CHAPTER XVII

LEN INDUCES ME TO TAKE STEPS

IF challenged, it is possible I could set down the purport of every remark that Len, at any time, made to me; in many cases the exact words would be recorded. In view of this, it will be understood that his confidential words on the platform came back on following days to my mind; repetition induced me to begin to consider myself in the light of a fortune hunter of the most remorseless description, and this feeling would clutch at me when I was working at Queen Street (where I now had a small room of my own with my name on the door, and very thankful I felt at these moments for comparative seclusion) sometimes when walking home through Holborn and Southampton Row, sometimes when I read, or tried to invent a new scheme, or sat at my drawing board; sometimes the alarming thought came in the early hours of morning, causing my eyes to open widely, and all possibility of further sleep to vanish.

"Get more rest," said Stemson once more. "Try the eight hours plan. Always glad to have wrinkles from you, but you needn't begin to wear them on your forehead."

Information conveyed to me by Mrs Len's solicitors was to the effect that only a few sweepings would be saved from the collapse of the bank, and comparison was one of the motives which induced me to write to Kitty. I tried to make it a proper and a tactful letter, but the task was not easy; perhaps one had become too much used to the method of dictating correspondence. I reminded her of our long conversation in Amersham Vale on the Sunday night when I persuaded her to act with me in the interests of my brother; she would recollect that at the time there existed no impression she was

likely to become well off; she must understand me when I said it seemed right and fair that, in the new circumstances, she should have choice of reconsidering the decision which I had then persuaded her to give. Kitty was not to reply at once, but to take her own time for consideration, and I would run down to Hatcham any evening she liked to suggest.

Following the despatch of this, a desperate inclination to see Milly and ascertain all she had to say, possessed me. The thought that she might prove indifferent was hard enough to endure; the possibility that she suffered as I suffered was intolerable. My mother procured the Devonshire address, and on a Saturday I left Waterloo by the 6.10 morning train, travelling first-class that there might be space and convenience for thoughts. The intention had been to rehearse on the seven hours' journey, and to arrive at the exact note to be used at the meeting with her, conveying my own distress and a proper division of sympathy, but into the compartment at the last minute jumped my old chief, Prentice, who flung himself into a corner, groaned with the disturbance that a stout asthmatic man feels after hurrying, and presently with the *Times* made a screen which indicated he had no desire for conversation. Before the train reached Surbiton, he had put this down and was talking, without recognising me, of the indifference displayed by Nature to a man's own mental disturbance; borrowing a pencil he made a note of this on the margin of his newspaper.

"Do you mean," he said, when I had introduced myself, "to look me in the face and tell me that you're little Henry who used to be in Great Tower Street? Impossible! I'll not believe it."

Assurance given.

"You haven't grown much," conceded G. W. P., "but you've changed so enormously. And you're really my friend Henry? I wrote a bit of poetry once called 'Friendship'; not the conventional thing in the least."

I felt sure of that.

"'Oh, friendship's surely but a name, A kind of charm that makes one sleep.' Rather neat, wasn't it? I'll send a copy on to you, and get you to read it and give me your candid opinion."

I expressed a hope, in the interests of the reading public, that he was writing a good deal. G. W. P. shook his head.

"A matter has been occupying my thoughts," he said, gazing at the foot-warmer, "to the absolute exclusion of everything else. Worst of it is, I can't talk to anyone about it." He gave a shiver. "What's going to be the end of this business in South Africa? Kruger seems to me a difficult nut to crack."

My views were given fully, but they did not appear to gain the whole of his attention, and even when some extraordinary opinion was offered in the hope of inducing him to contradict, he only signified casual assent. Presently he interrupted and asked whether I cared to hear the domestic worries of a man in the wine trade, and receiving the answer that I myself was rather crowded with trouble, entered upon the recital with animation. You had to picture to yourself, begged G. W. P., the case of two young people, far away in the early eighties, who somehow married, took rooms in Notting Hill, and began to quarrel with scarcely a moment's delay. Which of the two started this, appeared to be still an arguable question; point was that it went on for years until the situation became impossible, and the parties found themselves for once in perfect agreement over the suggestion that they could not agree. Mrs Prentice now lived in North Devon on an ample allowance, and about every six weeks her husband was called upon to make this long journey to Barnstaple and back.

"Good of you to take so much trouble."

G. W. P. requested me, with earnestness, to believe that it was undertaken from no desire on his side. Always, it appeared, the same course of events took place. Always,

Mrs Prentice received him at the station with enthusiasm, with apologies for giving him the trouble of coming from London, fair prophesies concerning the joint happiness of the future. Always before arriving at the house some remark sent her into display of violent temper; the door was banged in his face, and he had to lunch at the Imperial; this had now become such a matter of course that he generally sent a wire to the hotel beforehand. That was the case; what did I think about it all? I said, with an air of wisdom, that women folk were not always easy to manage; the great thing was to wait for the right moment, and then proceed adroitly in conversation. No doubt Mr Prentice, finding his wife in pleasant mood, made some statement that overstepped the bounds of wise reticence.

"I don't!" he cried, testily. "I assure you, as man to man, that the most ordinary reference, say, to a slight cold, or an allusion to poor old Gladstone, will suddenly make her break out, and when that happens I defy an angel from Heaven to manage her. All very well for you to talk, but you've had no experience in these matters. Once a woman makes up her mind to argue, no one can do anything with her. It will do you a lot of good," he continued, resentfully, "to get hold of a nagging wife, because she'll make you understand what some men have to put up with. I tell you, if I hadn't my verses to fall back on, I should simply worry myself to death and feel jolly glad when it all came to an end. And so would you, if you were in my place."

I argued less dogmatically after this, and we finally dismissed the subject, going on to the easier topic of poetry, in the course of which Mr Prentice expressed strong views concerning the work of Mr William Watson and others, who gained public approbation but failed, it seemed, to gain any compliments from him. Near Barnstaple, he wanted to fix a train for the return journey; I said it was likely I should stay until the Monday, and advised him to do the same, giving himself thus the time to proceed with deliberation, and return to the essay after a first rebuff. Mrs Prentice, a

comfortable looking woman, met him; they embraced affectionately, and G. W. P. said, "A shade stouter aren't you, my dear?" whereupon she strode off indignantly, and he had to hurry in order to catch her.

A carriage was hired at Torrington, and in going slowly up the hill it almost dazed me to think that I was so near to seeing Milly. At the farm-house I paid the driver, told him not to wait, and took my small bag.

"Your mistress in?" A middle-aged woman on pattens was sluicing down the red-bricked path leading to the front door.

"No," she answered.

"Is your master in?"

"No!"

"Miss Fowler at home?"

"No!"

"Nobody here but yourself?"

"There's the chickens."

"Just look here," I said, producing half a crown. "I want to see Miss Fowler very particularly. Give me all the information you can please."

"Hers gone to Lynton for the day," she answered, accepting the coin. "What might your name be, now?" I gave the information. "Heard talk about you," she went on, familiarly. "You're the young London chap what behaved so badly."

"Has Miss Fowler gone to Lynton alone?"

"Mr Wreford's with her. I told 'em as they went off," she chuckled, "Lynton's always been a rare place for young courting couples. Going like that, mister?"

"Have to catch a train."

"Won't you take a mug of cider and piece of home-made cake, nor nothin'?"

I went back to Barnstaple and lunched with G. W. P. at the hotel, where the waiter brought newspapers because, I suppose, he observed that neither of us spoke during the meal. In waiting at the station for the 4.16, it occurred to

me that the lady I had spoken to might well have been the mistress of the farm; her cautious replies accorded with this, and it was easy to imagine the description she would give of my hurried arrival, my questions and hasty departure; a humorous line about her mouth did not encourage me to take sanguine views. This meant I had appeared ludicrous, and at my age this was the bitterest stab of all. At Taunton I was in a blazing state of fury with everybody; near Salisbury I resolved to adopt Len's methods, and in future to take no trouble about anyone but myself; at Basingstoke I saw that Milly would settle down in Devonshire with Mr Wreford, who, it was to be hoped, was a presentable young man, a fit companion for such a dear girl; at Vauxhall, where I awoke Mr Prentice, I had become a deeply injured but beneficent person, willing to look upon events with kindliness tempered by a certain amount of jaded cynicism. One kind word from the ticket-collector would have induced me to burst into tears.

At Tavistock Place, Kitty's answer was waiting with a dozen other letters, and the opening with the old title, "Dear little brother-in-law," caused me to read on eagerly. A correct and a proper note, with not a word of complaint from start to finish. She had never thought for a moment that I should be influenced by the money which had come to her; she knew me too well to imagine that. Urged me to believe she had no sort of grievance against me, or against any member of my family (this was the only allusion to Len). The money, however, had the useful trick of enabling her to do exactly as she wanted to do, and she had gone away; her new address could not be given, for it was not at present known to herself; another excellent reason existed with which she would not trouble me. A letter had been left for her step-mother, and if I could spare the time occasionally to run down to Hatcham, Kitty would feel grateful. I was, and always had been, a dear good boy, and, as for herself, she blamed no one, especially in view of the fact that she now felt happier than she had ever felt before.

Kitty hoped everything would straighten out for me; hoped she would not be thought sanctimonious when she said she trusted God would bless me. If we did not hear of her for some time, we were not to assume she was anything but perfectly glad and peaceful.

"Try to consider yourself more," the letter concluded, "and not be too ready to put your own happiness in peril. I regret nothing which has happened in the past, nothing excepting the part of the incident that affected you, and I would give a good deal to set this right. Use your best endeavours, and tell me some day that you have no grudge against me."