CHAPTER XXIII

LEN AND THE HOUSE AT BLACKHEATH

MILLY took charge of the arrangements, assuring me that if I did but abstain from interfering, all would go well; at the dramatic moment I might be called in to confirm a statement and to make the end of the scene effective, but until then all she needed was a free hand. The dear girl brought such relish, and prided herself so greatly on her powers as stage manager, that one could not help feeling sorry when she had to announce that my aid was urgently needed; the leading lady declined to go on. My mother, it appeared, had a keen anxiety to see the house in Vanbrugh Park, wanted to go over the rooms just once to ascertain whether anything had been altered, desired to walk through the nursery garden and find out what had happened to the fruit trees; admitted the thought of all this had never, in many, many years, been entirely absent from her mind. But Len, in one of his youthful bursts of ambition, had made her promise that she never would set eyes on the place until the time came when he would be there to receive her, and this promise she had studiously kept; this promise she always meant to keep.

"If you can't suggest anything," Milly declared, "it means there is nothing to suggest. Unless——"

"Go on, young woman."

"Unless we give up the idea of making a play of it, and tell her the truth. Tell her that you have taken the house on the long remainder of a lease, and that everything is ready."

"She may still object to come, and in that case, all the motives for taking the house disappear. Seems to me, there's only one way out."

"One is plenty."

I explained the situation clearly to my brother at office (where he was doing better than we had expected, keeping on fairly good terms with all the other clerks, excepting Farrington, who alone amongst them was aware of his relationship to me), and Len, very good-naturedly, agreed to help in any manner I liked to propose. Living in one room in the house at Osnaburgh Street, where he had started life after leaving home, he made it a provision that if he gave the assurance I required, he would be permitted to remain at Blackheath, and indeed this seemed a wise and a feasible arrangement: I gained the idea that he required close supervision at this junction of his life, and my duty was to give it to the best of my ability. I wrote to his wife asking her to help in the task: the reply proved clearly that she was unworthy of Len, and the assertion that he had spoilt her life seemed to me proof that she had not yet become free from hysteria. The popular hobby of bringing vague charges against my brother was one to be increasingly resented.

"You don't mean it?" cried my mother. "You can't be serious, Henry? One of your boyish jokes made up on a Saturday, just to have a laugh at me."

"This very afternoon!" I said, decisively. "Run upstairs and get ready and ask Mrs Croucher to come with us."

"Ask her?" she echoed, with dignity. "I shall order her to come with us. Do we go by train, or must we walk all the way?"

"An open carriage is waiting out in Lewisham High Road."

'Let it drive up to the door," she directed, "and we'll make it wait there until all the neighbours have had a good look."

To please her and to gratify Mrs Croucher we went down Clifton Hill into Woodpecker Road where my mother gave gracious bows to those who recognised us; Milly and I assured her the general shop looked a perfect disgrace to the

neighbourhood, with posters calling attention, in terms and with illustrations, unworthy of such an establishment. She sat upright, as the carriage returned and made its way more directly to our destination, supplying incident by reproving Mrs Croucher for a bonnet awry, for the wearing of the grin, for exposing an elastic-side boot to our gaze, for playing with the carriage handle, for looking about her, until that excellent person, as we drove by the Obelisk at Lewisham, became a picture of profound misery, incurring new reprimands for giving a sigh at a time when cheerfulness and gaiety should be exhibited. Near Blackheath village, my mother became more agitated, smoothing the brown muff which Milly had given to her, in a restless way.

"I see alteration, my dears," she remarked, speaking to us, but shaking her head severely in the direction of poor Mrs Croucher, to indicate the person responsible. "New names over shops; fresh buildings about; lot of strangers walking up and down. It's to be hoped they've left the Heath alone."

"Last time I was there, on a Bank Holiday," remarked Mrs Croucher, with respect, "I couldn't see no change whatsoever."

"You wouldn't," retorted my mother. "Hold your umbrella properly, do. You nurse it as though it was a new baby."

"I shan't forget," said the other, reminscently, "the trouble I had with my third. When the nurse stepped foot inside the room, the first thing she said was, 'Mrs Croucher, you can say what you like, but you'll never get over it!'"

"Will you kindly oblige me," begged my mother, "by remembering that there are unmarried people present? Wonder how often I've had to tell you not to talk so much about your own affairs."

Mrs Croucher expressed a vague wish that she had as many sovereigns.

"You don't get money by wishing for it," remarked my mother. "My Len hasn't made his fortune by lolling all sideways in a carriage, and gazing up at the sky in an idiotic

way. Look in front of you, do, and try to realise that this is the day of your life. Wish now I hadn't brought you with me. You're more trouble and more responsibility than Henry and Milly put together!"

There came better justification for the presence of the lady companion when, skirting Blackheath, my mother pointed out proudly the church where she and my father were married, and Mrs Croucher said it possessed a nice spire; my mother, as guide, drew attention to the walk where the nurse had taken me daily, and Mrs Croucher remarked that it looked healthy; my mother gave the direction of Woolwich, and Mrs Croucher declared there must be great comfort and encouragement in living within a few miles of military barracks, especially in view of the fact that nowadays you never knew what the German Emperor might do next. On venturing to suggest that the command of domestic servants was possibly made difficult by nearness of the Royal Artillery, she received the crushing answer that they were not all like her. Conversation was thereafter given to us, and Milly and I—for whom this had been a favourite evening promenade—affected ignorance, and I was appealed to with an urgent request that I should throw my memory back over the long intervening years since childhood. Outside the house I jumped down and opened the gates; the coachman drove half-way round the semi-circle to the steps. There Len waited, both hands out to welcome us. My mother ran from me to his arms.

"You dear, wonderful boy!" she sobbed. "If I could only tell you how happy I am. This is what I've been looking forward to for such a long time. Your poor father ought to be here, Len!"

"He knows, mother, he knows. Miss Fowler, how do you do? Very pleased to welcome you. I shall want your advice here; we men have no taste. If you don't like the wall-papers— Hullo, little man! Scarcely noticed you! Now, mother dear, a cup of tea first, out on the lawn."

"He's thought of everything," said my mother, gratefully.

"Mrs Croucher, when you've done staring about like a great owl, perhaps you'll help me off with my cloak. No, Milly; let her do it!"

The maids had followed my instructions carefully, and the old silver teapot presented to me when I left home, was set on the white cloth'd table; a cake as near to the kind my mother used to manufacture was there, a scent of buttered toast made Mrs Croucher sniff appreciatively. As Len poured out and begged us to make ourselves at home, we had to interfere on behalf of the lady companion, and for compromise she was allowed to remain, but to take her chair two yards away, so that no one should credit her with the honour of being a member of the family. "And don't lick your fingers," ordered my mother, sharply. "Watch us, and do as we do!"

"Two lumps, mother, I think?" said Len.

"He remembers," she commented.

"What gratifies me very much," he went on, "is to observe that they have not cut down any of the trees. If I had found a single one missing, I should have felt much inclined to tear up the agreement, and refuse to have anything further to do with the matter."

"You must have taken a lot of trouble, my dear. However did you manage about furnishing?"

"There," he answered, with a wave of the hand, "there the little man came in useful. The place would not have been ready but for his help."

"I'm sure," she declared, "Henry was only too pleased to be allowed to give assistance. It isn't much he can do."

"I shall want him to do more," explained Len, sipping at his cup. "We've talked the matter over together, and we have had to realise the fact that owing to differences of opinion between myself and my unfortunate wife——"

"She was no use," decided my mother. "No more use than that twig on the grass. Mrs Croucher, take it up and throw it away in the corner. If you can't be ornamental, you may as well be useful!"

"What I suggest is this," Len continued. "We want to live under pleasant conditions and to make up a comfortable circle. I'm pretty busy in the City, as Henry will tell you; my time will be fully occupied and sometimes I may have to stay in town all night. What I recommend is that he shall take up the position of master of the house; that this charming young lady," with a bow to Milly that I think she might have acknowledged, "shall on her marriage become mistress of the house, and you, dear mother, and I, regard ourselves as their guests. Now, think that over whilst you're having your second cup of tea, and then we'll go in and I'll show you through all the rooms."

"You're the best son, Len," she cried, delightedly, "that any mother ever had. I've said so before, and I shall always continue to say so!"

"Your praise," he replied, kissing her hand, "is very precious to me!"

Milly had, of course, seen the rooms; had taken charge of nearly every improvement in connection with them, but she very adroitly gave expressions of satisfaction as each door was opened by Len. It was a long performance, for my mother insisted on trying every chair and every settee, looked at her reflection in every mirror, gave announcement of satisfaction with the few chosen pictures. The drawing-room, she ventured to remark, looked rather empty; in her day, one could scarcely walk from one end to the other without upsetting several articles of furniture, and she missed the large oval table which at that time, had proved so useful for the display of books, but when Mrs Croucher supported the resolution which hinted at a preference for old methods, then it was immediately declared that although some could not move with the times, others did so, and the charge of being old fashioned was one which should not be lightly incurred.

"Now this is your own room," announced Len, "and here, I think, mother, you will at last find something to which you can give unstinted praise."

"I like it all, my dear."

"My desire has been," he went on, opening the door, "to procure as nearly as possible the same furniture, occupying the same positions, and you can sit here and fancy yourself young again."

"I shan't do that," said my mother, gazing around dreamily, "I shall sit here and think about you! Henry," turning to me, "try to remember this all your days. Try to tell your brother now what is in my mind. Try to make him understand how grateful we are, and how proud we are——"

She broke down. Len and I, leaving her to the women, went to smoke in the garden.

"Did I manage all right?" he asked.

"Excellently!"

"Not every one could have done it."

"Don't step on the pansies."

"Hang the flowers!" he said, irritably. "If I'm going to be called upon to keep this up, I must have freedom and liberty. And, by-the-bye, shouldn't trouble too much about the old lady."

"Don't mean to do so."

We entered the summer-house that stood against the wall. The two sides and the porchway were made of wooden logs; on the red bricks were carved initials which we had made years before; our successors had apparently been boys with good manners or without knives.

"I shall get rid of her so soon as we are married," I continued, sitting on the octagonal table, "and send her back to New Cross."

"That's the way," he said.

I went on, glad to have earned his approval. "She may as well stay on for a while until everything gets into good order. She can make herself handy in one way or the other, and it will be giving her a new experience; something she can think about and talk about all her life.

"Please yourself about the moment for sending her back, but see that she doesn't stay on indefinitely."

"There's just this about it," I mentioned. "Mother nags at her and takes every opportunity for reproving her, but all this is only one form of luxury."

"About whom are you speaking?"

"Mrs Croucher."

"Oh!" he exclaimed. After a pause. "Give me a match!"

I found it very pleasant to sit there with Len. We did not trouble to talk much, but now and again he would mention a distant memory suggested by the surroundings; now and again something occurred to me. We were talking about a terrier dog and about the day that it died; I was reminding Len that he locked himself in his room on that occasion for twelve hours when, to my astonishment, he suddenly fell forward on the rustic table, and sobbed. I went round to him and patted his shoulder, refraining from speech lest I should choose the wrong word. It would have been easy to weep with him, but the two gardeners were clipping grass at the edge of the pathway.

"That's what I've been wanting to do," said my brother, recovering, but turning his face away and speaking in a low tone, "wanting to do for years. Wonder why it should have come now."

"It's going to stop," he went on in a louder voice. "I'm about to take a lesson from you. It's not too late for me to turn. I shall get the next train back!"

"Don't hurry away yet."

"Metaphor, little man; I'm talking in the language of metaphor. I shall take the first train back, and change at the proper junction."

"I'm talking seriously," he continued, after a pause, "and you will find out eventually that I mean what I'm now saying."

My mother, when she realised the carriage had been sent away, and that she and Mrs Croucher and I were to begin at once life in a new home, spoke to me regarding the money left by Mrs Latham, demanding to know where it was in-

vested, urging that I should consult Len before entering upon any rash speculation. On Mrs Croucher recommending the Post Office Savings Bank, my mother told her sharply that the matter was one which affected Henry alone, and nobody else had a right to interfere. Mrs Croucher did us another good service later in the evening, when Len had left, by interposing, during a discussion on the question of a good date for a wedding, a comment to the effect that early marriages always had been, always would be a grevious blunder; she herself reached the age of thirty-three before accepting the offer of Police Constable Croucher; my mother declared emphatic opposition to this view, and agreeing that Croucher might have been wise in putting off the ceremony as late as possible, there was no reason why Milly and I should not get married at the earliest opportunity. I walked with my dear girl through Blackheath, through Lewisham, up Loampit Hill, along Lewisham High Road, and we both complained of the shortness of the journey.

The church had outlived a reputation for high services, protesting Churchwardens, Sunday morning fights, and even Mrs Croucher, who remembering this, feared a mob might fill the road, and that we should have clothes torn from our backs, admitted later the only fault she had to find was in the smallness of the congregation. My regret was for the absence of Len who had promised to be my best man, and mother agreed that the ceremony seemed hardly legal without him, but the rest did not seem to care greatly; a telegram from Queen Street explained that he could not get away. Stemson gave me leave for three weeks, declaring it would be a pleasure to hold the reins again, and get some of the younger colts into training. In St Donatt's Road we were such a small company at breakfast, that Ernest Fowler had to propose the health of the bride and bridegroom, to reply for his father and mother, and to give the ladies, enjoying himself greatly, and compelling my Aunt Mabel to respond to the last-named toast, which that lady did in a few words that bore mainly on the subject of

a recent dispute between herself and the manager of a South London cemetery. We went up to town to catch the evening boat train, and there was time for me to run across and bid a private good-bye to Len. He came back and saw us off.

"Good luck!" he cried, walking along with the train, and waving his hat joyously. "Thank you for all you have done for me. I'll pay you well some day."

I said more than once to Milly, as the express dashed through Kent, that no one could wish for a more gratifying farewell. Repeating this remark the next day in examining lace shops of the Montagne de la Cour in Brussels, my wife recommended gently that we should for a time dismiss my brother from our thoughts.