. Leave me. And him!"

He shuffled across the office with the assistance of the table, his dressing-gown catching at the waste-paper basket which I saved from falling; he said, "His Nibs!" in tones of approval, and when we were outside nodded before locking the door. The servant scuttled off to her own quarters; Mrs Latham, suffering from reaction after the excitement, leaned a forehead on the bannisters and whimpered. By standing on tip-toe I could see through the glass half of the door; the single gas jet, that hissed a continuous protest against being turned on extravagantly, gave illumination. My brother was talking again in his suave tones, polishing his silk hat with the right arm sleeve and contemplating the result as though this were the subject that really engaged his interest; Mr Latham had returned to the mantel-piece where he stood

now with his large hands inside the frayed cord of his dressing-gown.

"They're going to discuss the matter quietly," I said to Mrs Latham, persuading her to sit on the third step of the staircase, and patting her wrist comfortingly.

"Poor Kitty," she moaned. "Poor Kitty!"

"Depend upon it, there's a way out. Len isn't the man to make trouble; he's the one to clear it up!"

"Treated just the same," she went on, "when I was about Kitty's age. I got over it. It never made no difference to me. But Kitty's different. I had half a dozen strings to my bow; she's only got one."

"Let's take the worst view of it," I argued. "Well, then, we must all be as good as we can to Kitty, and help her to forget."

"Somehow," she said, still with handkerchief at eyes, "you're as different from that man in there as chalk from cheese."

"I'm sorry!"

"You needn't be. He may go on and prosper, but don't you ever fancy for a single moment you'd like to be in his place. He has some pretty middling black hours, I promise you, when he happens to be alone. I've been watching men nearly all my life, and so far as a woman can understand them, I do understand them."

"I know him better than you do, Mrs Latham."

"You know him too well to be able to see what he's really like. It's the same when anyone falls in love. With my first husband, people used to come and bring me tittle-tattle about him with, 'Have you heard so and so's the case?' or 'I think you ought to know so and so,' but all they said didn't make the slightest difference to me. Not at the time. Later on, of course, it was different. Is that Kitty?"

I went to the front door and opened it, but no one stood there. Returning, I raised myself again and looked through into the office; the explanation of the sound of shuffling movement became apparent.

"Still quiet?" she asked. "They ought to have finished talking by this time; it must be bad for Latham. Let me know if anything happens. Dear, dear, I shall have to pay for this with a headache in the morning. And to-morrow's washing day!"

Inside the office, old Latham gripped Len by the elbows, and in talking (the lips shaping words with difficulty) now and again shook him. The silk hat had gone into a corner where it lodged absurdly; Len's walking-stick, in two pieces, was inside the fender. A sudden push that sent my brother against the corner of the table made me knock sharply against the window; they took no notice. The low, almost silent quarrel continued.

"Is there another key to this door, Mrs Latham?"

"Leave them to argue it out," she answered, rocking to and fro. "If Latham can talk at all, he can talk a lot."

Len, tiring, apparently, of the intermittent shaking, made a strong effort to disengage himself, but the other man's hold was too good. Len seemed to be looking around for something, and his hand went towards the ruler; he managed to grasp this, and with a quick movement brought it well against the side of Mr Latham's left wrist; the next moment the old man found himself hurled against the horse-hair settee, and Len was at him with the ruler. I kicked violently at the door, struck at it, shouted. Mrs Latham, coming from the staircase, assumed that my action must be mistaken because it was my action, and tugged foolishly at me. Disengaging myself from her, I ran into the back room and found a chair; returning with this I smashed in the top half of the door, and using the chair now to stand upon, managed somehow to squeeze through the space made in the smashed glass, and to drop clumsily inside.

I found myself struggling desperately with my own brother Len. I found myself twisting his collar and forcing him to desist. I found myself with both fists against his chin, compelling him to come away from Mr Latham and to enable

me to stand between them. Outside, Mrs Latham implored the maid to fetch the police; the servant replied that this clashed with precise instructions already issued to her regarding conversation with members of the force; the girl had evidently made up her mind to lose nothing of a scene that probably made an exciting break in a monotonous life.

"Kitty's father too!" I panted to Len, reprovingly.

"I'm going!" he retorted. "I've seen enough of this confounded place and of all of you. Where's my hat?"

"Hope you're not much hurt, Mr Latham?"

"Life in the old dog," he groaned, "yet. And I ain't done with him, neither. I'll get better just in order to do for him. I won't go until I've outed him."

"You don't mean that——"

"His Nibs don't understand," remarked Mr Latham, to the rosette in the ceiling. "It ain't in his line."

"Does this mean," asked Len, nervously, "that this old fool is going—going to follow me about wherever I go and persecute me, just because I have called here to put an end to a misunderstanding. The letter I received last night gave me no idea——"

"You did get her note then, Len."

"Be quiet!" he commanded. "Mind your own business."

"Shan't shoot him," continued old Latham, "because I don't hold with foreign tricks. Shan't knife him because that I consider Italian. But you just tell him that years ago South London knew what Jimmie Latham of Hatcham could do with his fists, and I'm going to have one more knock-out contest before I give up. Make that as clear as you can to him!"

My brother pulled himself together, and gazed at me. Gazed steadily at me in a way that reminded one of the hypnotist at New Cross Hall.

"Little man," in a low commanding tone, "get me out of this. For Heaven's sake, help me! You assisted me before, do it again. Think of Blackheath. Blackheath!

Ah," he shook his head as I hesitated. "Might have known you'd refuse."

I rubbed at my head in the effort of thought. Suddenly threw away everything, as once before on board the river steamer. Went and unlocked the door.

"Mrs Latham," I cried, "run up and find that letter you were speaking about."

"For you to give over to him?"

"It shall not go out of my possession."

She obeyed and came back with an envelope addressed to Kitty with a receiving post-mark of S.E., the other circle was not distinct. Len put out his hand quickly, and appeared astonished as I drew back.

"Mr Latham," I said, speaking slowly and reading the first page, "you have been ill for sometime and you haven't quite understood all that was going on. You think this unsigned letter was written by Len."

"We know it," interrupted Mrs Latham. "Why should Kitty have been so anxious to see him if anybody else had written it? Besides, Henry, what did you hint at yourself just now?"

I sat at the table, and drawing the blotting-pad to the edge, took a sheet of paper from the memorandum case. The original letter I gave to Mrs Latham, and from memory, wrote out in what was not my usual handwriting, the early part of the communication.

"Now," with something, perhaps, of determination, "would you mind comparing the two?"

Mrs Latham gasped, and took both across to her husband; he gave a gesture and said his eyesight was not what it ought to be. Len came and stood beside me, again polishing his silk hat.

"You mean to say, Henry, that you wrote this letter?"

"It hasn't been quite fair to you, Mrs Latham, and I'm rather ashamed of myself. It's been an underhand sort of game. But I see now where I've been wrong, and I am going to meet her to-night and have a good talk privately with her,

and if she is willing to marry me, why of course I am willing and—and anxious to marry her.”

Len, as we stood there in the silence that followed, went from the room, and we heard him pull the front door to after him. The old man tried to wipe his bruised face; he would not allow me to help.

“Never thought,” he said, as his wife assisted him out of the office, “never imagined that His Nibs was a chap of that sort. Missis, I feel rather inclined for a little carriage exercise.”

“That’s good news,” she remarked, heartily. “Where would you like to be drove to, Latham?”

“Lewisham Cemetery,” he replied, with a chuckle.

