CHAPTER II

LEN MASSING

THE departure of Len was an everyday occurrence which for me never lost any of its interest, and now that I had left school there came opportunity to watch the event with something of leisureliness. Years previously, when father was alive and we lived at Blackheath, there had been the considerable joy of regarding all the preliminaries necessary before nurse escorted my brother to an Academy for Young Gentlemen in Montpelier Place; the four years dividing us made him appear then, with large white turn-down collar, orange-coloured cap, and other grown-up apparel, to be a mature gentleman; I think these moments were more precious to me than even the occasions when we met a long line of sturdy horses and of drivers (who touched the rim of their hats to me) with carts bearing the words LEOD. DREW, CONTRACTOR. My mother took an equal pride in Len and in his setting out, and I heard her say once to a servant, in returning after a final wave of the hand from the gate along the semi-circular drive in front of the house in Vanbrugh Park, "Well, thank goodness, one of my sons is going to be a gentleman." Father used to tell her she was too fond of making friends of the servants, and she retorted that he should have thought of that before marrying her; when the bankruptcy came, and everything was sold and father escaped the last responsibilities, she said to Len and to me that our poor father's wisdom in marrying beneath him was now proved by the fact that she could turn her hand to nearly anything; she added that come what might, Len must go on with his schooling. More recently in Woodpecker Road (a branch of twelve-shillings-a-week houses

thrust out in the direction of market gardens, where bent women in red shawls were always making trenches for celery, or cultivating radishes, or the season's salads, and anticipating a later movement amongst their sex by smoking short black pipes) there, as I swept out the small crowded general shop, which had several smells, with paraffin oil beating all the others, I had the joy of seeing my elder brother go out at 8.20 on week-day mornings, walking rapidly along the back streets in the direction of the railway station. It always sent me off to school in good temper, telling myself that what Len was then, I would try, in course of time, to become.

I do not know whether it may be considered that my respect for Len requires explanation. It is not certain that you, yourself, would care to be called upon formally to give full and complete justification in any case of a somewhat similar nature. Speaking generally, one finds that most men keep two baskets, by means of which they are able to make a strict division between the people they like, and the people for whom they have no affection; in most cases the decision is made at the first encounter, made irrevocably. A man who discovers he has made a mistake and placed one in the wrong basket sometimes declines out of sheer pride to remedy the error; only occasionally will he own himself in error and adjust the blunder, so that those most successful in creating a good impression at the outset are likely to go into the favoured basket, and remain there. Friendship, so it seems to me, cannot be analysed or investigated; it exists, or it does not exist. In the case of Len and myself, affection started long before the period when I introduced him to you. My memories, and some of the best of them, went back to a remote day, so far back as the moment always referred to by my mother in the words—

"When Henry here began to sit up and take notice."

I should not like to make a guess at the age which coincided with recognition of Len, because it would probably sound incredible, but I declare I remember admiring him

from a cradle he had been ordered to rock, but from which excellent position he generously allowed me to remain awake and watch him as he imitated the magnificent drum-major of the Coldstream Guards. I can see him now, twirling a stick with fair success, strutting up and down the room, paper headgear similar to that worn by field marshals (to be turned later, by a magic twist, into a boat), and with closed lips buzzing a martial strain, relieved at times by the repeated ejaculation of—

"Oom-pah, oom-pah, oom-pah!"

Which I discovered later to be intended for the musical contribution of a trombone.

I must have made an admirable audience, ready to laugh on the least excuse, and never more diverted than, when tiring of other sports, he pretended to engage with me on a desperate prize fight, dancing near with clenched fists, giving tremendous and harmless blows, and sometimes affecting to be seriously injured, creating in me amusement that always ended in hiccoughs and a piece of sugar. Then, in the early days after Blackheath, when my mother's time was fully occupied in looking after the shop, and—as I have been told—a few of the old friends made a precise point of calling once, and once only, in order, apparently, that they might persuade themselves into believing they had not dropped the acquaintance suddenly—then, he was my nursemaid and took me out to taste the air of the market gardens in a perambulator, subsequently offered by my mother in a burst of generosity to a woman with innumerable children in Milton Court Road and by that lady—after close inspection of its many faults—definitely refused. (In its old age it became a conveyance for the delivery of parcels, compelling derision from errand boys who propelled cycle carts.) Len always contrived to make these outings agreeable to me, and I daresay he enjoyed the position of governor and guide. It was from his tuition that I learned to give an exaggerated title to most things; dogs were not bow-wows but lions, horses not gee-gees but elephants; the canal not ecky

water but the Atlantic Ocean. Later, my brother proved the only person who assumed I had anything like normal intelligence. Until the age of five or six my mother kept rigidly to the use of baby language; I recollect the pleasing shock that came one night, when she ceased, in giving me the cue at prayers, to refer to the Almighty as Dod; here was a signal that it could at last be taken that my knowledge of the English tongue had advanced beyond the elementary stage. Long after this, customers were in the habit of saying if I happened to tumble—

"Oops—y—daisy!"

And going out of their way to strike the part of the floor against which I fell, a species of revenge that never gave me entire satisfaction.

But Len, so soon as I began to run about, and (I suppose) showed that everything which affected him was of deep interest to me, at once credited me with acumen I did not always possess, and continually paid me the great compliment of talking far above my head. He must have been amazingly quick and sharp with his lessons, for whereas, when it came to my turn, I had to be threatened, and cajoled, and denounced into doing educational work at home—always making the most elaborate preparations in order to fend off the moment for beginning the task—with Len it was something to be attacked without delay, something to be dealt with smartly, something to form, afterwards, a topic of conversation between us. He opened my young eyes to the distressing amount of information that had to be acquired before one could be counted fit to engage in a struggle with the world, and I remember, in regard to history, envying the boys who came into the world at an earlier period, say, soon after the landing of Julius Cæsar. At any rate, I obtained from Len a queer stew made up of fragments of information, so that when I did go to the Board School in Edward Street, I was able to astonish the young lady in whose class I found myself, by a sort of spasmodic erudition, behaving rather like a cheap firework on the fifth of November. Len helped me

with my lessons, when lessons came, and my reverence for him was such that when his statements conflicted with those made by the young woman in Edward Street, I, giving her the submission due to an official, had no doubt whatever in which quarter error existed. Also, for introduction to other boys I was indebted to Len. I think he must have needed a certain variety in his friendships, for it was at times difficult for me to keep pace with his changes, and I had to endure reproof for continuing to speak to Arthur Jessom and to borrow his hoop, after Len had decided that Arthur Jessom no longer lived; with the few girls included in our circle, one had to be very wary, for the mere fact that Len spoke highly of the appearance and deportment of Mary Jane Partridge one day, was no guarantee that Miss Partridge, on the day following, would be counted worthy of the recognition which consisted in pulling undone the scarlet ribbon that adorned her plait of hair. In games, Len constituted himself my professional trainer, and I have always thought he would have done well at cricket, if only he had been able to keep temper under control.

I hope it will be seen how affection for my brother was planted, and how it grew.

The Blackheath days are rather vague in my memory, for I was sent away during the time of the sale, but I remember the men coming down to the house; large, purple-faced individuals, with rare jokes to crack about certain articles of furniture, and over-anxious to show amiability to maid-servants; the gummed labels which they produced suggested to me a Biblical reference which, somehow, did not seem appropriate to the situation, and "Lot 143" became the title of my rocking horse. I stayed with some people in Dover Road, who, to my distress, talked furtively and in whispers whilst I was present, giving me aggressive smiles of encouragement the while, but so soon as I was out of sight assumed that I was also out of hearing, and said so constantly—"What a come-down for the Drews!" that the remark became fixed into my little head as though it were the refrain of a comic song.

One large cart took the furniture bought in by my mother (mainly from the servants' room), and it called for me on a Monday night in January that, for another reason, is not likely to be forgotten by any Londoner alive at the time. It had been freezing hard all day, and muffled up with scarves and a borrowed shawl, I had been taken out to the pond on Blackheath to enjoy the best day of sliding that has come within my experience. People said, looking upward, that there was a lot more to fall, and this to me sounded promising ; a long ride in such circumstances approached one's idea of perfection.

"Don't know so much about it," said the driver of the large cart, answering an assumed question. "If you ask me, my opinion is, you'd better not venture."

The Dover Road folk said I had been a good boy; they were quite sorry to see me go, but they did not offer to extend hospitality, and my mother remarked that she scarcely knew what to do.

"Drive on!" ordered Len. He gave me a hand, I clambered up beside him, and he issued a further instruction.

"All very well to say Woodpecker Road," grumbled the driver, "but it won't be so easy to get there."

"I take the responsibility," said Len.

We exchanged farewells with my hosts, who could not conceal a look of relief as they turned to run indoors. It was fiercely, bitterly cold, and I allowed my mother to take me on her lap and protect me as well as she could from the biting air. Len slapped his shoulder in a manly way and began to manufacture a good stock of snowballs, some of which he fired at passengers who came out of the railway station ; their inability to discover the place the shots came from cheered us greatly, although my mother expressed the opinion that to knock off silk hats savoured of naughtiness likely to be punished, either in this world or in the world to come. The horse moved slowly, and Len from the tail of the van more than once shouted a direction that

the whip should be used, until the driver presently retorted with a pointed promise to adopt the suggestion, and a hint that the horse would certainly not be the object selected.

"Looks like winter," called out my mother, changing the subject.

"D'you know why that is?"

She shook her head.

"Because it is winter," replied the driver.

Down in Lewisham, near the Obelisk there could be no doubt about it. The snow was descending thickly and riotously; omnibuses discharged passengers who were told to walk home as best they could, and these began by floundering about in the great heaps that had drifted beside the pavement; the umbrellas they tried to put up were either wrested from numbed hands by the swirling wind, or turned inside out. It was certainly the maddest, the most irresponsible of snowstorms. We crouched back into the van as far as possible, but the flakes found us out, and Len shrieked with amusement at my mother's appearance; her crape bonnet had become the head-gear of a bride. Up Loampit Hill we found it impossible to move, and Len and I stepped down to assist the driver in encouraging the horse; I think the driver must have been a man of short temper, for he cuffed me on finding that my brother was making an endeavour to kick the animal. Everything about was perfectly quiet; the snow had the muffling effect of a thick white blanket, but now and again a slate came from the roof of a house and smashed into fragments. Near Lewisham Road station, when we had pushed our way there, we found a stationary four-wheeled cab with two lady passengers and a driver either inebriated or demented, and they implored that we should take them with us wherever we were going; their own objective was Sydenham.

What I recall principally about the journey was the vivacity of Len. Whenever there seemed a danger of depression making a clutch, the sight of some one else in deeper

misfortune cheered him, and I could not help thinking that anyone who could keep in good spirits during such an experience as this, was bound to make his way in the world. In New Cross Road the driver made an announcement.

"I'm done!" he said, definitely. "Can't go no further. If you take my advice, you'll try to make your way along somehow. The old 'orse and me, we've done our best, and we can't do more! Only wish the pubs were open!"

We spent that night in the empty house down nearly at the end of Woodpecker Road, with no fire, and little to make a fire, but Len's spirits kept up, and kept us going. In the morning we found the shop doorway blocked high with snow; not a soul within hail, a weird and uncanny stillness about, and a good prospect of starvation. But for help that came later from a Mrs Croucher who lived near, we might all have died that day. My mother and I wanted to do something to repay her for the hot soup and the dry firewood and for her kindness, but Len decided it would be unwise to make friends impetuously; he, moreover, pointed out that virtue was its own reward, the woman ought to be grateful for the opportunity that had been offered to her. On the day after Black Tuesday, we started keeping shop.

Forgive this retrospection.

I gave my news about Mr Latham on the morning after the Rosherville trip, and Len declared it happened most fortunately; at office they were beginning to say he ought to wear a silk hat, and if mother could let him have the fourteen and six necessary for the purchase, he was prepared to hand down to me his week-day bowler. You may have assumed that my mother was of uncertain temper and snappish methods, but this would be an incorrect guess; it was only on Sundays and holidays that these were exhibited; on working days, the business of the shop and the house seemed to make her cheerful, and to the request she replied promptly, that she had been waiting for this occasion. Begging me to keep an eye on the shop door—we often had

early lady customers who ran in, not completely apparelled, with the prefaced remark of "Quite thought I'd got something for breakfast, but I find I'm wrong; may I trouble you?"—she went upstairs and brought down a leather hat-box, worn, in places, to a light brown, and produced from it a silk hat calling our special attention to names of the notable makers inside. This was none of your fourteen and sixpennies; father, so she informed us, never dreamt of giving less than twenty-five shillings. She wiped it carefully with a clean pocket-handkerchief and bidding Len to remain seated, placed it with caution upon his head, requested him to look at himself in the glass.

"Can't!" protested my brother. "It comes right down over my eyes."

"Fetch some cardboard, Henry," she said. "We'll remedy that in less than two ticks."

"Yes, but," when this had been done, "it's the wrong shape."

"It's the shape of a silk hat."

We explained that, whilst to the feminine mind it doubtless appeared that a man's hat was always a man's hat, yet each year brought some slight alteration, and to wear one which was not of the current fashion, was to give encouragement to gibes from boys in New Cross, to smiles of pity from fellow passengers in the 8.33 train; I myself, on an evening of the previous week had remarked to a youth, "Come out of that topper; I know you're there because I can see your legs!"

My mother, disappointed, took the leather box away, remarking that if the hat did not suit Len, it would have to be kept until I was old enough to wear it. Gave Len the amount he had mentioned, reminding him to ask for allowance of a discount, and the week-day bowler, that very evening, came into my possession, together with a pale blue necktie, and a pair of cuffs requiring adroit treatment with scissors. It was understood my services in the shop, night and morning, were to be continued, and on Len saying he supposed he

ought to share some of these duties, I was the first to declare that he would do nothing of the kind.

"You don't want to get your hands red," I remarked. "Once they get that colour, it takes a long time to get them white again."

I went in the evening after putting shutters up to call on my friend Ernest Fowler, in St Donatt's Road, and before going spent a good quarter of an hour at the sink with pumice stone and nail-brush. His young sister opened the door and looked at my hand before accepting it; my trouble was repaid by her smile of approval. Her father and mother called out to know who it was, and on Milly giving the information, they cried jovially "Bring him in, and make him have a bit of supper!" Ernest was out at a shorthand class, and this caused me to show reserve, for he should have told me he intended going in for study; if there was anything in friendship it ought to mean the complete absence of secrets. But the Fowlers were so cheerful, and the cold ham and watercress looked so good, that I could not keep back my news.

"Good [illegible]ness!" declared the father and mother. "Nothing like getting a fair start. Help yourself to mustard."

"Wish Ernest could have had the chance of something of the kind," I said, eating industriously. "Of course there are City clerks, and City clerks, but unless you get into a position like that of my brother Len——"

Milly glanced at the clock and held out her hand; her mother gave her a penny.

"Otherwise," I went on, "it's a monotonous occupation, and you soon become little better than a machine. Now at a place like Latham's, it's different. Anything may happen there. I shan't have to take my turn with eighty others."

"Isn't he rather an ignorant man?" asked Milly.

"That just gives me my opportunity."

Mr Fowler had heard of Mr Latham; knew a case illustrating his acuteness. Mr Fowler's company wanted to extend a station that could only be increased on one side; the

engineer's department kept the intention a profound mystery, to be known only inside official doors, and had its eye on a row of ten elderly, dilapidated cottages. When the department came to closer quarters to arrange with another department for the purchase, it was found Mr Latham had bought them quietly, two by two, had repapered them, whitewashed them, given them an outward appearance of being fit for superior tenants. Mr Latham, at first, declined to sell, afterwards gave notice that he could be approached, eventually named a sum, and the company, without writing a cheque for the precise figure, nevertheless, as Mr Fowler expressed it, had to pay through the nose. I felt greatly pleased with this evidence of my firm's ingenuity and foresight. Ernest came in with his books, and congratulated me on the behaviour of Len in the river incident of Monday. Conversation went back to my coming duties.

"It's all as good as signed and settled," I remarked, "but I'm not quite sure what I ought to say when I call on him next week. Len says——"

Milly Fowler made a second mark on the back of an envelope.

"Len says I ought not to seem too eager. What are you up to?" I demanded, turning to her. "Foolish girl you are, to be sure. How can I talk without mentioning him?"

"Do you ever try?"

"What I was going to remark was that if any of you could give me some idea of what I ought to say, I shall feel very much obliged. Len would be the one to ask, but I don't want to seem to bother him."

They were good-natured over it, furnishing in generous qaantities a variety of hints, but Milly's impersonation of a youth who touched his eyebrows respectfully with a forefinger at every sentence I rejected without hesitation. At the end I decided on a demeanour of jauntiness, with a blend of deference, not altogether easy to rehearse, but certain to come at the right moment.

In sketching out my future career I likely enough became

slightly patronising to the Fowlers, for Milly interrupted and suggested a game of cards. Mrs Fowler felt sure my mother would not be anxious seeing I had told her where I was going, and we played a game called "Manners," with the cards dealt out to each, the object being to get four of similar value. So that I, having three Jacks, had to say at random to one of the others, "May I trouble you for the Jack of Diamonds?" and if the person did not hold it, the answer was "Sorry!" with the right to make the next demand; if the card was handed over, then you had to be careful to say "Thank you, very much!" and nothing but "Thank you, very much!" otherwise the card was returned to the original owner and everybody knew you possessed some of the other Jacks. I should have done quite well, and I recollected the cards that had been asked for, but I could not remember to make the formal expression of gratitude. Milly said the game was an excellent one for those not practised in the art of good behaviour, and I admitted Len would not make blunders in playing it.

Unexpected trouble was waiting when I reached home at about half-past ten. Ernest Fowler walked with me halfway down Clifton Hill, and we had a spirited discussion on the subject of the attempted relief of Emin Pasha; Ernest was against H. M. Stanley and I stood up for him, and as Ernest had, only a few weeks previously, taken an exactly opposite view, I called him a weathercock, and he called me a brick wall. Flushed with argument, I found my mother with her apron over her mouth, standing at the corner of Liardet Street, looking anxious and distressed.

"Here I am!" I announced. "Hope you were not disturbed about me."

"Not about you, Henry. It's Len. Len isn't home yet. And it's his pay-day. If he's been knocked down and robbed, whatever shall we do?"

I made her go indoors and tried to comfort her, but she declared something dreadful must have happened; Len would have telegraphed if he had been delayed in Great Tower

Street; the alternative to an attack upon him was a railway accident. Events always came by threes, and there had been the river collision, and the acceptance from a stranger of a counterfeit sixpence. I ran up to the South-Eastern Station and ascertained nothing irregular had taken place; searched for Len in the compartments of the house opposite (he always had a glass of mulled claret on pay nights), but he was not there. Hurried anxiously down to Deptford Broadway, and there a shouted chorus from the windows of a working men's Club "If you want to know the time, ask a policeman," gave me an idea.

At the police-station a sergeant listened to the statement, with a calm which seemed to me inappropriate, and after dealing with some less important matters, gave me further attention.

"What height?" he asked.

"Couldn't say exactly. I know that he was nine stone eleven pounds four ounces not long ago."

"Do you expect me," demanded the sergeant, resting an elbow on the desk and pointing with his pen, "to tell my men to be on the look-out for some one weighing nine stone eleven pounds four ounces? I appeal to your common sense."

"He's rather fair," I went on, "and he has a small moustache, and there's a scar on his neck where a nurse once burnt him, and he's wearing——"

"Not so fast!"

"Wearing a mauve necktie."

"How do you spell that? Doesn't look right as I've got it down."

I gave him my view. Black morning coat and waiscoat. Grey trousers. Buttoned boots. And a silk hat.

"Oh," said the sergeant, changing manner, "a gentleman, is he? Thought you said he was your brother. How many days has he been——?" I explained. "Look here," tearing up the record irritably, "we can take a joke as well as anybody, but if you ain't out of this place before I count three, you'll be the one that's missing. Do you fancy we've got nothing

else to do but to worry ourselves about young chaps who don't come home till the last train? Be off with you!"

I tried to think of the reproaches my mother would be likely to make, and before returning went on to the hospital in Greenwich Road, where they kept me waiting so long, that I became terrified and eventually begged the porter to tell me the worst; he complied by admitting he had forgotten all about me—"There's such a little of you," he remarked genially—and assuring me that no one bearing Len's name, no one without a name, had been admitted that evening. At the railway station in New Cross Road the last train, I was told, would be due in a quarter of an hour, and I paced up and down Amersham Vale, waiting for the passengers to come out. When they did arrive, a jumble of officials off duty, hilarious young men, and women who seemed to have come straight from the stage without taking off their make-up, no Len was amongst them.

"Not found him?" cried my mother. "Henry, Henry, you haven't tried!"

I never have forgotten that night, and it is not likely I shall be able to do so now. Neither of us thought for a moment of going to bed; the lamp remained burning and we left the front door open that Len, arriving at any morning hour, should not decide, from consideration for us, to remain outside. I furnished comfort by suggesting he had probably reached Charing Cross just too late for the 12.15, in which case he would set out at once, over Hungerford Bridge, for the long walk. "By now he ought to be nearing the Elephant and Castle," I said. "He has only to go along New Kent Road, and then he'll be on the straight line down to the Gate!" Timing the journey with precision, at the moment when he should have neared Woodpecker Road, I ran out and called his name.

"We've lost him," moaned my mother, rocking herself. "We've lost our Len!"

In the morning I took his train, the 8.33; I had a great mind to go along the crowded platform, making

inquiries, but did not want to cheat myself of the luxury of a journey to town. Great Tower Street was found, and the offices of Messrs Penshurst & Hill, wine merchants, discovered, all with an ease that nearly made me forget my trouble; evidently the difficulties of making one's way in the City had been over-estimated. Mr Drew, the office lad told me, would, he supposed, be on the spot in about two seconds; but it would be a relief if he stayed away for once. I could sit, or stroll up and down outside. I accepted the second alternative for the sheer joy of watching the thick crowd of men surging along, with every doorway accepting some, every turn receiving a share.

"Out of the way," said the voice I wanted. "What, youngster? You here?"

I nearly stood on tiptoe to kiss him. "We've been so worried about you, Len. Wherever have you been?"

"Let me go in and sign on," he said. "I'll come out to you presently."

Len asked me to take home the money due to mother, less ten shillings, which he would pay to her as soon as possible. He offered a choice of three explanations, and gave me permission to select the one most likely to be accepted without incredulity. I can see him now, and the old-fashioned offices with wire gauze blinds and a bunch of wooden grapes over the doorway; a slightly tired look about the eyes (doubtless my appearance was not too fresh), a smile near his well-shaped mouth; he nodded to acquaintances as they went by, or gave them a friendly gesture that I resolved to imitate.

"Let me know what you tell her," he said, concluding, "soon as I reach home this evening. Thanks for taking so much trouble. Know your way back? You must come up with me one morning before you start work at Hatcham, and I'll show you round, and introduce you to some people. Tell the mater I'm all right."

The good fellow ran after me and gave me sixpence, threepence of which I spent in going up the staircase of the Monument (three-hundred and forty-five steps; I counted

them), and from the high cage of iron at the top I looked out, and distributed to a party of country people a quantity of information, some of which may have been correct.

"Went to see some friends, Fulham way," I shouted in nearing the shop, "and they persuaded him to stay on. Anything ready to eat?"

"Thinking of nobody but yourself, Henry," she said, unable, in her joy, to put a tone of reproach in the words. "I only hope Providence won't punish you for it."

They compared times that evening, and finding I left Great Tower Street at twenty past nine, both reproved me for causing so much anxiety, and Len said he felt surprised I should occasion so much trouble; he hoped it would be a lesson to me in the future.

My mother's fervent aspiration concerning the kindly workings of Providence were not fulfilled. When, on the day fixed by Len, I called at Mr Latham's house and office in Hatcham, ready to embark at once on the serious business of life, and the control of advertising stations, that gentleman accorded me an audience, and I had no sooner begun to speak than he warned me that dependence must not be placed in the slightest degree on anything he happened to say when in what he called a cheerful condition. Mr Latham did not deny that on the steamer from Rosherville he might have given some sort of promise, or hint, or undertaking; all he wished to say was that his mind being a perfect blank so far as the early part of that voyage was concerned, he could only point out that drink was a curse, and we should all be a great deal better off without it. Talking down my protests, he gave me a severe lecture on the advantage of total abstinence, the necessity of joining a Band of Hope in early years—

—"And sticking to it, mind. No use your signing the pledge and then going and breakin' of it the moment afterwards!"

—The misery I should cause to those around me if I continued on the path which led to destruction. As I went out, disconsolately, Kitty Latham from an open door caught my arm.

"Come in and keep me company for a little while," she pleaded. "Haven't spoken to a soul the whole day long. Sit down on this hassock and talk to me."

She listened to my grievance against her father, and declared it a shame, condoling very amiably and assuring me that everyone in this world encountered set-backs; called attention to a personal grievance in a tiny rash at the side of her mouth which refused to leave at the dictation of cold cream. Going over my own complainings again, I pointed out that valuable time had been wasted; here was I, no nearer to the start of work than a week ago; necessary to go back and tell my mother and, later, receive the comments made by Len. Len might say something not easy to forget.

"I'll talk him over," she promised. "I'll try to meet him as he comes out of the station, and have a chat with him about you."

"You don't know by what train he comes."

"Don't I?"

"It would certainly be a good idea for you to explain that it wasn't my fault."

"Course it wasn't baby's fault. Bless his heart. Poor ickle chap; he thought people meant what they said."

"So they ought," I snapped.

"They ought," agreed Kitty. "You're quite right there; but what people ought to do, and what people do do, are two very different things. You'll find that out, chickabiddy, when you get older."

"Leave my hand alone, stop ruffling my hair, and don't call me silly names."

"Was he in the tantrums then, and did he want to show off his paddy? He shall then. He shall give Kitty a good, hard slap."

I stopped her from taking my hand again, and backing to the mantelpiece, sulked.

"Won't tease any more, Henry," she promised, rising from the hassock and coming towards me. "Had an idea you could stand chaff."

"I can from some people."

"Len, for instance?"

"Len for instance. He knows how to do it, and when to do it. Besides, he's a man, or nearly. But you're only a girl. I won't have it from you. And what's more, I shan't be too ready to forgive your father for the trick he's played on me. Mind that!"

"This silly old spot on my face," she interrupted, looking in the mirror, "does annoy me so much. Just here, where I'm pointing. Come closer," she said, "and then you can see. Quite disfiguring, isn't it?"

"Nothing to bother about."

"What colour do you think my eyes are?" she asked.

"Never noticed."

"Well, notice now. Have a good look and tell me!"

"About the ordinary colour," I said.

"My mouth is considered the best part of my face."

"It's all right."

"Not better than that?" she asked, surprisedly.

"Oh, it serves its purpose, I suppose."

"Some one told me once it was like a Cupid's bow. Just trace it out with your finger, and give me your opinion."

I complied with her request, but excused myself from endorsing the comparison on the grounds that I had never encountered the instrument of warfare in question.

"Expect you're dying to give me a kiss, if the truth was known."

"You story-teller," I protested, indignantly. "Haven't the leastest desire to do such a thing."

"Let yourself out," she ordered curtly, pointing to the door. "Go back to your two-penny-halfpenny shop. You're the biggest duffer I've come across as yet!"

The depreciatory reference to Woodpecker Road struck me, in walking slowly home, as unfair. My mother and I took a certain pride in the establishment, and now that the chance of leaving had disappeared, I wanted to increase its importance.

We had a variety of methods of dealing with customers

and these I had learnt from the time when I was only old enough to sit on the counter and play with bundles of firewood, and, on anyone entering, scream—

"Shop!"

Away to the period when I took a more active part in the serving out of school hours, and began to escort and assist over-loaded women homewards, accepting the smallest coin as liberal reward, and listening politely to the giver's instructions concerning disbursement. There could have been few better opportunities for the improving of general knowledge, and I used sometimes to think that one acquired wider information in this way than was obtained at school; a good deal of it perhaps was not intended to reach my ears, but the ladies occasionally forgot to keep their voices down in communicating intimate facts across the counter, only discovering my presence too late.

"I'd really no idea, Mrs Drew, that your little boy—— Shouldn't have spoke so free if I'd known."

"Doesn't matter," said my mother, reassuringly. "He's too young to understand."

Each customer was placed in a separate class, and dealt with accordingly. To some, an imitation of animosity was accorded at the moment they entered the shop, commencing with a brusque inquiry—

"Oh, and what have you came bothering about, I sh'd like to know! No work to do at home?"

—Thus striking the keynote of the conversation which ensued, so that a stranger happening to come in might have thought the two parties were on terms of the fiercest enmity; the customer deriding everything she saw or touched, and expressing grim incredulity concerning its fitness for human consumption; we, on our side, indicating doubt concerning the customer's ability to pay. Only the few, the chosen, were dealt with in this manner, for the temper had to be safe and well assured, with a perfect understanding between the parties playing in the comedy. The very demure, to take another set, relished best of all broad imputations on their

fidelity to husbands, and my mother proved exceedingly dexterous in playing upon this string.

"How are you and that young chap from Copestake's getting along?" she would demand of some sour-faced, elderly customer. "Your old man heard anything of your pretty behaviour yet? They're always the last to get the news, I believe."

"Takes a bit of artfulness," admitted the other; "but so far, there's been no open scandal. What I'm anxious about is that nothing shall get into the Sunday papers."

"Ah, well," with a sigh of tolerance, "youth will have its fling. Is a pound and two ounces too much, I wonder?"

Others again came for sympathy, and were not satisfied with anything but the genuine article. Lodgers tardy in settlement of weekly accounts, neighbours indulging in satirical remarks, husbands curt and reserved of manner, children guilty of the crime known as answering back, female relatives on the edge of foolish behaviour—all these matters were communicated under the seal of confidence, and my mother had, in addition to an admirable simulation of interest, a good assortment of comforting remarks.

"I wouldn't put up with it for another single, solitary moment, if I was you!"

"A worm will turn, Mrs What is it, and I think it's about time you did."

"The more you allow yourself to be down-trodden, the more you may. People reckon nothing the better of you because you don't assert yourself. You mustn't allow yourself to be sat upon!"

There were, too, frolicsome customers (mostly young married women), who brought anecdotes imported from town by husbands, and, in regard to these, my mother pretended an acute amusement which I am sure she did not feel, for her features went back to solemnity directly the light-hearted person, after telling the story once more, had departed.

I have since heard of sharp divisions existing in the society of military and dockyard towns, but nothing has ever been told to me that surpassed in intensity the sharply marked lines to be found near Woodpecker Road. Wives of railway signalmen, for instance. Their income was good, and, in many cases, they could afford to occupy an entire house without letting a room; in consequence they took up an attitude of haughty reserve, warning their children, under pains and penalties, not to exchange words with certain other children, and giving impressive and condescending support to the Wesleyan Chapel. Their daughters took music lessons, and sometimes opened the entertainment given in the Mission Hall, with a spirited duet wherein the girl who, by celerity and dodging corners, finished first waited, with a glance of triumph, for her slower and more conscientious sister. Wives of gentlemen engaged in the City, but not, if one might judge by their hats, in the foremost rank there, naturally kept themselves aloof from those whose husbands were employed in engineering works at Deptford, and when, at the end of the month, they were taken on a visit to the theatre, our shop was utilised as the exchange office for dissemination of news, for ladies not on speaking, or even frowning, terms with them were well inclined to hear what the play was about, how the ladies engaged in it were dressed, and receive an estimate of the age of the principal actress. Wives of clerks did take us, at rare moments, into something like society, and even Len could not be indifferent as the annual occurrence drew near when a lady in Milton Court Road was taken to a dance given by the firm, the invitation cards for which said "Evening Dress Indispensable," and whether she ought to go in low neck, or fastened severely up to the throat, was a question debated for weeks before the event, on either side of the counter.

We ourselves had triumphs, and these were always in connection with Len. Len once received a command to attend a fancy-dress Cinderella dance, and when customers had exhausted their stock of counsel—

"Don't you let him go, Mrs Drew. I wouldn't if he was a son of mine."

"If I was you, I should let him judge for himself. He's old enough by this time to know what's right, and what's wrong!"

—Then inquiries concerning the character Len proposed to adopt were fired at us, and our inability to give details was counted as reticence. Len ordered a hansom cab from the rank opposite the station, and before it came I helped to dress him in the Pierrot costume that he had succeeded in borrowing; it is doubtful whether any boy was so proud of any brother since the world began. He looked handsomer than ever, despite the necessary covering by an overcoat, as he walked through the shop, and I remember I ran after the cab a good mile just for the pleasure of being near to him. I remember, too, that when he came back an hour later with the information that owing to lack of patronage and consequently of funds, the orchestra refused to play and the dance had therefore been indefinitely postponed, it was I who burst into tears of disappointment and regret.

If I am not telling you too much of the little general shop which occupied such a large position in my early years, and now seemed likely to take a more considerable bulk in my life, I might remark on the considerable part taken by repetitions.

"Well, as I say, Mrs Drew, them that live the longest will see the most."

"That's right," agreed my mother. "Five-pence, twopence-halfpenny, a penny, and a penny-farthing; Henry, do you make nine three-farthings of that? Twopence-farthing change; I thank you."

"Yes," remarked the customer, placing the coppers in her purse. "People can argue what they like, but what I always say is, them that live the longest——"

"And what's more," interrupted my mother, dusting the counter, "it's perfectly true."

They may talk till they're black in the face," continued

the customer, with a touch of violence, "but they won't alter my opinion, not if an angel from heaven came to back them up." Taking up her parcel, and retiring to the doorway, "You take it from me, Mrs Drew, and you can mention my name if you like, for what I say I'm prepared to stick to." Very deliberately, and with something of the manner of one who has just taken the oath, "Them that live the longest will see the most!"

It was understood between my mother and myself that our task consisted in applauding circumstances which existed, and by inuendo decrying the past. When Len, home from the City, swung through and, as one of us hurried to lift the flap of the counter, gave an ejaculation which intimated that his nerves of smell were offended, mother would, at the first convenient opportunity, deliver a brief eulogium on the general shop as compared with other establishments.

"Perhaps," conceded my mother, "likely enough, the American cheddar is a bit niffy this evening. These things vary. But what I want you to recognise is, that in a shop like ours we're not pinned down to one particular article. There's always a change. If you don't cotton to one, there's plenty of others to select from; only about half an hour ago—not so long, in fact—I was serving a quarter of a pound of currants to that very nice party who's apprenticing her son to the engineering, and the scent took me back till I forgot what I was doing, and I'm afraid she must have seen I wasn't paying proper attention to what she was saying, or understanding how long it had taken her to save up to give her boy a start. Took me back, it did—how many years ago shall we say?—to the time when you were about four and Henry here hadn't long come to town, and I was making a cake for your birthday, and your father came home early, in rare good spirits, over something lucky that had happened, and took me round the waist, and waltzed me, just as I was—floury hands and all—right round the kitchen. A wonderful man when he was in good spirits. You remind me so much of him at times, Len. I see a great resemblance."

"Hope I shan't make quite such a bungle of my life as he did of his."

"Going back to the question of the shop," she went on, now addressing me, "I think you ought to have the intelligence, Henry, to see, considering how old you are, that there's something rather fine in being able to serve nearly everybody that steps foot over the sill. Why, I was in an ironmonger's the other afternoon down in Deptford Broadway, and in come a young woman, asking for a reel of black cotton. Of course," triumphantly, "they were done. All they could say was that they were very sorry, and recommend a draper's in the High Street. Now, with a general shop such as ours, you stand behind the counter and you feel that you're monarch of all—— How does that go?"

I supplied the quotation.

"None to dispute," she repeated, with a touch of doubt. "Of course, arguments will arise, but I find that if you haven't got in stock exactly what they want, you can easily persuade them to take the next best, by suggesting they should wait a day or two. Nothing makes 'em so impatient as to recommend patience. And then see how one thing leads to another. A lady comes in for a bar of yellow soap, and if we kept nothing else but yellow soap, she'd take it, and pay, and go, and there would be an end of it. But you talk to her about the wear and tear of washing day, and the necessity of keeping body and soul together, and that reminds her she's out of bacon, and she isn't absolutely certain that there's an egg left in the basin. You go from eggs to milk, from milk to cream, and you show her one of the little brown pots, and mention that lady customers who were brought up in Devonshire have spoken well of the article. The bar of yellow soap," concluded my mother triumphantly, "is only a kind of foundation stone, and anything you like—or rather anything you get the other party to like—can be built on top of it. Isn't that so, Henry?"

"Have known it happen."

"It's most satisfactory," said Len, finishing his supper, "to find that you two have a congenial occupation. Brush my hat, mother, and, Henry, just give my patent boots a rub over."

"Going out again this evening, my dear? Why not stay in and have a game of draughts with your brother?"

I glanced at him hopefully.

"Nothing I should like better," he answered, "but I have an engagement."

My mother never contested when this phrase was used, and I am sure she found a real gratification in repeating it; even the woman whose son was going into the engineering trade and plumed herself greatly on the circumstance, had to bow before the words when they came in answer to the casual question, "And where's your eldest, Mrs Drew, if it isn't a rude question?" My mother had a shiver of pride in furnishing the information that he was not at present indoors, and in giving the reason.

It was this woman's son who gave me, after the Latham incident, some of the black moments that jealousy can create. I happened to be going through the phase that comes once, or more often, to every boy, when his heart's desire is an occupation that excuses grubby hands and murky features. Lads went by of an evening, returning home from the works in question, magnificent in greasy clothes, carrying a blue tin can, and their faces smirched as though they had half determined to join the Moore and Burgess Minstrels. I envied them, and I envied his prospects. The mother had been saving up since the loss of her husband, and in school days I had been compelled to punch his head for declaring he intended to take up occupation in the works where his father was killed; the truth being, I suppose, that no other repartee occurred to me. He called round to see me on the night before commencing duty, and we walked up Clifton Hill together; I remember warning him—in the manner of one who knew the world inside and out—that nothing ever came up to one's expectations, and that the great trick was to under-

estimate rather than exaggerate possibilities of the future. We wrangled a good deal at the top of the hill near to one of Latham's advertising stations, and became so heated that we parted in a huff, and I walked home, continuing my side of the discussion in an undertone to myself, not greatly helped by the discovery that the most valuable arguments occurred to me too late to be of effective use. The next morning, his delighted mother called twice; once to inform us that he had left for his first day at the works; later to give a sketch of the great times they would have together when he began to earn wages. My mother, noting the sulkiness that enveloped me, spoke of the risks of marriage open to youth in receipt of a good income, but the caller declared, confidently, that she was ready to bet a halfpenny that no girl would ever get hold of her boy. She had increased the amount to a penny when two men, who looked defiant, but it appeared, intended to look sympathetic, came to the doorway.

"Partly his own fault, ma'am, mind you. He'd no business to be meddling with the machine. No," answering her screamed appeal, "no. You can't see him. The poor kid ain't a sight for anybody, let alone his own mother."

The incident caused me to feel less dissatisfied with the general shop in Woodpecker Road.