CHAPTER XVI

LEN IN CHURCH AND OUT

TO my mind, the south of metropolis—with its occasional heights permitting one to turn a back upon London, its thick forest of chimney-pots, its stout gasometers, the shipping in the Surrey Commercial Docks, the reflected flare, of an evening in the sky from lights in main thoroughfares, and gaze away to the beautiful counties of Kent and Surrey—cannot be beaten, is certainly hard to equal. It may be admitted that there rests one small space of South London where I would not willingly go; I mean along by the blank wall side of Amersham Vale, near the railway-station at New Cross. It was here, on the Sunday night, that I walked with Kitty Latham, arguing, pleading, almost threatening, doing all this in a quiet voice because folk were constantly arriving by train, or rushing up to catch one. I suppose there exists scarcely any road in London that has not known tragedy. Amersham Vale is certainly acquainted with one.

Old Latham, a fortnight later, took the journey to which he had referred, and my Aunt Mabel thanked me warmly for using influence on her behalf, offering to pay for a pair of black gloves as tangible expression of her indebtedness, and expressing gratification in finding there still remained some who recognised the ties of relationship. Her son-in-law had recently lost his mother, and you would have thought that in the circumstances—"But no!" said Aunt Mabel, with a shiver of annoyance. "Oh dear me, no! Must needs go off to a firm in the West End, and I only hope they made him pay through the nose for it. That's all the harm I wish him!" I did not go back to the house with Mrs Latham

and Kitty and Mrs Latham's relatives, partly because urgent business called me to Queen Street, partly because I had no great desire to be seen in New Cross. Kitty told me she preferred to delay the reply to my offer, although I felt anxious to see the matter settled one way or the other; meanwhile it had been necessary to write to Milly and appeal to her, without giving any reason, to break off our engagement. Kitty I tried to encourage from silence as the carriage allowed me to take a train at a convenient station, by the whispered reminder that we were acting in the interest of Len, an interest surely more precious to us than anything else in the world.

"Don't know yet what I'm going to do," she said, absently, as she took my hand. "Seems queer to think that I can't call you my little brother-in-law any longer."

"You will be able to call me something else."

"You're such a boy," she remarked, gazing at me as I stood with my hat off outside the black carriage, "that I don't believe you half understand what you are doing."

"Doing exactly what I think I ought to do."

Mrs Latham was well-disposed towards me, in spite of what must have appeared erratic behaviour, for a note came from her later, written in an old-fashioned running hand, and lines crossed at the end as though postage were still an expensive item, informing me the solicitors had cleared up everything at last; that all, she was thankful to say, had been left to Kitty; trusted I should be kind to the girl, who certainly appeared to her more reconciled and happy now than she had been for some time. The money had come to a larger sum than anybody hoped; everyone was gratified at this, with the exception of Kitty herself.

"Be sure to write to her," the letter went on, "often as you can. She wanted yesterday to call on the young lady you had also been carrying on with, because she felt it must be hard upon her; I induced her to put off the visit until she was better. She said it all seemed such a tangle, but I told her I had known worse knots than this to straighten out when one gave them time."

By the same post, arrived a formal communication from the honorary secretary of the club in Beaufort Buildings, acquainting me with the fact that my proposer had withdrawn his name from the support of my candidature; because of this the nomination would not be submitted to members of the Committee. I sent this on to Len, without remark, in the hope he would help me to join one of his clubs, but no reply came. Mr Stemson remarked in my hearing that he admired anyone who was a demon for work, but a limit should be fixed and adhered to, for the good reason that if you went beyond, trouble and illness, and brain-fag, and goodness knew what ensued; reckoning it up at the end on both sides of the ledger, you probably found you had lost over the transaction. All the same, continued Mr Stemson pointedly, there would be no great harm in certain of the staff emulating the example set, and if some of the canvassers put more energy into the work, the result would be better for themselves, good for the firm. Queen Street certainly, at this period, saved me.

A gilt-edged invitation note came from a Mrs Battell, and was about to be thrown aside, when a name lower down arrested attention. The marriage was between her niece Mary Woodrow and Mr Leonard Drew; the words—

"Reception afterwards at 126 Cadogan Gardens, three to five o'clock."

—had been crossed out with a single line. Calling for the envelope which had been sliced open with others by a junior, I found it was in my brother's handwriting. I wrote at once to ask my mother whether she had received a similar invitation, and to arrange about a present; her answer came to the effect that she expected me to take her to the church, wherever it was, for without my assistance she would be certain to lose herself; the two ladies were now hard at work in the endeavour to select from the current number of a journal some appropriate costume on

which the dressmaker in Florence Road could set to work.

"Dear Henry," the letter went on, "your conduct has worried me, and I cannot understand what you are at. Milly Fowler has gone to Devonshire to stay with some relations. She did not come to see me before she started. Dear Henry, I do hope you are not getting too high and mighty. I must now conclude with fond love.

"P.S. Len too is not behaving as I thought he would behave, but I expect he knows best."

It was obvious my mother's first words at Charing Cross (where I found myself wishing very much that the figure of Milly could trip round the corner of the barrier) would be—

"Happy's the bride the sun shines on!"

—And the remark duly came. The good soul was too much excited over the coming event to discuss anything else, and as a hansom took us through the Mall, expressed anxiety concerning the exact shade that a lady, entering upon marriage for the second time, would wear; comforted herself with the thought that experience might enable Mrs Woodrow to make the answers in a clear, distinct voice, and at the correct moment. Near Victoria, news on the placards caught her attention, and she remarked on the considerable advantages enjoyed by those who had no money to invest beyond the sum which the post-office authorities were willing to guard. The rest of the journey was taken up by her consideration of the nice point whether I ought to give the cabman one and six or one and nine, and when, being pressed, I told her I intended to pay two shillings, she remarked, dolefully, that some people appeared to enjoy playing ducks and drakes with their money; she only hoped it did not mean I should come to want. The alteration in recent procedure had compelled her to re-arrange her mental picture of the house at Blackheath.

"Did she have any children by the first marriage, Henry, my dear?" The answer caused her to give a regretful sigh.

A crowd stood outside the church; several carriages had arrived and were being marshalled by the police. We shewed our notes of invitation to gain entrance, and once inside, my mother, by energy and persistence, routed a verger and took me to seats well in front. There she stood up, explaining that she had given her word to take back to the two lady lodgers a full description of all the dresses, relinquishing this task for a moment when I complimented her upon her own. Then I did not consider it too youthful? Not a year, not a month, not a day. That was all right then; she had, to tell the truth, experienced some doubts, but now she need not bother any further.

My brother came up the aisle with his best man; a lady journalist sitting near to us whispered loudly that this was a well-known member of Parliament. Len, quite composed, chatted with friends, whilst his companion twisted gloves nervously and glanced at a watch.

"Why, there's Kitty," said my mother, excitedly. "Down there, just at the very beginning of one of the rows. Fancy her coming here!"

I thought this not in perfect taste on the part of Kitty, and I was about to step along and beg of her not to make a scene, when Mrs Woodrow arrived, and I could only send down a warning, appealing glance. At the first words—

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God."

—the church hushed. My mother began to weep.

"Well," said the lady journalist, at the end, in a business-like way, "it's gone off all right. Now I've got to hurry along to half a dozen things, and how in the world I'm going to do them all, and get back to the office by nine, I really do not know!"

Len and his wife came down the aisle; we stood up in the hope that he would recognise us. They were going past when she glanced around and smiled, stopping him at the same time.

"The election," she reminded me.

"Did help my brother there," I admitted.

"Your brother? Oh, then you're coming on to Cadogan Gardens?"

"I think not!"

"Henry is a busy man," remarked Len.

"Absurd!" she declared, emphatically. "Of course you will come and you will bring—your mother? Come now, and take one of the carriages."

I followed them closely to see what Kitty would do. She had been reading a good deal during her father's illness; it was reasonable to fear she might want to enact a scene taken from some romance. Instead, she put out her hand very pleasantly to Len, said—

"Best congratulations!"

—and with a bright nod to us, made her way out to the opposite end of the row. I wanted to wait for her outside, but an important, managing person obeyed instructions by hurrying us into an open carriage, delaying it for a moment whilst he found two more people to sit opposite. These were young men, each furnished with a giggling laugh, who, as the carriage went, talked in a high voice and vaguely. Wonderful person, said one; no wonder she had married twice; many in the same circumstances would have postponed the wedding, what? But perhaps, said the other, she was not yet aware of the news; it had only been about during the last half-hour, what? In that case, remarked the first, seemed undeniably rough on Thing-me-bob. At any rate, interesting presently to see how Thing-me-bob accepted the information; worth while to put in a good twenty minutes that they might be in a position to report fully to those not privileged to be present; as good as "Charley's Aunt." The other remarked with a great air of wisdom, "True, true! But mind you, dear old man, entirely different idea, what?" My mother sat upright, taking no notice of this vivacious conversation, and I had not the assurance to lean forward and ask what they were talking about. "Awful rummy things happen in

this world," remarked one; the second, after thought, was unable to contradict the assertion completely but suggested, with deference, that the happenings were not rummier than one might expect them to be, taking everything into consideration.

We were shown into a room on the second floor to view the presents, and made way through the crowd, endeavouring to find the silver frame containing our photographs, which we had chosen as something not likely to be duplicated; my mother was the first to discover it on a table in the corner with a number of other articles; a tall frowning man on guard, who would have been identified even by a blind man as a plain clothes detective. He edged towards us as we examined the frame, and I mentioned to him that the photographs which it should have contained were missing, the card with our names could not be seen; he answered confidentially that if nothing of greater value disappeared his duties would be held to have been satisfactorily performed. The folk shouldered towards a long screen on which telegrams were fixed with drawing-pins; exclamations of surprise came from those who encountered one at the centre.

"That means somebody important has telegraphed," said my mother. "If you could only press through, Henry, and get the name, it would be something more to carry in my mind."

I made the attempt, but found myself compelled to retreat. To speak the plain and exact truth, these people had the worst manners of any set I had hitherto encountered; the pit crowd outside the Strand Theatre on the slope from the street to the Embankment on a Saturday night, which Milly and I often joined, was in comparison, a precise and decorous assemblage, for here everyone talked in the loudest tones, and obstructed without giving a word of apology. Thought of visits to the play, forced me to consider the jumble of recent events; one could not help agreeing with the view of the philosopher in the open carriage,

We made our way down to the drawing-room, and presently managed to near the married couple.

"So glad you were able to come on," said my brother, pleasantly. "The affair would not have seemed quite legal and proper without you, Henry."

"The 2.20 from Charing Cross," he continued, answering my question. "That will get us to Paris in fairly good time to-night, and then we go on in the morning by the express. You haven't done the South of France yet? My wife—"

He laughed, and I too laughed.

"My wife has a villa there. You and Kitty must come out and stay for a month or so, later on. Tell her how gratified I was to see her at church, won't you. Thought she looked very attractive. Good to find oneself," he glanced at his watch and suppressed a yawn, "to find oneself surrounded, at such a time, by old friends. When I come back, you and I must see more of each other. My name is near the top of the list for any chance bye-election."

"You're still keen on public work, Len."

"Little man," he said, lowering his voice, "I want the initials after my name. That's all! They'd be of tremendous assistance to me in business."

"But there will be plenty of money about now."

"I don't want to be indebted to my wife," he said, definitely, "for a single shilling."

"Candidly," remarked my mother to the bride, "of the two, I'd rather see it the other way about. Because there's no use in shutting one's eyes to figures, and by the time he's just over forty, you'll be getting on for sixty, and when a woman or even a lady gets to that age—of course your life hasn't been so hard as mine, but you see what I mean, don't you?"

"A beautiful collection of presents," I mentioned, interposing between them, and leaving Len to speak to some insurgent ladies. "Never seen so much valuable property brought together before."

"We were pleased to have yours."

"By-the-bye," said my mother, "I hope it hasn't been stolen or nothing. We had it taken, me and Henry, at the corner of Breakspear Road, and no one's any right to make off with it."

Mrs Len, declaring herself greatly concerned, insisted that we should all go upstairs and make inquiries. There the crowd had lessened, and whilst she started investigations, I went along to the screen and inspected the telegrams. "A thousand good wishes," said some. "May this auspicious day—" began others. And "Good luck and prosperity." Mrs Len, having ascertained from one of the maids that the photographs and the card had been put away by express orders from Mr Drew—

"Rather early," she remarked, with good temper, "for him to exercise control over my property."

—Brought my mother across, and unclipping pincenez, explained that she had to leave the task of opening and displaying telegrams to her lady companion, a mature woman who, it appeared, greatly resented Mrs Len's enterprise in marrying again.

"A business communication," I said, with a wave of my glove, "seems to have it's way here."

She read, and dropped the glasses swiftly.

"This is rather—" she said. Looked around in a dazed way, searching for the word. "Rather disturbing," she went on. "I'm afraid it means that nearly all my money is gone. Wonder how he will take the news."

"I can tell you," eagerly. "Oddly enough, my brother made a remark to me just now that answers the question." I quoted Len. My mother asked to be informed of the circumstances, and volunteered an incident within her own knowledge, wherein she had by error given half a sovereign to a tram conductor under the impression it was sixpence; discovering the error, waited for the return of the car from Waterloo and obtained, without any additional trouble, a refund of the nine and six.

"Go down," said Mrs Len to me, "and if there are not many people there, tell him to ask my aunt to take my place and request him to come here at once!"

Len declared this must be one of my blunders; I had certainly misunderstood the command; he went on talking to the women around him. I interrupted again after a few minutes, assuring him the matter was one of considerable urgency, but he once more put me aside. An old lady came forward and said in a strident voice—

"A dreadful business, Mr Drew, this bank failure!"

"Haven't heard of it, Lady Mac."

"Is it true," with open satisfaction, "that I am the first to bring you the news? What an enormous piece of good luck!" She whispered.

We went up the staircase, two steps at a time. In the room where the presents had been shown, the plain clothes man had brought a chair for Mrs Len.

"What does this mean?" demanded Len, brusquely. I led him towards the telegram on the screen.

"I think," she said, "that we had better give up the trip abroad. We might run down to Eastbourne instead for two or three days."

"You know all about Cockney holidays," he cried, swinging around to me. "Didn't you once go for an afternoon to Rosherville? Tell this invaluable lady who has just become my wife how we can get there. Or are you perhaps aware of a cheaper excursion? Capital item for the enterprising journals—'The happy pair left amid a shower of rice to spend their honeymoon in the Isle of Dogs.'"

He took up the nearest article from the nearest table, and flung it on the parqueted floor. It happened to be our frame.

"Not her fault," I protested.

"So clever of you to notice that," he said. "Of course it isn't her fault. I am the only person to blame. No one else is in the least degree responsible. I owe her a profound

apology for having led her into the misapprehension that I was about to marry a rich wife."

"But you didn't marry her only because you thought she had money, Len," pleaded my mother. "It was love that made you do it."

"A marvellous set," he declared, picking up the pieces of the frame. "A family possessing such a really wonderful insight into the human mind ought to be giving performances at the Egyptian Hall. Of course, it was love, my dear mother. You have only to give one glance at the lady, to feel certain of that. It was for the sake of her beautiful eyes; the eyebrows I think owe something to the cleverness of her maid. It was for the sake of her delightful hair; so many varying shades are rarely seen in the possession of one woman. It was for the sake of her splendid complexion; the resources of art——"

"Len," I shouted, "I like you, I love you, but I'm going to put a stop to all this."

"Don't you think you had better look after your own affairs? Strikes me you'll find your Kitty rather a difficult riddle to understand."

"If you're so eager on money," broke out my mother, "it was a pity you ever gave her up. Her father left over eight thousand pounds."

He went across to the large windows and gazed out. Downstairs the string band, that had been playing modestly, stopped, and those of us who had not observed its existence before, noticed it now. I bent near to Mrs Len and counselled her to make no change in the travelling arrangements; suggested that to get right away would be the best method of forgetting financial troubles; begged her to command me if I could be of any use in obtaining information. Len turned from the window and rejoined us.

"Now," he said, in his customary genial way, "having cleared the air, what shall we decide to do? Mary," to his wife, "you settle it?"

She expressed the opinion I had offered, and he went across and kneeling, kissed her forehead.

"That's right then," he said. "We'll let them see that we can take a slash across the face and not whimper. We'll forget all that we said to each other just now."

"Your wife never said a word, Len," pointed out my mother.

"Run and change," he ordered. "I'll tell them to see to the luggage and we shall be in Paris by midnight, after all. Henry and mother can go on and see us off at Charing Cross."

The inspector at the station, noting some traces of rice in the brim of my silk hat, came up on the platform and expressed regret that he could not, owing to pressure of traffic, give me and the lady a reserved compartment; Len, highly diverted by this, protested humorously against the common impression that he was always going to allow himself to be cut out by me; aside, he hinted, to my astonishment, that I knew what I was about in taking Kitty away from him. Other friends arrived, and we had to back out to the centre of the platform where my mother stood upon a wooden seat, alternately waving a handkerchief and, with it, wiping her eyes.

"Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye!"

Farewells were exchanged as the train moved; I just managed by standing on tiptoe to catch a sight of Mrs Len, and she smiled at me in a rather forlorn way. Len kept his head out of the window until the express disappeared, on the bridge, from sight.

"Len is peculiar," summed up my mother, when she had finally resolved to put her handkerchief away, "but, mind you, there's a lot of good of him."

I agreed emphatically.

"Next thing will be to see about you and Kitty. Your's won't be such a grand affair, Henry, but there's no reason why you two shouldn't be equally happy, providing you like to try."

"Is it too early to have a cup of tea, mother?"

"Never too early," she replied, "and never too late, so far as I'm concerned. Wonder how poor Milly's getting on down in Devonshire? Funny I should think of her just now!"

Len and his wife had their photographs taken in Paris, and the inscription on the one he sent me for my birthday, overpaid me for everything I had done.