CHAPTER XXII

LEN WITHDRAWS HIS SUIT

STEMSON took me into partnership in October of the following year. I had so little of the dash and courage which Len possessed, that I anticipated drawbacks in giving up the fixed and adequate income for a share in profits, and it was not until we had done six months under the new arrangement that I felt justified in asking Milly and my mother to look out for a house that would suit. It became necessary later to give more detailed instructions, for my mother was fascinated by an announcement in a house-agent's list of an admirable dwelling in a refined neighbourhood, and declared this was —short of the house at Blackheath with Len —just what she had dreamed of; on obtaining an order to view, we found it was a house next door to the one in which we had been living for some years in Shardeloes Road. Mrs Fowler, on the other hand, drew my attention to something like a baronial castle at Lewisham (built either by some old gentleman at a time when softening of the brain had set in, or by some young sportsman to win a bet), pointing out the considerable attraction of two stone lions over the entrance gate about to play a game of bowls, and to several pine-apples of the same material with which the outer walls were studded. I found the architect had been so far carried away by a desire for realism, as to make sparing use of drain-pipes; Milly's mother said that people who were so particular had better choose for themselves. Delay occurred in the superannuation of Mr Fowler, and Milly remarked there was no occasion for us to hurry into the first house we came across; she did not wish to leave her people until they departed from London. Milly soothed me by describing

fancifully the neck and neck race between myself and Len for the house at Blackheath, offering to back me to the extent of sixpence. I said it would be a shame to win her money, but took the wager, and Mrs Latham on whom we sometimes called and who on these occasions made elaborate excuses for leaving us alone, asked to be allowed to put a shilling on the same horse. Mrs Latham enjoyed life a good deal at this period by the device of calling on institutions and asylums around London, consulting the secretary, inspecting the buildings, and talking to inmates, leaving with a gracious word and genial smiles that made all the officials experience a keen sensation of hopefulness. The two lady lodgers at my mother's secured, without any warning, two buyers in a City warehouse, encountered by chance at a Handel Festival at the Crystal Palace, and married them promptly; I was at a loss to see what could be done for my mother until I thought of Mrs Croucher, who still lived near to the shop in Woodpecker Road.

"I can manage her if anyone can," said Mrs Croucher, with a great air of artfulness. "It's all a question of tact. Tact is a thing that's served out awk'ardly; some people haven't got none, and some of us have more than our share. You mark my words: we shall be as 'appy and contented as the days are long!"

The scheme did not work well at first, for Mrs Croucher's idea of diplomacy was to agree with everything, whereas a certain amount of opposition and argument proved as necessary to my mother as sugar in her tea; the plan went more smoothly when I arranged for Milly to give the companion a word of advice, and thereafter they quarrelled on excellent terms. It was one of Milly's tasks to look in now and again, and if she found some contentious topic in existence, to hear both sides and reserve her decision; in its absence, it became her duty to adroitly set the two ladies at logger-heads before bringing her call to a close. Milly told me one evening that her father had met my brother over some question of a ticket; Mr Fowler, it appeared,

advised her privately to see less of me. We agreed there could be no reason for this, and I declared my intention of communicating with Mr Fowler on the subject, but Milly assured me the advice would have no effect upon her, and no need existed for taking any action. Len, it seemed, had been in the habit of running down to some small station in the country.

"On business," I suggested. "His work takes him nearly everywhere."

And the travelling collectors asserted that he frequently took a return ticket for a short distance, giving the lad at the destination his evening journal and the word "Season!" On his return he chatted with the young official, who seemed to have gained the impression that Len was a director, and, arriving at the London terminus, delivered the second half of his short return ticket. I remarked that to a man whose mind was occupied with many affairs such a blunder might well occur, and the circumstance that Mr Fowler had been able to arrange for no proceedings to be taken, meant the affair did not possess a serious character.

Next thing we heard about Len was that he and his wife had separated. My mother and I agreed that if two people found they could not get along well together, this solution was inevitable; it seemed likely to us that Len might now find his progress less retarded by impediments. My mother, after several debates, decided that the incident, regrettable as it would appear to many, in reality took a load of apprehension from her shoulders; she had feared all along that in the house at Blackheath she and Mrs Len might fail to hit it off; under the new arrangement there would be only one head of the household.

"And that'll be me," she remarked, joyfully. "I shall be able to order all the servants about, look after Len's meals, tell the gardeners what they ought to do, dictate to the nurse—I suppose that won't happen, though. It's what I'd particularly looked forward to. I've got my own ideas

about bringing children up, Henry. You've never had anything to do with babies."

I nearly told her about Kitty's little chap.

"But there's a right way and a wrong way, and it's many years since I had a chance of looking after one."

"The right way is your way, and the wrong way is other people's way."

"That's exactly it," she remarked, seriously, "and I consider it quite clever of you, Henry, to be able to see the matter in that light. You'll never be the man Len is, but I'm bound to say I see considerable improvements. At one time I began to despair of ever making anything of you. One clever boy in a family of two is more than the average, and if you'd turned out a Simple Simon, I shouldn't have had any excuse for grumbling."

"Len will be feeling lonely," I remarked. "We ought to do something to cheer him up."

"Shall I make him a nice blue mange? He used to be very partial to them when he was a boy."

"We'll have a swell dinner in town, mother," I decided. "Just the three of us. As good a dinner as London can give."

"That means," she said, "that I shall have to see about a new lace cap. Now the question is, what about the ribbons? Pale blue or dark blue?"

Len replied in jocular strain to my note, protesting that he had acted in the interests of economy in agreeing to the separation. In regard to the evening at the Carlton, he had unfortunately a previous engagement to dine at Lockhart's Cocoa-rooms, at the corner of Long Acre, and assuming the cost of the proposed meal to be two guineas, he was clearly entitled to the amount; a postal-order could be forwarded by return. In the same spirit, I sent the remittance together with a shilling in stamps, representing the tip I should have had to give to the waiter for attending upon him. Acknowledging this, he promised to give me a call at Queen Street, so soon as he found

himself free from some knotted ropes which were hampering his movements.

"I have devoted your money," his letter added, "to the relief of a gentleman in reduced circumstances."

I pointed out to young Farrington (who had become my confidential clerk) that here was a good answer to those who charged my brother with meanness. My only fear was lest generosity should interfere with prompt arrival at the goal which he had set for himself.

Mrs Latham, after a burst of excellent health and great industry, died. Died, and a letter from her solicitors announced that the whole of her money had been left to me. Kitty came up for the funeral, and when my Aunt Mabel had taken her black-coated men away, we had a long talk. I said the fortune should have gone to her; Kitty retorted she had plenty; besides, she had no claim on her step-mother apart from that which consisted in having given her cause for a good amount of worry. As to the baby boy she did not propose to allow anyone to interfere with her rights and her duties, and on this point spoke warmly and with decision. She hoped I had kept my promise to say nothing about his existence.

"What you can do now is to take the house at Blackheath," she said, masterfully. "Marry, and settle down there. It will gratify your mother, and every son ought to be glad of the opportunity of doing that."

"But Len will think I have stolen a march on him!"

"Does it matter?" she cried, vehemently. "What Len will think is the bogey that is always bobbing up in front of you! Len has never thought of other people; why should you bother to think of him? Try to put him out of your mind altogether."

"That would not be easy."

"It was not easy for me, but I found it possible. I caught sight of him the other day, and it didn't make any difference."

"You have your boy."

"Yes," she said, happily, "I have my boy!"

The man at the house in Vanbrugh Park was on the Stock Exchange, and I found he had been doing badly. Tiller, our inquiry agent, reported this, reported also that the man was desirous of moving into a house more appropriate to his reduced income. Milly—delighted with the news and declaring that poor Mrs Latham surely intended her money to be used in this manner—suggested it should all at present be kept a secret from my mother, and we went about the preparations with the relish that conspirators experience. Everything was proceeding well, when Mr Fowler came to Queen Street one afternoon and made a statement to me of such gravity that I ordered him, in imperative tones, to remain in my room until Farrington took hansom, discovered my brother, and brought him to us.

"Felt it my duty to tell you," urged Mr Fowler.

"Sit down!" I said, sharply.

"Milly, you see, is our only girl. And although her mother and me know quite well that it's a fine match for her——"

"Please stop!" I ordered. "I want to hear nothing more until my brother comes."

"You needn't think," said Mr Fowler, with spirit, "that I've any objection to facing him. Never made a statement yet without being sure of my ground!"

Feeling certain all would be explained so soon as Len arrived, it was impossible to evade perturbation of mind, and I found it difficult to do anything but pace up and down the room. Once before, I had nearly lost Milly; if anything came between us now, the future would lose all its colour for me. In less than an hour Farrington returned, bringing Len with him; withdrew, and left the three of us alone. Mr Fowler doggedly repeated the statement.

"My dear sir," cried my brother, trying to balance a ruler on his finger-tip, "you railway men are the most muddle-headed set of people I ever came across. You gain pro-

motion, I suppose, on the grounds of special stupidity. I certainly had some conversation with you on the occasion referred to, but if you told me you had seen Henry with a lady and a child, I'm perfectly sure I made no such suggestions as you ask us to believe."

"Mean to contradict all that you said, then?"

"No, no!" retorted Len, airily. "I'm saying now exactly what I said then. I'm the last person to circulate scandal, and if I did, my brother is the last person of whom I should say it."

"Then I'm done!" admitted Mr Fowler, rising. "It's my word against yours. Good day, Henry, and I hope you'll forgive me for interfering; glad I came to you before mentioning it to anyone else. 'Tisn't often I put my foot in the fire, and when I do, I like to draw it out soon as ever I can."

"Felt sure," speaking to him on the landing, "perfectly certain, Mr Fowler, that my brother would be able to put everything right."

"He's got the trick of putting himself right."

"That's what I mean. Do you want a cab, Mr Fowler?"

Tickled with the idea his good humour returned. He went down, waving his hand and shouting renewed apologies.

"Better look at the numbers," said Len, as returning I took up my cheque-book and placed it in the safe. "What a suspicious mind you have. I don't pretend to be all white, but it's pretty hard when one's own brother refuses to believe——"

I declared that I had always accepted his word.

"No!" he declared, obstinately. "I know that is not the case, and I know that you know it is not the case. A kind of distrust has been steadily growing up between us for some years. There's no use in blinking the facts. I am no more to you than a dozen, twenty, a hundred other men whom you meet in the course of business."

"Len," almost furiously, "this is most unkind and unfair.

There never has been a time when I haven't been prepared to make almost any sacrifice for your sake."

"Almost!" he repeated. "A useful word. I heard a man in Hyde Park the other evening, when I was wasting a couple of hours there, give his opinion that the Prime Minister was the greatest blackguard, the most notorious criminal, the most depraved scoundrel the world had ever produced. 'In a manner of speaking,' he added. You adopt the same methods with your 'almost.' I'm tired," he burst out, "of a man who is almost a brother, almost a friend. Give me, for preference, a man who is completely my enemy. I can deal with him. I know what I'm about when he declares war against me. I can fight as well as any, once I recognise the position of the other man."

Words did not come, and I could only look at him appealingly across the table.

"You're not the only one," he continued. "May I smoke here?" I pushed the cigarette-case eagerly in his direction, and struck a match for his use. "I was prepared to find it in many quarters when I lost that contest. Knew I should be dropped at head-quarters. Knew the papers on my side would explain away the result by saying the selection of the candidate was perhaps unfortunate. Knew I had used up the last ounce of influence, and that I should not have had the chance but for a fluke that occurred just before my name cropped up. Knew I had been neglecting my own business for some time, and that unless I succeeded in getting into the House, I should find trouble in making up for lost time. Knew my wife would, at the first suggestion of my friendship with some one else in the country, clutch at the excuse for getting rid of me, and I knew this would shut a good many doors. But I did think I could reckon on my brother to stick by me."

"You can, Len!"

"Takes some time to get up the ladder," he went on, "although I was supposed to be one who climbed quickly,

but, Lord, the swiftness of the return journey!" He held up the paper-weight and allowed it to drop noisily on the table. Young Farrington opened the door; I intimated with a gesture that his presence was not required. "Seen that fellow somewhere before," remarked Len, sharply.

I gave some information, glad enough to welcome a new subject.

"And what are you paying him now? Too much!" asserted my brother on hearing the sum. "For a man of his age, a hundred and fifty would be adequate."

"I like to pay," deferentially, "according to the quality of work, rather than the quantity of years."

"When I employed clerks, I never made the blunder of giving them more than the market price."

"You talk as though this were all past and done. By-the-bye, Len, I want to ask you something. You remember the old house at Blackheath?"

"It's further away now than it ever has been."

I told him what had happened; he eyed me steadily as I spoke.

"So the little man is going to do it, is he?" he remarked, thoughtfully. "Not the elder brother who was getting on so well at one time, and whose name is absent now from the newspapers, but Master Henry, five feet six high, about ten stone in weight; he's the one who is going to take his mother back to the house in which both the sons were born. A queer world, but it has to go on juggling and balancing, and to keep some down it sends others up. Do you know," he went on, resting elbows, "it would be an enormous relief to me to strike you!"

"One way," I said, amusedly, "of getting your name in the journals again. 'Fracas in a City office.' Perhaps it would not be worth doing though."

He continued to gaze at me curiously. "I suppose not," he answered, with deliberation. "Daresay you're right. Besides, at the finish, I might feel tempted to kick,

and—" He lifted one foot and showed the sole of his boot.

"My dear Len, you don't mean that you are walking about on a sloppy day with soles like that. Why didn't you put on another pair?"

"Hadn't another pair."

"Why don't you have these mended then?"

"From inquiries made in several quarters, I find that three shillings and sixpence is the amount required and," he felt in his waistcoat pockets, "eightpence halfpenny is the total sum in my possession at the present moment."

"Why not write a cheque and——"

He raved up and down the room, swearing furiously; I could do nothing but interject a soothing word.

"Dare refer to that again," he screamed, shaking his fist. "No doubt it's a great joy to you to jump on a man when he's down, but if you don't make up your mind to deprive yourself of the satisfaction, I won't answer for the consequences. Do you understand? Do you see that I'm in earnest, or must I prove it to you in some other way?"

"You're worried," I urged. "Sit down and keep quiet for a few minutes. Sit down at once," more commandingly. "I'm not going to listen to you unless you talk sanely. Come in!" Answering a knock at the door.

Tiller entered with some information concerning a special inquiry into the reliability of a new customer; I told him he could speak in the presence of my visitor, and the business took about a quarter of an hour. Tiller, in finishing, conveyed by signs a wish to speak to me outside, and with a word of apology, I followed him out. Tiller asked whether I knew anything of the man in the room; I answered sharply. "Then that's all right," said Tiller, reluctantly. "Only I think you ought to know, sir, he goes about bragging that you're his brother!"

Len had recovered calm, and seemed prepared now to talk quietly, to attend to what I had to say. If it were true he was so hard up that he could not afford to have his boots

repaired (looking at him more closely I perceived his clothes were shabby) then clearly something must be done, and conversation in reasonable tones would help to find a way. But no raving could be allowed, and he would have to make an endeavour to be fair to me, just to anyone else who cared to help.

"I must practise it," he conceded. "Are there any classes held where one can acquire the beggar's whine, in a set of lessons, ten and six till perfect?"

That again was not the way to talk. Nobody wanted him to adopt the manner of match-vendors; he could retain his self-esteem and all that folk expected was a proper civility. Had he anything to suggest?

"Better give me a berth in your office?"

We happened to be fully-staffed, with the result that no one was working overtime; this some of the married clerks regretted.

"Sack one of them," he recommended. "Get rid of that chap Farrington, and put me in his place. Two twenty will just about keep my head above water. I can go through the Bankruptcy Court and start afresh!" A moment of hesitation on my part caused him to break out again: I stopped him authoritatively.

"We'll give you something to do," I announced, "but we shall not get rid of anybody to make a vacancy. You can come here under your own name, or you can adopt another, if you like. Please yourself!"

"Call me Mr Leonard."

"Very well," thankful the interview was nearly over. "Consider it a temporary arrangement, and I'll pay you five guineas a week."

"I suppose," he remarked, going, "that I ought to thank you, but, to be honest, I don't feel inclined to do so."

"Then be honest, dear chap," I answered, cheerfully, "and let's both begin again with a better understanding of each other. Besides, there need never be any question of thanks between you and me."

I wrote to Kitty and told her of all this; she replied, asking me to suggest a method by which she, too, could help without allowing anyone but myself to become acquainted with the fact. The baby boy was well and healthy and bonny; had begun to make large experiments with the English language, and could identify my portrait, giving to it the nearest equivalent possible to the name of Uncle. Entrusted for the first time with a pen, he had made at the foot of the note-paper some remarks which Kitty said conveyed his message of love to me.

In my rooms at Tavistock Place I managed to find the suit of clothes which Len had once given to me, and he accepted the return of the garments with words of gratitude which, I do declare, pained me more than the remarks he used across the table in Queen Street.

It had come so much a matter of course to think of Len as one enjoying perfect health, that I could scarcely believe the contents of a letter marked "personal" which I found one morning at office. It had been dashed off in a great hurry, the last lines went at an angle; the tenour was that, suffering from a breakdown in health, he resolved to go at once into a Nursing Home in the West End. An expensive place, but it seemed to him that at such a crisis of one's life, the question of money ought not to be considered. A few weeks retirement from the world, and he would be himself again. I read this, in a dazed way, two or three times, then started up, determined to see him and give every help in my power; in re-folding the letter I found on the back page two lines, which said—

"You must send me £75 before half-past ten in the morning."

And this (which was exactly what I wanted to do) oddly enough, made me pause. Len might not, in his present state, act wisely, or with his usual discretion; the better plan would be to take charge of all the arrangements, and relieve him of the worry that details involved. A message to a friend of mine, carrying on a City practice in an office

of one of the large buildings near, brought reliable particulars, and a telegram despatched to Len gave the address and recommended him to proceed there without delay, leaving everything else to me. I telephoned to the Nursing Home and arranged they should have everything in readiness to receive him. This would have been followed by a swift visit in a taxi-cab, but at the moment callers came, demanding to see me, and no one but me; the order concerned the issue of some company prospectuses. (A very lucrative business, by-the-bye; suggested by me to the firm and sanctioned with the provision that I should attend to the branch myself, and make sure—as Stemson said—that we became mixed up in nothing shady. I should not like to be certain that we always evaded dealing with doubtful folk, but I do know that we were careful never to make a bad debt.) Afternoon came before I was able to get along to Wimpole Street.

"We've been expecting him," replied the matron, "but he has not arrived yet. Perhaps he's too ill to be moved."

Greatly disturbed, I hurried to the address on the south side of the river given in Len's communication. Something Mansions was the name of the place, and it occurred to me in going up the stone staircase that they were not easily distinguishable from workmen's dwellings. No answer could be obtained to the knocking at the door, but a stout woman came from the next apartments in the same corridor with lips firmly set in the manner of one determined to give no information.

"Gone!" she said, curtly. "No, I don't know where to. And if I did, I shouldn't tell you. I can keep my mouth shut as well as anybody. Yes, he went away just before eleven, if you must know. There's been a lot of other callers, and, like you, they didn't seem inclined to take 'No' for an answer. There's nothing else I can tell you. He's gone and he won't be back for three or four weeks. Obliged to go, he was; couldn't remain here another minute. His brother, are you? Well, all I can say is, I don't see much

resemblance, except perhaps the nose and eyes. Couldn't tell you which way he turned when he got outside. Did try to, but these windows are so awkward. Well, what he told me, in strict confidence, and I've no business to be repeating it to you, was that he had to go into a Nursing 'Ome somewheres. It's no use you keeping on asking fifty thousand questions, because he paid me to keep quiet, and quiet I'm going to keep.'

I paid her to relax her methods of reserve, and it eventually seemed clear that she told me all she knew, but this did not amount to much. To our man Tiller I gave the task of going around to every Home of the kind in London given in Kelly's Directory; the conclusion we had to come to was that Len had entered under a name not his own, and I had the gloomy assurance that he would be without a friend, would be labouring under a sense of grievance against me.

Until a month later, a telegram came from the Metropolitan Hospital in Kingsland Road, and I hastened there, relieved to think suspense was over; delighted to know I was going to see him again. I ran up the steps, resenting the inquiry of the porter, walked impatiently up and down the passage whilst inquiries were being made. The matron came, and gave me a few distinct, good-natured words of advice. Len was already improving, but his condition still appeared serious; the matron thought that if the best happened there would be a long period of convalescence. Indeed, so far as she could gather from the doctors, he ought, if circumstances permitted, to live in some suitable place abroad.

"For a time?"

"For the rest of his life," answered the matron.

He was asleep as I tip-toed along the ward, to the bed indicated by the sister in charge. He had shaven his moustache, and his hair was becoming thin, but looking at him, I could see the same Len who, as a boy, always slept with his right arm for pillow. A catch in his breathing was noticeable; the touch of colour on his cheeks appeared to be not quite in the right place.

"Hullo!" he said, opening his eyes slowly and rubbing them. "Come at last, then?"

"I expected you to go to the Nursing Home, Len."

He smiled. "Don't blame you," he said. "You see, as a matter of fact, that was all bunkum. London was getting too warm and I had to fly away, just as the swallows do when it is getting too cold."

"Mother has been worried about you."

"They turned me out of the village in Hertfordshire, partly because I couldn't pay, partly because of something else. I had to tramp all the way back to London. That's how I caught this damn cold. It's nothing more than a cold, but it's just about sewn me up. Let me have some money before you go."

"You don't need any whilst you're here, Len. When you're ready to go out, I'll see what can be done."

He gazed up at me in a queer way before speaking again. "Better be civil to you, I suppose," he remarked. "The time will come when I shall be the upper dog again."

"Of course, it will, old chap."

"I'm not the kind of man who being knocked down stays down."

"Certain of that. Only—" I hesitated, "if you had been straightforward with me, perhaps I could have helped you."

One hand played with the counterpane. "That's such a dull way of conducting one's life," he said. "Any fool can take the main road. I like to get to my destination by short cuts."