CHAPTER XIX

LEN CALLS AT QUEEN STREET

I AM particularly anxious not to say too much about myself because the career of Len is more interesting, but it is necessary to mention here that—this was in nineteen hundred and one,—my position at Queen Street improved so considerably that there was no excuse for begrudging the temporary absence of the savings lent to my brother. We started a trade journal, Stemson and I, a journal of which you have probably never heard so much as the title; it is rarely to be found on the bookstalls, never in the reading-room of a club; all the same a most excellent piece of property, and no reputable firm in that particular trade thinks of discontinuing either its subscription, or the illustrated advertisements. An elderly cashier resigned, and the farewell evening given to him at the Albion, caused Stemson to stay at home in Palace Court for a while; I used to go over every night to get cheques signed, but this became irksome, and Stemson placed his autograph on the slips, warning me to be careful of these blank cheques; his aunt mentioned the case of a Lord Somebody now residing for good reasons in the Argentine Republic. There was nothing astonishing, in the circumstances, that Stemson should regard his indisposition as serious, for a man never existed with a greater relish for ailments; the singular thing was that the complaint proved to be serious, and the doctor explained to me the difficulty he encountered; having always hitherto magnified the little weaknesses in order to gratify the patient, the trouble now was to persuade Stemson that the occurrence had a special character. At Queen Street, I took possession of the invalid's room, and senior clerks began to call me "sir."

It was Mrs Latham who first gave me information which others had kept to themselves. The old lady called at Queen Street one afternoon, and clerks at the counter assured her Mr Drew was deeply engaged, quite unable to see anyone unless an appointment had been made.

"Oh, I shouldn't have gone back home," she assured me, when we were alone, "without having a word with you, my dear. I was in business too long to feel inclined to take 'no' for an answer. What's all this about your brother Len?"

I had but glanced at the morning papers.

"It's nothing that'll appear in print," she said, lowering her voice, and at once allowing it to regain the usual volume. I stepped across and closed the door. "I made it a rule at the very start never to lend a single penny to any one, but it's a rule I've often broken, and if you want me to do it this time, why you've only to say the word. But I don't pretend I like doing it, and I shan't forget to tell him so. He's got no claim upon me, and he's no need to write as though borrowing a hundred pounds was doing me a great favour. Not a word, if you please, about interest! Not so much as a single word. I don't mind telling you I've been fairly lucky with my investments; it isn't always the widow that gets taken in with money matters, but at the same time I've got no spare cash to throw down a sink. I want to keep a hold on it, and want to make something out of it. Four per cent. is enough on good security, five per cent. is better and five and a half——"

At my interruption, my voluble friend opened her small wrist-bag and gave a click of the tongue, indicating despair.

"That girl again!" she cried, "I said to her when she was buttoning me up at the back, I said, 'Emily, don't you let me go without that letter on the dressing-table,' and she said, 'All right, ma'am, I'll remind you!' Remind me indeed! As I tell her, she thinks of nothing, nothing in this

world excepting it is a Royal Artilleryman over at Woolwich."

"Tell me what the letter said, Mrs Latham."

She was able to recite the communication verbally, from start to finish. The letter gave details of the last visit paid by Len's wife to a specialist, information repeated by Mrs Latham and explained in frank language that formed a tribute to my age and wisdom; what Len required was that another and a better and a more expensive man should be seen, and the money was required in case an operation should prove to be necessary. It was, he said, a case of life and death, and on Mrs Latham would rest the responsibility for any failure to do the right and proper thing.

"That didn't frighten me," she commented. "It's an old trick of the borrowing sort to try to put you in a corner and say, 'Your money or some one else's life!' But I thought I'd pop on my cloak and bonnet and run up here and let you decide, and what you say is to be done, shall be done. Whilst I think of it, just glance your eye over that and see what you think of it."

The circular was from the secretary of some charity with which I was not acquainted; appended was a form useful to those who desired to bequeath money to the institution.

"Being with no kith and kin," she remarked, using the phrase with a certain luxury, "it's high time I began to think about how to dispose of my little all. If I'd got kith and kin, it would be different, but they're things you can't order at the Stores. These affairs are all much of a muchness, I suppose, and I should like to make up my mind."

To exhibit the celerity with which we were able to deal with questions, I ordered Farrington to bring me all the available information within ten minutes. In regard to Len's letter, the question was not so easy to tackle. No reason to doubt his statement; on the other hand I was unable to give it confirmation for the reason that I had not heard from him since—— The last letter was produced and Mrs Latham, without ceremony, took it from me, and read.

"That settles it!" she announced. "Thought this might be his first experiment, but it seems to be at least the second, and goodness knows what its proper number is. I shan't lend that brother of yours a penny!"

"Then I must!"

"But you've done it already, my dear. You can't go on all your life paying out and paying out; you'll find, once he sees you're willing to do that, he'll be ready enough to let you do it. If I'd behaved in that way, there wouldn't have been no necessity for me to bother about a will. You ought to think of yourself. Some day you'll get married."

"There appears no likelihood of that."

"You'll get married," she persisted, "and towards the end the greatest joy that can come to you will be the thought that you can leave something to those that are dear and near to you. Concerning your brother, I never did like being taken in."

"Len is the last man to impose upon any one."

"I suppose I shall never acquire the taste for it, and I tell you what's occurred to me whilst I've been sitting here. I shall write him a letter — I miss Kitty so much where spelling is concerned—and tell him that if he'll give me the address of the medical gentleman, I'll send a cheque direct to the address, if so be that it's wanted."

Still no news of Kitty, she told me, and when I suggested that perhaps her step-daughter had married some good fellow and settled down comfortably, she pointed out, very wisely, that no reason would exist in that case for withholding particulars concerning the town, road, and number. Admitted, however, that Kitty was one of those somewhat flighty persons whom marriage occasionally converted into steady, thoughtful women. Farrington came in with satisfactory information concerning the charity, and Mrs Latham, in accepting it, announced that a load had been taken from her shoulders; I heard later that in going out she had pressed three-pence upon the dignified young gentleman (whose

father was in the Foreign Office) with the advice that he should not spend it on sweets.

My concern regarding Len became deepened when one Sunday evening I paid my usual weekly visit to Shardeloes Road—where I always quickened footsteps and kept eyes left in going by the Fowlers' street, and in spite of all this, never able to pass without experiencing a queer sensation at the throat—my mother showed me, with great satisfaction, a note from my brother, the first she had received for a long period of time. The letter made affectionate inquiries after her health, reported good accounts in this respect concerning himself, spoke with some acerbity of the influences that were working against him in public life, expressed confidence in being able to overcome them. The paragraph which gave my mother keenest satisfaction related to the house in Vanburgh Park, Blackheath; Len said he had reason to believe it might shortly be placed in the hands of Tokenhouse Yard; there would, he could assure her, be at least one bid for the property, and supposing the reserve figure proved not unreasonably high, one of his ambitions would find itself satisfied. My mother begged me to read this part again, to think of it, and to endeavour to imagine what it meant to her. Was it not a most fortunate thing that she had always preserved the die used in the old days for letter-paper; see what this would save!

"There was one thing that did remind me so of your poor father," she went on exultantly. "When I read it, I could almost hear him talking. It's in that same envelope, if you look again. Your father used to complain that, with all his money out in various what-do-you-call-'ems, he often didn't know where to put his hand on eighteen pence when he wanted to pay for a cab!"

The slip mentioned that if mother had twenty-five pounds in her savings book, she would be doing Len a special kindness by withdrawing it and sending the sum, in five-pound notes, by registered post at the earliest possible moment. The sum, it appeared, had, with the expert assistance of the

two lady lodgers, been so forwarded on the previous afternoon, and my mother was now looking forward gleefully to the receipt of another letter from her favourite son, acknowledging receipt.

We were discussing this, and I was turning the matter carefully over in my mind when a sharp double-knock came at the front door, and I answered it.

"Thank goodness I've caught you," panted my Aunt Mabel. "Been mentioning to the conductor of the tram coming along that I particularly wanted to see my other nephew, and he said he had no doubt but what I should. As I told him, people seem to imagine I'm made of money, but that's a mistake."

Aunt Mabel kissed my mother, accepted assistance with a certain proportion of her voluminous wrappings.

"It's all very well," she went on, breathlessly, "for some people, but I've still one daughter on my hands, and I've got to think, mind you. I pay out rates and taxes and so forth and so on that seem to increase year after year, and when they tell me that a lot of it goes in making people more healthy, and in giving them a chance of living longer, I answer back, 'What's the use of that to me? What I want to know is, where do I come in?'"

"Had such a nice letter from Len," interposed my mother.

"Oh, you've had one, too, then."

"Has he written to you, Aunt Mabel?"

"He's written to me," she replied, desolately, "and I've written back, and now I don't know whether I did the right thing or not in saying 'No!'"

I stiffened courage in leaving the house, and determined to make a call at the Fowlers. Mr Ernest only was in, said the maid, and Ernest came out, a pen over his ear, but he did not take the hand I offered. Yes, answering abruptly, he had received a letter from Len, but it seemed to him the Fowlers owed nothing to the Drews, or if they owed anything, it was not to be paid in money. His sister had not yet returned from the Continent; if he knew when she was likely

to return, the information would certainly not be given to me. Mr and Mrs Fowler were at church; when I expressed regret, he assured me they had no desire to meet me. I said a few words of strong approval concerning a story of his that had appeared in one of the current magazines.

"Look here, Henry," he said. "You're not a bad chap, and there may be another view of the affair that does not present itself to me, but you may as well understand that friendship is impossible between us, and when you see your brother you can intimate that this remark refers also to him. Len, I never did care for, but I don't mind saying that I did like you. I liked you so much that—Good night," he added, abruptly.

The rebuff had been courted, but this did not decrease the hurt; one had become less accustomed to the snub direct, and this instance was not easily dismissed from the mind. Considering the whole matter, I felt aggrieved at what seemed to me unfair behaviour, and gradually persuaded myself Len was to be seen, Len was to be advised; if necessary, Len was to be reproved. This decision, arrived at during a week of considerable pressure at Queen Street, with delicate questions to be settled in the absence of Stemson, and a sudden spurt of activity on the part of a rival firm of advertising agents, appeared to me later the result of a confused brain; it is fair to say in justice to myself that on the Friday I wired to him, after telephoning in vain to his club—it would have been so much easier to convey the reprimand without seeing him—it is fair to say I was not in full possession of my usual self-command; at the moment I felt prepared to blame him for everything that had gone awry, from the breaking of my engagement to Milly, down to the circumstance that an office boy had brought in for me buttered toast instead of dry. The telegram directed him to call at Queen Street at half-past six, at which hour the staff would have gone, and I should be alone. It was discovered afterwards that the lad who took telegrams for us to the post-

office in Cannon Street, having money trouble of his own, made a practice of whittling these down, deleting words he reckoned superfluous, and it is likely my communication reached Len in a form less polite than the state in which it left my table.

"Four wires, sir," said Farrington. "One appears to be private."

"Leave them there. I'll look at them directly."

"Do you wish any of us to stop, please?"

"I think you all go on the stroke of six," I retorted, testily. "That, I believe, is your invariable custom. The promptitude of your departure——"

"Don't mind waiting, sir, if you wish me to do so."

"I have already endeavoured to convey to you, Mr Farrington, that the reverse is my earnest desire."

They went off, one by one, two by two; the charwomen came talking shrilly of the defects of husbands until one, in placing a stool, legs upwards, on a desk, caught sight of me; whereupon they changed the topic and discussed, in benevolent tones, the brain worry experienced by gentlemen in business, the advisability of not over-stepping the bounds of energetic application. I walked up and down, hands deep in pockets, until the half hour was nearly reached; then washed at the stand behind the screen, practising the while in the mirror, an adjustment of features that should convey a wisely compounded blend of regret and disapproval.

"Gentleman to see you," said one of the charwomen.

"Little man," cried my brother, entering rapidly, "you're a dear, good chap, and I like you, but really you do select the most inconvenient hours for making appointments. This means that my wife will dine alone, and I shall have to snatch a bone at the club and eat it on the mat." He went on without listening to my first words of explanation. "You ought to get away before this, you know. No man of your position should be found staying late in the City: suspicious people begin to hint that he's only doing so in

order to cook the accounts. Or," he laughed, "to make experiments in handwriting."

He took up Stemson's cheque-book and glanced through the leaves. "No necessity for you to do that, I see. Do you mean to say he trusts you to this extent?"

"There is no reason," stiffly, "why he should not trust me to any extent."

"Of course, of course!" With a smile that made me repent the tone I had adopted. "I should feel exactly the same if I were your chief. Some day, the opportunity will come for me to show the deep regard I have for you. By the bye, I have great news. Your friend Miss Fowler is in town."

"No!"

"Pardon me," he insisted, genially. "Met her this afternoon in New Bond Street; stopped and spoke to her."

"That was good of you, Len."

"She asked about you, and I told her you were living in my old rooms. Shouldn't be at all surprised if you get a call from her there."

"How was she looking, Len? Did she speak of me with —with kindness? Do you know where she is staying?" I rapped out the questions eagerly.

"Where's your A.B.C.," he asked. I pointed to the book hanging at the side of the table. "Step into the outer office," he said, "and get the South Western book I saw hanging up there."

He was sitting on the corner of the table when I returned, choosing a cigarette from his silver case. Taking the time-table he examined a page hurriedly, exclaimed, "Shall only just get to Waterloo in time!" put on his hat and went to the door.

"I want to say something to you, Len," I called out. "An important matter!"

"Send me a note," he called over his shoulder. "And if it's anything I can do for you, rely upon me. Always glad to oblige you, for the sake of old times."

The meeting had not taken the turn I meant it to adopt; the man at the wheel shouldered away and control exercised by an invited passenger. There came relief in the thought that harsh words had not been used, but I could scarcely persuade myself the event was cancelled; it was but postponed. Len would have to be told, and told by me, that he must not pester everybody for money; if he stood in urgent need of cash, the correct course to pursue was to come to me, see what could be done, and receive the lecture I prepared on the advantages of thrift. But all this seemed a matter of less importance now: the information that Milly was in London modified, obliterated everything else. Len's suggestion that she might call at Tavistock Place startled me into activity, and I bustled around, setting papers to rights, called out to one of the women requesting her to whistle for a cab. The cheque-book which I opened had been reversed in position.

"There was one just driving up," announced the woman, breathless after hurrying up the staircase, "so I told him to wait."

Outside on the landing, a young woman, well-dressed, examined in the dim light the names on the large framed indicator set against the wall.

"Milly dear!" I cried.

I led her through the office where the two charwomen, at the sight of us, stood at attention, brooms upright. In Stemson's room I pulled the easiest chair to the table and made her sit down.

"Don't close the door," she said.

I daresay the words and phrases could be recovered if I taxed my memory, but there is no necessity to do so. Kneeling by the side of the chair (until I presently encountered the astonished gaze of the two ladies who should have been occupied in sweeping) I explained everything frankly, endeavoured to make her see that I had always loved her, that everything of which she had a right to complain was done in the interests of Len. It appeared she had

met Kitty at Eastbourne, and Kitty's evidence coincided with mine.

"You've improved so wonderfully," I declared with enthusiasm. "I thought there was no room for that but——"

"Listen!" she interrupted. "What I want to know is, how far you are prepared to go for the sake of your brother?"

"There are no limits in that direction."

She thought for a moment, and I kissed her hand to reassure her.

"I met him this afternoon," said Milly.

"I know."

"I didn't like the look of him."

"You never did, dear. He came here half an hour ago, and I do think if you had seen him then, as I saw him, you would have been tempted to alter your opinion."

"Did he want money, Henry?"

"Now that's unjust of you," warmly. "You've heard something from Ernest."

"I'm sorry," she said, with her finger on my wrist, "if I do him an injustice. But I confess to the feeling that I owe him a grudge. I've had some rather dark moments since I saw you last."

I kissed her again.

One of the women, rapping cautiously at the door, said the cabman desired to know whether he was to wait all night. I tried the lock of the safe, glanced around and noticed I had forgotten to put away the cheque-book.

"Anything the matter?" asked Milly, coming to my shoulder.

"There's a blank cheque missing," I remarked, puzzled. "And the counterfoil's gone, too. I shouldn't be so foolish as to tear out the counterfoil."

"It was signed?"

"Yes."

"Crossed?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Then," she said, "it would be impossible for anyone to fill it in for an amount and obtain the sum across the counter of the bank."

"Milly," I remarked, still examining the book, "you seem to have accumulated an enormous amount of business information."

"At what time did your brother leave here?"

"Ten minutes to seven."

"That's all right, then," with relief.

We walked back from Lombard Street after leaving the note that requested payment to be stayed, and going along the nearly empty Queen Victoria Street, found ourselves on the delightful embankment, where we could walk arm-in-arm without exciting attention on the part of any but the couples adopting a similarly affectionate manner.

At the old-fashioned hotel in York Place, I was introduced to Mrs Wreford, received by Mr Wreford with something of the manner of the father of the prodigal son. My landlady's servant mentioned the next morning that it put fresh heart into her to see me once more making a decent, respectable breakfast, more like that of an honest Englishman, less like that of a French foreigner.