CHAPTER XXIV

A LUCKY MEETING WITH LEN

MY dear wife, with an experience of the Continent that I could not claim, directed the journey, acting as Cook's guide and interpreter, and it was not until we walked down the gangway to the steamer at Boulogne, and an English seamen with S.E. and C.R. on his blue jersey advised us to go below, that I had opportunity of regaining command. The first use made of this was to decide that, as we were both good sailors, we would procure macintoshes and stay on deck. The seaman in giving his help to the scheme mentioned the weather was a jolly sight worse on the other side; he doubted whether the boats at Folkestone would start. I remarked authoritatively that in this case, passengers would go from Dover; he answered that we were going to Dover instead of to Folkestone, but it by no means followed that the outward steamer would make the attempt. I had telegraphed to my offices in London for a messenger to bring letters to Folkestone to meet me and this alteration possessed the elements of annoyance; he comforted by remarking that there were men of brains at Folkestone Harbour who would send the clerk on to the other port. Milly charged me with excessive anxiety to meet business, and I admitted that, happy and delightful as the holiday had been, I did want to get back to Queen Street to see Stemson, home to Blackheath to see my mother, above all to see Len and tell him where we had been.

"Tell me instead," said my wife, nestling under cover of the tarpaulins. The steamer went quietly out of the harbour to find itself cuffed, and struck, and buffetted and gripped by pugilistic waves. "Tell me the names of the

places, so that I may be sure I haven't dreamed some of them."

Only one other passenger had declined the recommendations of the crew, and he gasped up and down with a cigar stuck out between the capacious flaps of his travelling cap, coat collar turned up, and escaping now and again, more by luck than agility, the furious spray. He glanced at us resentfully as one who preferred to be able to report that he had been the only passenger who dared to remain on deck; a sudden lurch sent him in our direction as I arrived, in the recital, at Munich, prepared to describe the journey through Austrian Tyrol.

"Mille pardons," he exclaimed.

My wife bowed.

"Est ce que vous or rather avez vous——"

"You surely can't manage to light a match, Mr Prentice."

"Thank goodness," he roared, "thank goodness, I've found some one who can understand me. But I declare I don't know who it is. Can't tell you from Adam."

"Allow me to introduce you to Eve."

Prentice invited Heaven several times to bless his soul, declared alternately he would have recognised me anywhere; that it was impossible, in the circumstances, to identify anyone. He had been out to Bordeaux to see some firms there, and had done not altogether badly (a Great Tower Street term which I knew meant he had done remarkably well), where he had really scored was in ideas gained that could, later on, be manufactured into verse. On the top of all these came the gale, such a gale as one often heard about but seldom witnessed; G. W. P. confided to us that a title had already come to him, and a good part of the first line.

"You'll be glad to hear," I shouted, "that my brother Len is going on excellently." The noise of the storm prevented Milly from joining in the conversation, and she contented herself by nodding occasionally; she turned aside when I mentioned Len's name.

"Don't know whether I am glad," he replied, using gloved hands as a megaphone, "but I'm certainly surprised."

"You never forget an old grievance."

"Not in matters of business. You wait until some one does you a bad turn in that way, and you'll find that all sentiment goes. You'll come down on them like a hundred of bricks. Matters of business stand altogether apart. Your experience hasn't been so great as mine. I've come across some rotters in my day, but never— All right, I won't say any more for fear of offending the lady. I'm told you're getting on well, at any rate. Did you a good turn, my boy, when I turned you out of Great Tower Street. Funny how everything comes about, isn't it, madam?"

My wife agreed.

"With my peculiar gift," he went on, still at a shout, "I naturally have to take a great interest in everything, but I assure you the tricks providence sometimes does, absolutely stagger me. See how your husband has succeeded for instance! Why, when he came to me as a lad, I never imagined for a moment there was anything special in him. If I gave him a moment's thought, I probably decided he was one of your dull plodders, who might eventually reach his £200 a year and stop there. If it isn't going too far," turning to me, "what is the figure now? In round numbers."

Again Mr Prentice made his appeal to Heaven.

"And you are going home now to a nice comfortable little nest, I'll be bound."

On receipt of the additional information G. W. P. rose hurriedly and let us, lurching up and down the deck, now clutching at a trunk, now at a seat in order to steady himself; Milly suggested he probably wanted to use language which could not be spoken in her presence.

"Of course I'm glad," he bawled, returning and slithering across in front of us. "Immensely gratified. Nothing pleases me more than to think that my efforts have good results. At the same time," he addressed himself to

Milly, "I've been ambling on for years. No one has ever left me a single penny. All the people connected with me expect I shall leave each of them my little all. Seems to me I'm likely to be more unpopular when I'm gone than I am now that I'm living. Suppose he's told you my wife can't stand the sight of me."

A sailor came over in zigzag fashion, eager to be of use; Mr Prentice gave a gesture indicating desire to sweep him from the deck.

"But you have your poetry," I said.

Between the ear flaps, a smile came to the limited space of features; he shook hands with both of us to express, I think, gratitude for the reminder. The gale certainly did not improve as we entered upon the second half of the journey; the steamer appeared unable to make up its mind whether to rest on one side or to stand upright, but nothing short of a complete and total wreck would have stopped G. W. P. from reciting his verses to us; he sat on a high coil of rope at our knees and out-bawled the storm.

"Pretty thought, isn't it?" he screamed. "'As far asunder as the poles!' Strange nobody ever thought of that before. 'And yet we trust that somehow good will be the last and final goals.'"

My wife ventured to say that she seemed to remember hearing lines of a similar intention.

"That's just the danger of it," said G. W. P., regretfully. "I go about quoting my verses, some ignorant chap overhears them, goes home, sits down, writes something almost exactly like them, and—" slapping the coil of ropes, "thinks he's turned out original stuff. The amount of plagiarism that goes on in this world is simply terrible."

Milly preferred to remain in the deck chair, and I left them in order to walk up and down and restore circulation. In passing by each time, one could hear Mr Prentice's voice shouting, "Not like the same person—marvellous improvement—always said he'd make his way!" (from which I was conceited enough to assume he was speaking of me) and

later, "A thoroughly bad nut—no good to himself or anybody else—bound to come to a bad end!" (which induced me to hope the subject had changed).

The *Duchess of York* behaved cautiously outside the harbour before attempting to put its nose inside; bells rang, shouts came from the bridge, passengers came from below greatly astonished to find each other alive. We divested ourselves of tarpaulins and macintoshes, and with the pride that comes of having stood a perilous journey well, rested elbows on the side as the boat went in. My wife took my arm.

"All right?" she said, affectionately.

"Never felt happier in all my life."

"Dear man!"

A line of people stood on the wind-swept lower quay, town porters, station officials, some with bundles of letters, a telegraph boy with a pad of forms, the two men belonging to Scotland Yard who watch arrivals and departures.

"It only needed that," I cried. "Look! There's Len! My own brother Len. How very kind and thoughtful of Stemson to send him! He doesn't see us!

I waved and called, but Len was in earnest conversation with one of the uniformed officials; seemed to be exhibiting some anger at the information received. A rope sprang from the deck and was secured to one of the stout wooden piles, the gangway fixed, porters hurried up, and the first man took our hand-luggage. I placed Milly in a compartment, and ordered a cup of tea for her before going back to find my brother.

"Is it a fact," he was saying, addressing sharply now the harbour superintendent, "is it finally decided that the boat is not to cross to Calais?"

"That's correct!" answered the other.

"A most infernal piece of bad management," he declared, heatedly.

"Shocking!"

"Who else can I speak to about it?"

"Depends entirely on your religious belief," replied the harassed official. "So far as I know there's nobody here who's responsible for the weather!"

I caught Len's arm as he turned; he seemed to go back a step or two.

"What a day for you to be out!" I cried. "You've come down with the correspondence."

"Come down," he repeated, slowly, "with the correspondence."

"You went to Folkestone and they sent you on here."

"Went to Folkestone, and—they sent me on here."

"Good chap!" heartily. "Now you can travel back with us."

"I'm in no hurry."

"But we have so much to say to you, Len!"

The harbour superintendent returned to mention that it was just possible the outward boat might start in an hour or so; the gale seemed to be moderating, and without accepting the responsibility which the gentleman appeared anxious to fix upon somebody, he felt inclined to say that passengers would be able to get across.

"You don't want to go over," I remarked to my brother.

"Course not!" he said. "I asked simply out of curiosity."

"If I'd known that," declared the harbour superintendent, caustically, "I wouldn't have troubled you so much."

"Worrying times for these people," I said to Len, leading him away, "when the Channel suddenly breaks out into a fit of mad temper. That's the odd thing about the sea; you never know what it is going to do. Human beings can be relied upon."

"You think so."

"That's my experience."

He stopped, and kept perfectly silent as we were going up the slope of the platform. He was about to speak when a porter with baggage divided us, and a line of people

followed; when I crossed a man was engaging him in conversation.

"You know this person, sir?" asked the man, turning to me. I was about to answer proudly, but Len held up his hand.

Mr Prentice came along to tell me that my wife was becoming nervous at my absence; the porters were begging people to take their seats. He glanced at Len.

"It's all over," said Len to me, in a low voice. "You can't save me now."

"Save you?"

"You can't do anything."

"But I will if you only tell me the truth."

"The truth," he remarked, "is a dashed unpleasant thing to have to tell."

"What do you know about this gentleman?" asked the man, who held my brother's arm.

"If I told you the good I knew of him," answered Mr Prentice, vehemently, "you wouldn't be any the wiser; if I told you the bad I knew of him, we should have to stay here for a week."

"This," I protested, vigorously, "is spite!"

"His name's Leonard Drew; he was once in my employment, and I had to sack him; he's now in a firm in Queen Street, City. What did you say was the name of your firm?" he asked of me.

"Seems to me," said the man, "that we may as well all travel up together. Unless the lady objects. She needn't know what our business is. I'll take charge of your bag," he said to Len, "and the remainder of your Paris ticket."

I shall never forget the easy manner adopted by Len on that journey, as compared with my own distress and the reserve of the two other men. My wife could not help being influenced by his courteous behaviour; he kept the conversation going with no apparent effort. Trafoi? He was so glad we did not miss Trafoi. Did waitresses at the

hotel there still dress in costumes of the country, and were the guides with bunches of edelweiss in their hats standing about outside to conduct nervous climbers up gentle heights? Len felt sorry it rained at Innsbruck, regretted we were not fortunate enough to see the religious play at Oberammergau. A wonderfully impressive thing this; he defied anyone to sit there watching without experiencing a lump in the throat, a keen desire to lead a better life. What was that great sentence of some one's concerning religion; that if it did not exist, it would have to be invented? Len admitted he liked travelling; a shockingly unpatriotic thing to say perhaps, but he had a positive craving to live in any other country but England. My wife could not agree with him here, but he insisted, with a glance at me, that in our colonies, for instance, there was room for a man to breathe, to move, and to fight; he himself had a great anxiety to settle down in Australia. He believed the climate was something we English-folk could only dimly imagine.

I saw my wife into the North Kent train, begging her to excuse me. We went in a four-wheeler to Queen Street where I found the clerk who had returned from Folkestone, and took possession of the bundle of letters; telephoned to Stemson at Prince's Gate. When he arrived, we started a conference that lasted for two hours.