

CHAPTER XVIII

LEN ACCEPTS GOLD

IT seemed to me in my loneliness there was no good reason why Ernest Fowler should preserve his detached attitude, and I wrote a short letter to him; he did not reply. I wrote to Len, when he had been back in London a few months, suggesting again he should put me up for one of his clubs; he answered briefly that there was a rule forbidding membership to brothers; a misapprehension, as I found later. It looked as though I was never to enjoy even the privilege of being blackballed; necessary to pretend that one objected to clubs on principle. Happening to mention the subject to the proprietor of a trade journal with which Stemsons were doing business, he, to my astonishment, assured me nothing was easier than to become elected at that moment to one of several old-established institutions in the West End, particularly those which suffered from recent party differences and the falling in of leases. He took me off to an admirable club, gave me lunch, introduced me to some fellow members, explained to them that he felt anxious I should allow myself to be nominated, but that I was a reserved, obstinate chap, who declined to listen to reason, whereupon they requested a waiter to bring the candidate's book, and announced jovially that unless I consented to allow my name to be entered on a page there, I would not go out into St James' Street alive.

"You're as right as ninepence," declared my friend, confidently. "The only risk here now is with men who are known."

I spent a busy hour on the first evening after receiving notice of my election, writing notes on club paper to folk of

my acquaintance ; the first to Len, inviting him to dine with me, the second to Milly, the third to my mother. The communication to Milly required care and thought ; it contained a quantity of news, some references to the weather, congratulations on the improved state of affairs out at the Cape, and a polite reference to Mr Wreford ; if he was ever in town, it would be good of him to send a line, and to allow me to entertain him at the address which headed the note-paper. A reply to this came from the gentleman himself. Miss Fowler had been so good as to allow him to see my letter ; he was coming to London shortly, and if I arranged an evening he would make it fit in with his convenience. Len fixed a date and I wrote to Mr Wreford, giving this ; the two could serve to neutralise each other, and the presence of Len would save me from the contempt of waiters who might otherwise think I had no friend but an awkward youth from Devonshire. Also, if one determined to try powers of sarcasm on the West country guest, Len would prove a useful leader.

A report in the journals of a woman's body found at Beachy Head startled me to such an extent that I ran down there, affrightedly, by the first train ; my position at Stemsons gave freedom which enabled me to come and go. At the police-station the information was that the initials on the clothing assumed to be K. L. were in reality K. T., and a glance at the mortuary was enough to assure myself that the poor soul in no way resembled Kitty ; all the same, I broke the return journey in order to see Mrs Latham. Mrs Latham had accepted the resignation of crape ; I found her decked out in most of the colours known to a rainbow.

"As right down pleased to see you," she declared, "as though you were my very own boy. Upon my word, if you hadn't a mother of your own, and if it wasn't for the look of the thing, I'd set to and adopt you, Henry. You want someone to look after you."

"No reason why you shouldn't, Mrs Latham. You could

leave me then all these vast sums of money you have accumulated."

"You think I'm joking," she remarked, sedately. "Some day you'll find that when you're married, children, or the absence of them, make all the difference."

"I am marked out for a bachelor."

"Wait and see, Henry. Your brother—let me see, how long has he been married?" She counted on her fingers, and after an inquiring glance, conveyed regret at the absence of news. "I was thinking only the other day of you two boys, and the difference between you, and all at once, like a flash of lightning, I saw the truth about that letter. You were playing up to him. Your only idea was to get him out of a difficulty. If I'd had more sense, I should have seen it at the time. As it was, we let poor Latham go with the impression that you hadn't behaved so straightforwardly as you ought to have done."

"In the result, Mrs Latham, it appeared I had not succeeded in doing my brother a good turn. Hope he doesn't make it a grievance against me. Shouldn't like to think that."

"Bother him and his grievances!" she cried, warmly. "You and your mother fuss about him as though he was perfect. Makes me cross. I know too much of the world to think that about any man. To prove which," she went on, noting my gesture, "I may tell you, what I wouldn't tell everybody, and that is, I've had an offer—an offer of marriage from a very respectable gentleman." She lowered her voice impressively. "A people's churchwarden, if you please!"

I said this meant saving up for another wedding present.

"Not going to take him," said Mrs Latham, trembling with pride. "I'm going to keep him on the leash, so to speak, for a time, and then I shall have to say as nicely as I can that I've made two blunders already, and that people will begin to think I'm off my head if I make a third. Not that I dislike him."

she added. "How old do you reckon, Henry, a woman ought to be when she gives up all thoughts of falling in love?"

"There's no maximum, Mrs Latham, and no minimum."

"Let's talk again about Kitty," she said, after considering this statement. "I know nothing more than you do, but what I do know is that just before she went away, she was brighter and more cheerful than I've ever seen her. Seemed satisfied, like. And it's certain we needn't be afraid that she'll do herself any harm, for one of the last conversations we had before she went off was about a poor girl who had been found in the Canal; Kitty said the girl had no right to do such a thing. I tried to explain to her the reason, but she said this made it worse."

"Len will be relieved to hear there is no risk of such a thing happening to her."

"I expect your brother Len," she retorted, "wouldn't much care if everybody drowned themselves, so long as he was safe on shore. That's all I'm going to say against him," hastily. "You and your mother are alike in that respect; one word about Len that isn't lavender water, and you're up in arms like a shot! But I must say what I think, sometimes; I remember a gentleman customer once said I was a plain woman in everything but looks. Can't you stay any longer, Henry? Do come down and see me as often as you can. I go and call on your mother sometimes just for the pleasure of talking about you. It isn't as though I'd a lot of relatives; if I had, they'd be buzzing around me now that I'm getting on in years."

Stemson accepted my invitation to join us at the dinner; we still mistered each other at office, but away from Queen Street this formality was waived, and at Palace Court, when the lady relative ceased talking of what she called the beau monde, he had more than once asked my advice concerning a new partner in the business; there were some candidates, it appeared, who had cash, some who had mental capacity, but Stemson required one possessing both, and begged me to

keep a gun ready that such a rare bird, if sighted, should be brought down.

Len, when I came out of the smoking-room of the club and greeted him, apologised for arriving early ; his wife had been seeing a specialist, and was away staying with friends in the country, and he found himself with nothing to do. It was not possible the surroundings of my club affected him, but, (if it can be said without conceit) perhaps I had gained an easier manner, one more like his own, since our last meeting, and it did seem for the first time we were talking on something like equal terms. He told me, before Stemson was announced, that a good, secure seat had at last been placed at his disposal, and when I offered my services, thanked me and mentioned that considerable efforts would not be required.

"Besides, your time is fully occupied now," he said. "I hear of you from one or two business folk of my acquaintance." A political personage to whom I had once casually spoken went by and nodded. "Introduce me," whispered Len, anxiously.

"Can't," I protested. "He probably doesn't know my name."

"Do as I tell you."

The man stopped at the swing doors and accepted my appeal graciously ; I thought Len began to talk with a shade too much eagerness, and the other seemed to take this view, for after a few moments he turned and gave his conversation to me, furnishing the name of the line of steamers which he had failed to recall during our talk of a few days previously. If I decided to do the trip, I must promise him to stay in Gibraltar at the Bristol, in Granada at the Washington Irving, in Seville at the Paris, in Tangiers at the Continental.

"Wish you hadn't taken him from me," complained Len, as the member went. "Five minutes with him would have been most valuable. Afraid one can still detect the old strain of selfishness in your disposition."

"Don't see how I could have forced him to talk to you," I remarked, with spirit.

"We will not continue the discussion," he said.

I took care that with Stemson he should have full opportunities, but Stemson, to my regret, had a slight touch of lumbago, and every other topic appeared to him irrelevant until he had explained the exact hour when the first twinge attacked him; the precise spot where it affected him, the advice given by an expert in Cavendish Square; there appeared a choice of two procedures, one to adopt the counsel and carry it out faithfully, the other to show contempt for the medical profession, and to declare that doctors constituted the most ignorant set of men on earth. Len glanced at his watch; I explained we were waiting for a young fellow from Devonshire.

"Is he walking all the way?" asked Len.

"He's a great friend of Miss Fowler's," I said. "You remember her."

"I seem to recollect!" he remarked.

"Mind you," said Stemson, "no one can imagine what the pain is like unless they've gone through it. The doctor tells me there's a lot about just now."

"Mr Wreford to see you, sir," said the page boy.

I went out into the hall prepared to set an awkward youth at his ease, and found a courtly, white-haired old gentleman.

"I have a message for you, Mr Drew," he said, as I helped him with overcoat, muffler and hat. "Miss Fowler sent her regards."

"Good of her to remember."

"A most invaluable young woman," he said, following me. "Her assistance as secretary has made it possible to get on with some work that has been in arrears for a long time. A charming girl too, Mr Drew, with a certain rapidity of manner, very useful to those of us who live in the country. My wife and I sometimes induce her to play to us of an evening, and altogether she has become quite indispensable."

He proved slightly sententious in manner, but when I realised the delightful fact that here was no competitor, it seemed easy to forgive a small defect. After dinner, we went back to the smoking-room, and there the old gentleman showed to advantage, telling stories so aged that they were new to us, contesting Len's opinions on questions of the day with such perfect courtesy that my brother's methods appeared, by comparison, rough and curt. Mr Wreford had suffered as Stemson was suffering; recovered as he felt sure Stemson would recover, and my chief, showing both hopefulness and discouragement at this prophecy, took up, for a change, the question of a peculiar affection in the right elbow of which he claimed an exclusive monopoly. Len, as I edged my arm-chair in his direction, made an effort to arouse himself.

"So you're going in for globe-trotting, are you?" he said. "Hope you'll enjoy it more than I have ever done. Nothing will ever induce me to go out of England again."

"During the last tour," I remarked, "my views have slightly changed. Not at all certain now that I want to go away for a month. Tell you though what I should like to do, Len, some day, and that is for you and I to go off together."

"Where should we go?" he asked, animatedly. "Get a Continental Bradshaw and let us plan it all out."

"You see," touching the bell, "for years we have never had a good chance of a long talk; never the opportunities we had when I was a boy."

"Gorgeous idea!" he declared, taking the book from the waiter. "Far and away the best suggestion that ever came from you. Now then, let's see. Where do we start from?"

We worked out the journey, one taking the book from the other when difficulties arose, in the impatient manner that most exhibit when a time-table is in question; Len complained of the smallness of the print, but I found it presented no trouble. Sharing the interest and the joy, I pointed out

we should be making rather a wild rush of the trip: he said it was impossible for him to loaf; the moment he arrived at a foreign town a keen desire possessed him to get away from it without delay; if I came with him, I should have to be prepared for this.

"Well, that's settled," he announced, sitting back. "There's only one point; I suppose you can afford it?"

"I'm a careful man."

"Haven't you middle-class people some ingenious trick of having a money-box on the mantel-piece labelled 'Holidays,' into which you put all your very small silver? It's not a bad notion. I'm all in favour of thrift."

"Does the money come in well with you, Len?"

"Oh yes, yes," he answered, lightly. "Of course, no one has quite so much as he would like to have, and public affairs interfere to a certain extent, but I musn't grumble." He became didactic. "The general idea has always been that a man should make his pile before he begins to devote himself to the interests of his ~~country~~ country; consequence is that, by the time he takes up this work, he has exhausted himself and is only fitted for the task of either drawing, or riding in a bath chair. I'm doing the two together; one will help the other." He stretched arms luxuriously. "Great advantage of public work is that it gives such excellent opportunities for encountering the mug. I was introduced to one the other day, and within twenty-four hours——"

I mentioned when he had finished the account that, speaking frankly, my sympathies were with the deluded party to the transaction; Len said this was natural for I myself possessed many of the admirable virtues of a fool. This seemed to demand a short retort and I gave it, apologising humbly the moment that he touched my sleeve. The other two were still engaged in earnest conversation on ailments, and we both sat back, Len looking at the ceiling, I gazing at Len.

"Is this for one of your guests, sir?" asked the page

boy. Len leaned out of his easy-chair and took the letter from the tray.

"Tell my man he needn't wait," he said. "Excuse me!"

He opened the envelope, and stood upright.

"Great news," he exclaimed. "Magnificent news. Come over to the corner, Henry, and let me have a word with you."

"May I look at the letter, Len?"

"I'll tell you the drift of it," he answered, placing it in the breast-pocket of his dress-coat. "The envelope was marked confidential."

"Oddly enough I thought it was in your handwriting."

"Listen to me! It seems we're on the very edge of a bye-election in the constituency I spoke about; needn't go into details because you'll see all about them later on. Point is this; I shall want every penny I can put my hands on."

"Lucky that you have plenty."

"Plenty is a large word," he replied. "What I want to say is, that you have often professed a certain affection for me."

"A sincere affection, Len."

"Then prove it by scraping together every penny you can find, and let me have the whole amount by noon tomorrow!" He went back a couple of paces and surveyed me.

"There's only one objection."

"That you don't want to do it," he suggested, quickly.

"I do want to do it, and will do it, but the result must be that I postpone taking a step which has only seemed possible since the old gentleman over there made his appearance this evening. Milly is down in Devonshire and I want—I want to ask her to marry me."

"Seems," he remarked, drily, "that one half of my life is to be devoted to extricating you from amorous difficulties."

"That's not fair," I blazed out. Again a touch from him, and my ill-temper vanished.

"Just give me your answer, yes or no. You'll have it all back in six weeks; two months at the latest. If you want security——"

"Your word is enough, Len. Mind you, the total sum may not be so large as you think."

"You can't lend me what you haven't got," he agreed, in reasonable tones. "I'm not asking you to do the impossible. You're giving up the idea of the Tangiers trip, and you can have no urgent need for money. Give me now all you have about you. How much will they cash here on your cheque?"

He made proper farewells to the two other guests, assuring them of the delight experienced in making their acquaintance, and in the room where his overcoat and hat had been left, I was able to hand to him a good fistful of sovereigns; he slipped them carelessly into his trousers pocket. On the steps outside I waited to see him go.

"Run in!" he ordered. "You'll catch cold if you stand there." I went back to the smoking-room with these words of solicitude in my ears.

"My young friend," said old Mr Wreford, elaborately, "I am accustomed to early hours, and I hope you will excuse me."

"Eleven o'clock is my time," remarked Stenson. "Never out of bed a moment later."

"Mine is half past ten," said the gentleman from Devonshire.

"Too early," declared Stenson.

The new topic was argued, whilst I stood by their chairs, pretending to listen, but really engaged in my own thoughts. At last I was about to do something for Len, to prove to him I was prepared to make sacrifice for the sake of his interests. This was exactly what one had been desiring all through life, and reproof had to be mentally administered because there came a sensation of regret that opportunity arrived at the particular moment. I could, of course, write

to Milly and explain why I did not wish my appeal to be granted immediately, but this would necessitate a reference to Len, and Milly did not like my brother; it would give an excuse for charging me with an affection for him greater than the affection one had for her. Approaches must be made with great caution, and care not omitted. The two wranglers ended their debate by compromising on 10.45, and ascertaining that this precise hour had been reached, bustled off without further delay. Mr Wreford was staying at an old-fashioned hotel in Bloomsbury; I gained his permission to walk with him.

"Makes me feel quite the young bachelor again," he said, looking about as we went up Shaftesbury Avenue. "Great days, great memories. But no one who finds the right woman need envy his youth. Now, take your case, Mr Drew."

I was willing that my case should be considered.

"We are very anxious about Miss Fowler. We like her. We admire her. And to tell you the truth, my wife is a bit of a match-maker, and she gave me distinct orders before I came away that I was not to return until I had successfully carried out her instructions. What I recommend is that you go back with me and stay with us for a while, and there you will have opportunities—Well, my wife will see that you have opportunities. Trust her!"

"You think there's a good chance?"

"That," he said, judicially, "I am unable to guarantee. She is a reserved young person, and my wife—a brilliant cross-examiner, believe me, and not easily daunted—has, for once been beaten. For all we know she may decline to listen to you. It's quite probable she may receive you with a considerable amount of coldness. Mrs Wreford assures me that if she were in the girl's place, she would take up an extremely dignified attitude."

I piloted him across Cambridge Circus.

"Mr Wreford," I said, "I am not sure whether it is possible to make myself clear, but I hope you will under-

stand that if I do not marry Miss Fowler, there will be very little happiness in my life."

"Good!"

"At the proper time I shall use all my best efforts to induce her to forget about things that are past, and to persuade her to regard me again as——"

"Excellent!"

"But this is not the proper time. Just now, and for the moment, I am not in a position to make an offer, and I ask you to go back alone."

"Bad!"

"Go back alone, and report only that I inquired very earnestly after her welfare, and sent a kind message."

"Damnable!" ejaculated the old gentleman.

I found no reference in the newspapers to the election referred to by my brother, and one or two men in the City, and one or two men at the Club, who would be likely to know, assured me there was no chance of the immediate occurrence of such an event. When a proper time had elapsed I wrote to Len and mentioned that, in the circumstances, I was prepared for the return of the rather considerable amount advanced to him; wrote also to Mr Wreford, asking him to fix a date for my visit. Len replied, in what seemed a curt note, that no time had been indicated for repayment, and I must refrain from sending him tiresome and irritating communications; to the other letter, came, in answer, a postcard from some one informing me that Mr and Mrs Wreford and Miss Fowler had left for a long tour on the continent; at Mr Wreford's request no letters were being forwarded.