CHAPTER XXV

LEN AT THE DOCKS

MY mother was inclined to blame the tea taken out on the lawn on the afternoon of the first day, and after some deliberation, fixed the whole of the responsibility on Mrs Croucher who, fortunately for herself had gone back to Woodpecker Road in the company of a tin trunk containing a supply of dresses and bonnets from which Milly had induced my mother to part, making room for those of a newer date and fashion. Mrs Croucher ought to have noticed that the grass was slightly damp; the wonder was, with such a careless, stupid woman about the place that all of us present on that occasion were not being ordered abroad, necessitating the chartering of a special steamer. The one excellent point to be borne in mind, was in my mother's view, that Len could well afford to take the journey, and if, as had been hinted to her, he should decide to reside permanently, for the sake of his health, on the other side of the globe, he could be trusted to keep his footing there. (I feel sure my mother had an idea that folk in New South Wales walked as flies on a ceiling.) Hers would be the duty to see that a Christmas pudding was sent out to him every year. On finding this would be eaten in summer weather, my mother gave thanks that she remained in a country where the climate, at any rate, knew how to behave in a sensible manner.

"Talking of which," she remarked, smoothing the skirt of a new dress contentedly, "I'm afraid you don't realise, Henry, all your brother is doing for you. He's allowing us to stay on here, rent free."

"We have made an arrangement with him," interposed

Milly. She disregarded my look of warning. "It has only been a question of terms, and Len appears to be satisfied."

"Too good mannered to show that he isn't, my dear. Of course if I'm kept in the dark, I can't be expected to see these things in the light you do, but I should like to have Henry's word that he hasn't been niggardly in the dealings."

"You can take it, mother, that I have been as generous as it was possible for me to be."

"Such a difference between them," she remarked, addressing my wife again. "You've no idea. Even as children Len was always the one to get rid of his toys and Henry, here, was the one to hoard them up. Now, I'm going to make a suggestion, and if you two consider it's likely to cost too much money, why I'll trot down to Blackheath village and take something out of the post-office."

The dear soul felt hurt on discovering her recommendation had been anticipated; that we had already issued invitations to the available members of the Drew family, begging them to come to dinner at Vanbrugh Park, that they might bid farewell to Len. The number was not great: Aunt Mabel and her married daughter and the husband, the daughter who had remained single, a Drew at Orpington who had once been called young, because he had less years than my father possessed, but could now, by the stern rules of arithmetic, never expect to see sixty again, and (besides ourselves) that was all. My mother wanted to include the Fowlers, but Milly declared, with great sense, that if we went outside the family, we should scarcely know where to stop, and with the necessity of keeping in my mind the exact proportions of knowledge possessed by each individual, I seconded the amendment and it was carried. My mother announced that it seemed a skimpy way of doing a thing not likely to happen again, and I found a cutting on my study desk cut from a local paper, which she alone read, entitled "Strange End of a Miser."

There was no time to lose, for a berth had been unex-

pectedly placed at our disposal by the shipping agents in Leadenhall Street, and I was bound under the agreement with Stemson to get Len out of the country at the earliest possible moment. The sailing was arranged for Saturday morning; the date of the dinner had to be fixed for Friday night. Meanwhile I caught each evening a good train from Cannon Street, in order to enjoy all the available moments in my brother's company. He was at his best during those three days, courteous to Milly, affectionate with mother, always genial with me, excepting at one moment when I asked whether he would care for his wife to be invited. He emptied his tumbler and threw it into the grate violently.

"Sorry!" he said, after two minutes of silence. "Couldn't help it. If I had married some one else, even if I could now marry some one else— She won't take any action," he went on, grimly. "I've given her opportunities, but she won't watch; I've had her watched and she won't give opportunities. So here am I, separated from her and yet chained to her for the rest of my life!"

"It began wrongly."

"That wouldn't have mattered," he said, with his arms across the table and fingers clenched, "if only—if only there had been children. I've never spoken to anybody about it before, and I don't know why I speak of it now, but if there had been but one boy to call me—to call me father!"

He was in another mood in less time than it took me to cut the end of a cigar for him. "See that a couple of boxes of these are packed up, will you?" he directed. "They'll be useful to give away on the voyage out. And think of something I can give your wife as a present. And something for mother. And something for yourself."

"You needn't waste your money on us, Len."

"Not my money," he retorted, airily, "yours!"

Len received the guests at the top of the staircase on the Friday evening at seven, Milly and I standing immediately behind, and not one of them could have guessed that a few

days previously his liberty had been in danger. Accepted their thanks for the invitation, and with a movement of the hand, conveyed the hint that some of the acknowledgments should be given to us. The Orpington uncle could see a resemblance between my father and Len, especially about the mouth; he considered that I favoured my mother. This topic, communicated to the rest, created a lively debate before dinner, and Aunt Mabel's married daughter declared both of her children had their father's nose; her sister expressed the opinion that this constituted a defect likely to stand in their way in years to come. I noticed that Len went across and spoke to the married cousin, asking after the health of the children, and promising to send presents to them from Sydney.

"Often tell them about their Uncle Len as they call you," she declared, "you wouldn't believe how proud they are of you."

"That's good!" he said, heartily. "Next to having a child of one's own— Henry, you take Aunt Mabel. Not quite enough men I'm afraid to go round. The ladies must make the most of us."

They were, at the sweets, rallying the single cousin from Peckham on her austerity of manner, and her mother was offering, as excuse, the circumstance that out of twelve recent commissions no less than nine had been gentlemen, when one of the maids brought a card to my wife; she spoke to me down the table.

"Mrs Thomas?" I repeated. "No, I don't know the name at all."

"Send down word that you can't see her," ordered Len.

"There was a Thomas once at New Cross," remarked my mother. "Lodged at the Croucher's and he was a luggage-labeller at Charing Cross."

"If it's anyone who wants help—" began my wife, starting up.

"Now I think of it, my dear, I remember Thomas was his Christian name."

"How absurd of me to forget," I cried, suddenly. "Why, of course, it's Kitty!"

"Kitty must come up," decided my brother, promptly. "I shall be extremely glad to see Kitty once more. Kitty must drink my health."

She came in with apologies, but my wife would not listen to these, and took her furs and her hat, and Len brought a chair to the table that she might sit next to him; she moved this to my end, and, slightly flurried at first, soon became composed. A very pleasant figure to look at, with features which, once they had lost the early look of nervousness, gave signs of perfect calm; she answered my mother's searching questions easily, accepted the news of my brother's impending departure with a correct blend of surprise and regret. Kitty had left the sea-side town, because she heard of a school near Westerham.

"Why," exclaimed the Orpington uncle, "you're the good-looking woman with the curly-haired boy. Good gracious! I know you both by sight as well as I know my own front door. Smart little chap in a sailor suit, who struts along trying to keep in step with his mother. Talk of the neighbourhood."

"In what way?" she asked, quickly.

"Because he's such a healthy youngster."

"I see."

"This is all news to me," remarked Len. "I had no idea, Kitty, you were married. What is the boy's father like?"

"He is no longer alive," I interposed.

"A great deal wiser," decided Aunt Mabel, "to come to a London firm that's got everything ready at hand, than to allow yourself to be imposed upon by country muddlers, and so forth, and so on. If it isn't a rude question, ma'am, what did it run you into?"

"You might bring the boy down to the docks to-morrow morning," I said, turning the conversation. "It would interest him, and it would give him an opportunity of seeing Len for once in his life."

"That will not be convenient," said Kitty, with decision.

"I don't want anybody but Henry to see me off," remarked Len, definitely. "If there's one thing I dislike, it is tears."

The married cousin came round to discuss children and compare dates of children and their progress; I edged back my chair and thought of the Sunday evening in old Latham's office when everything seemed in a tangle that defied straightening out. The uncle wanted to smoke, and we went through the windows to the lawn at the side of the house, strolling up and down the gravelled path. The old gentleman said he made it a practice to take a brisk walk after dinner and Len, who seemed apprehensive of a farewell lecture for me (which, in truth, I had no thought of giving) fetched hats and sticks, instructing me to look after the ladies; they went off. I sauntered across to the summer-house and tried to realise that this was the last evening I could spend in the company of my brother. To-morrow night at this time we should have to think of him as well down the Channel, the next night as in the Bay, in five days' time at Gibraltar.

"Don't tell me," said Milly's voice, "unless you really want to do so. I'm not curious."

"But I must tell somebody," said Kitty, "and I feel I ought to tell you. You're a good woman, and good women are generally severe, but I have an idea you can afford to be generous."

"That is true!"

It would have been possible for me to come out and interrupt, but I did not greatly care that they should see my eyes just then. To my relief, they walked away.

"And I wish you to understand," said Kitty, eagerly, as they returned, "this is the only revenge I want to take; that he shall never see the boy. Never see his boy. I advise no girl to behave as I did but——"

I made my escape as they strolled on; went into the dining-room where the ladies were talking in confidential tones of something expected to happen in the following April; my mother, jumping up, declared that Milly ought

not to be out in the evening air and hurried to fetch her, the while others began to speak at random of different subjects. Kitty and Milly came in; there seemed a new friendliness between them. When Kitty took her leave, without waiting to see Len again, my wife kissed her affectionately, and gave a promise to drive down to Westerham.

I sat up with Len that night until nearly one o'clock, and looking back, it is not easy to recall any time when he appeared in better spirits; a lad setting out in life could not have been more enthusiastic or more sanguine. If all went well on the other side—and Len knew of no reason why everything should not go excellently—he hoped I would run out there some time and give him a chance of showing hospitality. I must be prepared to put up with a good deal of mutton in the bills of fare, but all else would be guaranteed beyond criticism. If any children came, the sea journey would do them an enormous amount of good; it had always been his ambition to take a boy around the world, for that would supply something which Shrewsbury could never furnish. I remember we talked a good deal about the bringing-up of children, and I listened with proper deference of views.

Len was just as fresh and animated when we started in the early morning, running into my mother's room to give a final good-bye, and reciprocating the farewell wave given by my wife at her window. We drove through Greenwich in the direction of Blackwall Tunnel; the moment he caught sight of the river and the shipping, he stopped talking, and I could get no word from him. We reached the Dock gates, and walked through the long, muddy spaces with traffic and business hustling each other, arriving at the quay side before the London train came in. On deck, I had to do everything for him. Found his cabin, looked after his luggage, introduced him to the officers, secured his place at the tables. The train emptied a crowd of excited voyagers and companions, with every man and every woman struggling desperately to ensure their own comforts; friends encouraging, and feeling in pockets to make sure that handkerchiefs were

there. More than once in the time that ensued, I made fresh efforts to make him speak, but he preserved silence. Not until the last bell rang, did he turn, taking my shoulders in the old way.

"Little man, little man!" he cried, brokenly. "What a fool I have been to myself."

"Best and dearest brother," I declared, "to me."