CHAPTER XXI

LEN AS A CANDIDATE

I MISSED the three last days of the contest; nothing but my brother's urgent instructions would have persuaded me to do this. Stemson had returned, so completely filled with complaint that no part of the human body could be mentioned without eliciting information of a grisly nature; he was good enough, at intervals, to say the work had gone on moderately well in his absence, and indeed I had secured some good contracts from firms whose representatives admitted the only reason for not completing them earlier had been that they could not stand Stemson. His presence gave me the opportunity of giving a fortnight of afternoons and evenings to the constituency which Len was fighting, to the management of those who came to help, the furnishing of useful hints.

"You can't be too careful," Beecher and the other local authorities told us. "Our people are nearly all church or chapel, and the duller you are the better the chances."

It was a good deal to ask of my brilliant brother, and travelling with him across country from meeting to meeting, one could but admire the efforts he made to curb his usual raciness of manner. He had several methods, one of which could generally be selected and adopted, from the bluff, hearty style with—

"I don't mind confessing to you, gentlemen, that I'm a man who has made his own way in the world, that all the runs I score are made off my own bat. The middle-classes, I belong to; my brother Henry sitting over there in the back rows can confirm what I say. Henry, stand up and let them

have a look at you!" to the elaborate, complex style where the sentences were so long and so involved that sheer astonishment when they came to an end made audiences cheer enthusiastically.

"And when I am told that England is on the down grade, that life is becoming less honest and pure, that religion is losing its hold, and the code of morals no longer being respected, then I ask those who make the assertions to come down here to this beautiful country which I venture to call the flower garden of Great Britain, and pointing to your women and your men—and no finer specimens of Nature's handiwork are to be found on this earth; the poet might have had them in his mind when he wrote—" And so on.

Sometimes, in the villages, we were received with a blank surprise which continued as we told them the world was watching eagerly the way they would vote on Tuesday week, that from the Czar of all the Russias to the newest born child in Germany, the Continent awaited the result with anxiety and fear; I think not until we had whirled away did they begin to consider all this, and to make endeavour to realise what it meant. The contest missed the compactness of a London fight. Even Len, confident as he was, became influenced by this fact for a time, but entry into a town of some importance where his portrait (taken six years before and giving him an appearance of youth and great amiability) appeared in shop windows, and children ran up to follow the carriage, and a long line of men stood outside the Town Hall, and sandwich men went along at the edge of the pavement with

"TEN REASONS WHY
YOU SHOULD
VOTE FOR DREW"

matched on the other side by boards which professed to give fifteen reasons why you should do nothing of the sort—all this revived Len, and the visit over, he declared he had no

doubt concerning the result; the only question to be discussed with Beecher was the amount of the majority. Beecher, a local man, prided himself on being able to take the gloomiest possible views; he had prophesied to the late member a victory by two hundred votes, and the figures showed an excess of over two thousand; in the present case he placed his estimate rather higher. Beecher had wisdom, and he was the first to reprove my brother for making reference to an Oxford incident in the life of the man on the other side; the opponent did, in fact, take exception to the allusion, and news came that having been reminded of the fact that he once fought without gloves, he proposed now to repeat the experiment with, he hoped, greater success.

"What did I tell you?" demanded Beecher, triumphantly.

"I'd like to know exactly what is meant."

"What it means is, Mr Drew, that your past will now be put under a microscope. You know best whether it will stand it."

"Dismal croaker!" cried Len. "Henry, come and tackle him. Let me watch the contest. Optimist versus Pessimist."

"He's one in a thousand," remarked Beecher to me afterwards, confidentially, "if there isn't a spot or two somewhere."

I reassured him.

"Funny thing about you two," went on Beecher, thoughtfully. "I've got a brother, he's a farmer and a lay preacher, ten children, and everyone's got a good opinion of him but me. I loathe and hate the very thought of the man. If I could do him an injury, I would. If he could do me any harm, he wouldn't hesitate for a moment. Whatever I hear to his credit, I don't believe; anything he hears against me he swallows without hesitation. They say there's no friend like a brother, but until I met you, Mr Drew, I never realised it, and that's the truth!"

The proper messages of encouragement came from leaders of the party; a few notable men arrived to speak for us, and were duly warned to lay special stress on the high

character and white repute of the candidate. Deputations from societies with titles beginning with anti were received, and, so far as possible, mollified. Management of the posters took me back to early days, and I wrote one evening a long letter to Mrs Latham, in addition to the nightly communication that went to St Donatt's Road; asked at the end of the letter whether any news had come from Kitty. The two envelopes had just dropped into the pillar-box opposite the hotel when my brother came running up the narrow High Street, hat at the back of head, coat tails flying, face scarlet with excitement. Some stragglers followed in the hope of discovering interest.

"Want you!" he panted. "Come inside at once. Don't stand there like a fool!"

We went upstairs to the rooms which had been reserved for us.

"She's here!" he exclaimed, closing the door sharply. "She's here in this town. You must get her away at once and keep her away until it's all over!"

"Why not let her remain?"

"Will you do what I tell you to do? Pull yourself together, and help me for once. Go round to her and get her out of the town. It doesn't matter where you go, so long as you get her away, and keep her quiet!"

"Will she consent to come?"

"She will if you behave tactfully."

"I'll do it, then, Len," I answered, "but I really don't see what objection there is to her presence. The other man drives about with his wife, and she apparently helps him a good deal in canvassing."

"I'm speaking of Kitty Latham."

"Oh!" And, after a pause, "Perhaps she only wants to help you."

"I know the type of woman better than you do. She's staying at the Unicorn; go and see her and get away by the 9.12. We can do quite well without you here."

"Milly might not like to hear of it."

"Milly need not have a chance of hearing of it!"

I was forced to pretend to be seriously indisposed, and Kitty—grown rather stouter and more matronly, and certainly a handsome woman—gave me her sympathy at once. She had, it appeared, come in the hope of seeing me rather than in a desire to encounter Len, and when I said I wanted to go away at once to the sea-side and obtain rest and good air, she declared that I must accompany her to the boarding-house where she had been living for two summers. As we went in the train, I saw that Len, with a relieved air, watched us through the railings of the embankment.

"We'll soon put you right," said Kitty, in a motherly way that made me ashamed of the deceit. "You must take everything very quietly for a few weeks."

"A few days," I amended. "Want to get back in town on Tuesday night."

"Wish you could stay longer. You will scarcely have time to become friendly with my baby."

"Your baby, Kitty?" I echoed, amazedly.

"Oh, you didn't know."

"I'm so glad," I declared. "Tell me what your name is now."

"I am Mrs Thomas," she answered, looking out of the window.

"And shall I have the pleasure of meeting baby's father?"

"If you don't mind we won't talk about him. But you needn't look at me pityingly. I have the dearest little boy there ever was in this world, and I don't need anyone's sympathy."

Near the Parade the very first morning (which was Saturday) the young man and I became such good friends that he permitted me to take him from his nurse and his white perambulator, and on the beach I instructed him in the game of throwing pebbles at the waves. His aim was, at first, erratic, and he showed such acute distress when accused of being a girl, that we had to give up criticism; when later a stone hit me, he clambered up on my lap and remedied the

hurt by kissing the place. I made a fleet of steamers out of the morning paper, and suggested he should be called Admiral, but the title presented some difficulties and we borrowed the title of General from another branch of the services. He was a jolly little chap, with strong limbs and fair hair, and I do believe he felt honestly gratified to have a companion who treated him as though he were a mature lad of ten; at the boarding-house, ladies fussed over him, calling him a sweet ickle mite, and a dimpled ickled darling, paying no regard to the frown with which he received the compliments. His mother came along at eleven o'clock, admirably gowned, and watched by youths in panama hats and white flannels with undisguised approval; I could not help thinking that a few years ago she would have returned many of these glances. I reminded her when her baby had taken her over the Channel Squadron, of the evening when she tried to induce me to kiss her.

"Please!" she said, appealingly. "You don't mean it should hurt me, but it does. I like to think that my life began when this little chap arrived."

"Has Mrs Latham seen him yet?"

"No," answered Kitty, "no. There's a reason for that. I should like her to see him, I should like everybody to see him. Excepting Len."

"Thought you said you had no grievance against him."

"Are there any children there?" she asked.

I shook my head, and she rose, suggesting a long walk, but one not longer than I could endure. The baby, however, refused to part company with me, and we had to accommodate our pace to his little steps; his satisfaction when I affected to be unable to move at anything like his speed was unbounded. It occurred to me when we rested near one of the old Martello Towers, that Kitty was right in numbering herself among the happy women. She asked about Milly, and my news delighted her.

On the Tuesday evening we made a large party, Kitty, the nurse, baby, and I, engaging a compartment in the late train to

town. Kitty wanted to see her dressmaker, next day the nurse wished to see a friend at Knightsbridge Barracks, the baby desired to meet the lions at the Zoo, I was anxious to ascertain at the earliest moment the result of the election. Baby went to sleep on the way, to dream, probably, of wild animals, went to sleep on my lap, and it was considered unwise to disturb him. Consequently, on arriving at the London terminus, I was allowed to carry the little chap to the fore-wheeler, and Mr Fowler, on late duty, remarking jokingly that I looked quite the family man, ordered some of his porters to assist with the luggage. Near St James's Street we stopped the cab, and I ran up the steps to see if the figures had come in; one of the long sheets of paper was being detached from the instrument.

"Must be some mistake," I declared, returning to the four-wheeler. "It isn't possible that he is beaten by eight hundred votes. Can't think what it means!"

"It means," said Kitty, "that others estimate him more correctly than I did, more correctly than you do."

"Then they are wrong!" I asserted, emphatically.

In reply to the pre-paid telegram I sent the first thing in the morning, he wired, "Better luck next time. Thousand thanks for your kindness." That was so like Len, to overpay me for small services.