CHAPTER III

LEN IN THE EIGHT THIRTY-THREE

THE severest trial that came as a consequence of Mr Latham's defection was in the open amusement of my former colleagues at the Board School. In a wage-earning district like to that on the slopes north of New Cross Road, the usual thing was for a boy to leave on Friday and begin work the following Monday, with mothers perceptibly brightened at the thought of useful shillings a week added to the weekly income, and making plans for an afternoon of shopping in Rye Lane, Peckham. Here was I submitting to an interval (eating my head off, as Mrs Croucher phrased it), during which no child was too small to ask, "Got a job of work yet, Henery?" and when they came in groups and saw me standing in the shop doorway, they gave a few lines of a dirge sung by unemployed men during the previous winter; in ordinary circumstances verbal retorts might have been made to crush these attacks, but my voice was breaking and its irregular notes, high and low, lent themselves easily to ridicule. Mrs Croucher, who had the right to come into the shop at any time, emphasised my desolate outlook by declaring that the Has Beens, amongst whom she numbered us, never regained their former position, and discovered a paragraph in a Sunday newspaper which gave a statement of some medical expert to the effect that Londoners, after three generations, became extinct. Mrs Croucher had a regard for my mother, looking upon her as one with the rare experience of stepping up into society and returning, after a pleasing interval, to something below the first position; she often brought other women in of an afternoon to make small purchases, and, with bare elbows resting on the high

counter, they listened eagerly whilst Mrs Croucher put my mother through an examination in chief regarding life in a large house at Blackheath, glancing now and again at the audience when some astonishing detail had been elicited, with a proud

"What d'you think of that now?"

Or,

"Isn't that exactly, word for word, what I told you?"

A stormy, tempestuous incident occurred at about this time that reflected little praise to me, but a good deal of credit upon Len. I hope there existed a better reason for my conduct than I can discover after this lapse of time.

Tyson was the primary cause of all the trouble, and even now I cannot think of the man with anything like amiable feelings; he made me suffer too deeply. He had the great good fortune to lose a leg at Spa Road Station, and the only topic on which he could speak intelligently consisted of a description of the whole affair from start to end; the recital took three-quarters of an hour, beginning with the exact quantity of refreshment imbibed before taking his ticket, ending with the final letter from the railway company, offering a sum without prejudice. "And now," concluding, "now you know as much about it as what I do!" After hearing the account some twenty times, the man's deliberation and exactitude touched my nerves, and I started on the game of hating Tyson. It was to be a fight to a finish; either Tyson or I would have to admit defeat; one of us was to go down in the corner, and confess himself unable to continue. He called himself an Insurance Agent, and a small brass plate to this effect was screwed to the railings of the house where he lived in Amersham Vale, but the sum obtained for the loss of a limb enabled him to relinquish the perfunctory occupation, and his habit was to get out of bed at twelve o'clock midday. "Never a minute earlier; never a moment later," he used to say, proudly. He always hailed me with—

"Here comes little twopence-three-farthings!"

A remark which in its early days might possibly have con-

tained some elements of humour, but these had been, by constant repetition, worn away. His further conversation went on regular lines, and the broadness of his hints concerning a cup of tea never varied. He did perform one useful service in providing a butt for lady customers, who arriving, would assume he was one of the articles provided by the general shop, and ask for a pound of Tyson, or—this struck me as a clever touch—a bundle of firewood of the Tyson brand. Recognising him, they apologised, and mentioned that a girl of their acquaintance was wishful to get married, and had no objection to a husband who was half a man and half a tree. His great joke at my expense was to suddenly stick out his wooden leg as I hurried through, and trip me up.

My dislike became more profound on overhearing two women discussing him one evening. Tyson, they said, was making up to Mrs Drew; a hard-working widow, not bad looking when you took everything into consideration, and with only a couple of boys—one nearly able to keep himself—would just about suit the old humbug. This alarmed me. I spoke about it to my mother and she answered, amusedly, that people would scandalise about something; a good thing they could find nothing more serious.

"I'm going to tell him to leave off coming here," I said.

"You're to do nothing of the kind, Henry."

"Why not?"

"Because I forbid you to. That's why."

Tyson, closely watched by me, proved to be exhibiting some of the curious effects created by love. He sat, as usual, on a sugar box in the corner of the shop, but no longer related the details of Spa Road accident; omitted to give me the salutation. Instead, allowed his eyes to wander sheepishly about the floor, and on discovering a pin or a wisp of straw, he descended, carefully removed the obstruction, and went back, with the relieved sigh of one who has performed a good day's work. Also, he adopted a trick of humming quietly to himself which I found irritating in the

highest degree; it is likely that anything he had done would have provoked equal annoyance on my part. Because he refrained from mentioning that tea, taken in due moderation, could be looked upon as a refreshing beverage, my mother brought him at five o'clock a cup, into which he blowed furiously and lifting it said—

"Well, ma'am, here's another thousin' a year to all of us!"

And thereupon sipped noisily.

I knew that if I spoke to Len about it, he would only reprove me for stupidity, and as Tyson was always careful to leave on the stroke of seven, my brother knew nothing of the visits. Meanwhile, Tyson became to me a perfect nightmare. He might have been toothache, or a tipsy wife, or a foolish speculation, from the complete way he had of filling all one's thoughts. Tyson was in my mind as I went to sleep, the leg of a chair in the bedroom recalled him to me as I opened my eyes. The sound of his one footstep, alternating with the tap of his artificial limb, made the blood rush to my head, and I could not pretend to hold myself under control. I spoke to three lads of my acquaintance, and they agreed with me the case was serious, that something had to be done; promised to assist in any way I cared to indicate. On the night and at the hour when we were to seize him as he came out of the shop, and run him down to the canal, the three unfortunately had engagements of an urgent nature which prevented them from arriving.

This failure on the part of friends sent me into the deepest depths of gloom and recklessness. I determined that, the situation having become intolerable, I had the right, at any rate so far as I was concerned, to terminate it at all costs. On the following evening when I arrived, tired after delivering parcels, Tyson was there and, this time, if you please, smoking a pipe, an act which seemed the last possibility of insolence. I did one or two tasks suggested by my mother, then privately scooped out the contents of the money bowls and filled my pockets with small silver, and coppers that included a number of farthings, (I think I must have

had some idea that I was securing my birthright, or something of the kind). With a look at Tyson that should have been fatal to the superfluous man, I strode out.

"Where are you going?" asked Len's voice, between two dim gas-lamps.

"Len," I blurted out, "I—I'm going away. I can't stand it any longer. I've left without saying good-bye to mother, but I'm glad of the chance of saying good-bye to you. Wish me luck, please!"

He took me by the shoulder, and gave me a shaking that made every coin in the pockets rattle; then, holding my arm, forced me to return. At the doorway of the shop, he released me and gave a warning glance I dared not disobey.

"That your definite and what I may term final answer, Mrs Drew?" Tyson, coming out, was asking.

"Definite and final," replied my mother.

"All I can say is, you're a very silly woman."

"All I can say is, you're an uncommonly stupid man."

He begged pardon for his clumsiness in stumbling against us, and went off growling a threat to never re-enter the shop. Len ordered me to put the money back, and to come upstairs.

"Want you to mend my skates for me," he said. "You're a handy little chap to have about the place."

Len was very good to me through all this time, and he once allowed me to walk up to Bricklayers Arms goods station in Old Kent Road, enter on some pretext, and make mental note of several addresses on cases that bore the word Glass, the instructions This Side Up, and a drawing of a bottle; he gave me for these a penny each, and I, although wet through, counted the money easily earned. Also, he handed over, at various times, more wearing apparel, and I took a new interest in every tailoring purchase he made; it was not his fault that the articles which fitted him excellently proved too commodious in every direction for me. Fortunately it was a rainy summer, and trousers could be turned at the ankles without creating surprise.

One thing, quite clear and indisputable, helping us enormously, consisted in the fact that Len was the first gentleman of New Cross; of, at any rate, the streets on the London side of the main road. We found it amusing to observe the efforts of other young blades to compete, to note the discouragements encountered, and their last struggles to keep in line with him. It was a time when experiments were being made in the shape of bowler hats, and on Len appearing with some novelty in head-gear, half a dozen made a frantic rush to secure hats of similar appearance; in their haste they occasionally paid insufficient attention to the size, and strutted about either with one that came down to the ears, or perched riskily at the very top of their head. In neck-ties, nobody disputed his lead, and I shall never forget our great triumph when he obtained from a French clerk at his office one of those spacious butterfly ties, blue with white spots, and the competitors found themselves unable to purchase anything that, excepting at a long interval, resembled it. With regard to fancy waistcoats, reserve and caution were exhibited until Len had proclaimed his choice, and then the imitations came swiftly. I wanted him to go out one evening in a tarpaulin suit with a nor' wester hat—which I could have borrowed from a man working on the canal—just to see how many youths would display themselves on the next rainy evening, similarly attired, but Len took the question of clothes seriously.

"The low comedy part in the family, I can leave in your hands," he remarked.

"You'd do it better than I should, Len. You'd do every thing better."

"Almost everything," he corrected.

Occasionally a new arrival came to the district, a junior clerk in lodgings with an allowance from parents in the country to add to his monthly wage, and he, hearing of Len's reputation, set about to surpass my brother. What generally happened in a case of this kind was that mere extravagance took the place of discretion, or that the fine

feathers had the result of attracting him into an early engagement and marriage with some female bird; wedded life, in our neighbourhood, always meant that the husband thenceforth relied exclusively on the wardrobe accumulated in bachelor days, and as the years went on, so he receded from fashion. A good many of Len's contemporaries made spirited essays on small incomes, but they never succeeded in clothing themselves completely in one period; a garment or more belonged to the previous year, and by the time these were replaced by something new and in the note of the season, other details had fallen behind, hopelessly distant. For myself, I was of course never in the fore-front, but I had a special reason for looking after Len's clothes, seeing they were well brushed, hanging coats on supports, arranging that trousers should have the precise line at the right place, and pointing out to my mother any necessity for slight repair; I never knew how to thank him sufficiently when, at moments for revision, he said—

"You can have this if you like. I've done with it."

For then, so soon as he had gone out, I was able to put the garment on, and exhibit myself, obeying my mother's instructions to walk across the room, and trying to accept in the sense intended, her enthusiastic assurance that she had never seen such a fit in all her life.

The infatuation of certain young women for Len was natural enough. Invitations to parties came during the party months, addressed particularly and specially to him, and in replying to these, he would sometimes at my earnest request, mention that I was willing to take his place; now and again the inviter had the strength of mind to answer, in so many words, that my presence was unnecessary, but I did frequently discover myself acting as his understudy, only to be badgered throughout the evening by inquiries concerning Len, and by endeavours to ascertain whether truth was included in the excuse he had made. The girls wrote to him on coloured note-paper—heliotrope for choice—with a small flower at the corner of the envelope; the

whole so fiercely scented that when the postman made the delivery, odours of our shop retreated. My mother, seeing one or two young women waiting about on the opposite side of the way at about the hour when he usually returned home, would go to the doorway, and say loudly (to my great confusion)—

"Henry! Looks as though some one wants to see you."

Whereupon they took to their heels.

With every desire to recall satisfactory incidents, I cannot remember any special attention being paid to me by these ladies for my own sake. In pairs, they would give me their company on the way from Sunday evening service, talking rapidly, and there were times when I thought I had made a good impression, until glancing back after they left, I observed them doubled up with amusement, and, more than once, I heard the remark, "Isn't he a little fool!" Alone, it was easy to talk with considerable fluency, inventing remarks and giving appropriate repartees, but with me, good acting was noticeable only during rehearsals. With Len, it was the exact opposite. I heard him on the rare occasions, when he permitted himself to talk with members of the opposite sex, rapping out the correct, if unexpected answer; affecting to misunderstand their questions, and making great play of this; always leaving them with some adroit remark. A great gift; it used to strike me that nature, in making distribution, showed extraordinary partiality, but I felt honestly glad that Len had been specially selected. And I hope I am placing sufficient emphasis on all the joy that came to us out of our pride in him during these days.

Childhoods differ, I suppose, but one cannot help thinking that the rapture exhibited by some in speaking of their early days is due, in some part, to failure of memory. For myself, I cannot select any months of my later life that I would care to exchange for those spent immediately after leaving school. When nearly everything in the shape of disaster had been piled upon me, toothache jumped to a seat on top, and I

used to rise early of a morning, and quietly, for fear of disturbing Len; take a sharp walk down over the canal bridge, under the railway viaduct, past the soap works to St Helena Gardens and back, in order to distract thoughts from the acute pain; my mother took every lady customer's advice, and tried their certain and unfailing remedies upon me, making the nerve more sensitive at each experiment. Before making up my mind to dress and go out, I lay there wide awake, envying Len the possession of a peaceful mind, and seeing my own future with increasing plainness. Fate, it was bvious, marked some as favourites, and I had not been selected; this meant that I should go down and down. A disreputable old man known as The Cadger came round the streets of the neighbourhood, always stopping to turn over heaps lying near the pavement and swearing horribly to himself at conclusion of the search; folk said he was worth untold gold, and this circumstance made the only difference between my future and his present years. The Cadger lived near the railway arches at Debtford, and I followed him home one night, and with a small gift endeavoured to obtain some particulars of his early life, in order to confirm some of my dismal suspicions, but, between his imprecations, one could only gather that if he now encountered any of his relatives, he would murder them individually or collectively, which task accomplished, he would strangle me for daring to interfere with the quietude of a peaceable man who, if only he found enough tobacco and sufficient beer, asked no more of the world. I ventured to ask whether he had ever had enough beer, and the Cadger answered this happened only once, in December of '82; he added that, unless I decided to cut off home at once and stop badgering, he might reconsider the order of killing, and set about me.

My mother, accepting the next morning a letter from the postman, insisted upon arguing the matter of re-direction with him, and when he protested, declared he ought, by rights, to know by whom it had been sent on from the old Blackheath address.

"If you don't," she remarked, triumphantly, "who should?"

Rejecting my advice, she decided not to open the envelope but to allow it to remain untouched until Len returned from office at night; a promise was, however, given that I should have the foreign stamp, providing Len did not require it. Meanwhile, we both speculated regarding the contents, and it was over the tea-table that my mother announced suddenly that it must be from one Henry, favourite cousin of my father's and a relative whose Christian name had, it appeared, suggested mine. After that it became difficult for both of us to exercise patience, and at half-past six—the counsel of two lady customers having been sought and obtained—my mother took the resolute course suggested by me some hours previously.

"This can never be!" she cried, when she had come to the end.

I was reading it aloud, my mother checking the sentences, and the two customers leaning interestedly and open-mouthed across the counter, when Len came in with his usual quick alert manner and snatching up the envelope demanded sharply who had been opening a letter addressed to him; the two ladies went hurriedly remarking that they would look in again, later.

"It's meant for your poor father, Len dear."

"Give me the letter."

He announced, after reading, that he would see to it; charged us to speak no word of the contents to anyone in the neighbourhood. The great thing to avoid, in a matter of the kind, was bungling, and Len did not conceal his suspicion that our capabilities in this regard had no definite limit. The relative would, it appeared, not arrive home from China for a month and there existed no occasion for hurry; we were to leave the matter to him, and he guaranteed that it would be dealt with in a wise, diplomatic way. These elderly men who had been away from England for a number of years and were out of touch with civilization, had to be

handled carefully; Len's view was that we should on no account, at first, exhibit our poverty, but that we should meet him on terms of equality; later, he was to be allowed to find the truth, and his purse would then be affected by the discovery. Mother, with great respect, urged the advantages of truth, but I sided with Len. Few things, in my opinion, were so likely to impress the old fellow from China as an attitude of proud reserve; an indication of not asking for assistance.

Nothing, however, could prevent us from speculating on the future, a game in which ladies of the neighbourhood joined with something exceeding ordinary enthusiasm, something that came perilously near to extravagance; it would not be easy to quote the sum which the fortune eventually reached in the buoyant estimate of Woodpecker Road, and I am sure many found a kind of reflected success in the incident, for they spent a great deal more money than usual at the shop; the stock of several articles had to be increased, and travellers who called took a cheerful air, speaking of a precedent to be found in Westbourne Grove, where one small shop had grown into twenty and the name of the proprietor had become known throughout the world. My mother gently reproved everyone for optimistic views, but I have no doubt that those she herself held were equally sanguine. Len gave an order, after being carefully measured, at a tailor's in Cornhill, which meant that I had a fair prospect of impressing Milly Fowler and her people by a smarter appearance; I hoped my contemporaries would not be too severe in their comments on my first walk out in a tail coat. Len's clothes, as I have said, nearly fitted me, but there did exist a margin which betrayed the fact that they had not come direct from the tailor into my possession. Len told me at night that if the relative wanted to take him back to China, a swift answer would be given to the proposition. Len was willing to accept help, for help would, at the moment, be useful, but London had the first claim upon his services, and London was the place where he intended to make a name.

As for myself, I felt that for me the curtain was now going up. What would happen, it was not within my powers of imagination to decide, but I could foresee that instead of the slow, laborious years hitherto expected, an instant change was to be made by means of the fairy wand that was on its way from China. I was able to show on my old school atlas the point which the steamer had now reached, and from comments made, it appeared certain that, for the first time, my mother threw away incredulity in regard to the existence of distant countries, although she could not understand why the ground in some was red, in some yellow, in others brown. We both took up, in the shop, an attitude of less servility, and if customers, on finding we did not possess an article they wanted, and that we gave no assurance we should have it in the following week, threatened to go to Deptford, we gave a short cough intended to convey complete indifference. A few warned us not to think ourselves everybody, but this caution had no effect.

"Henry," said my mother, with solemnity, "we can afford to laugh now."

I wanted to accompany Len, but he decided I should be in the way, and he alone took charge of the task of meeting the steamer at the docks, and entertaining the relative.

Throughout the day we could make no successful attempt to hide restlessness; my mother fixed her new lace cap with a touch of violet in it—

"Half mourning," she explained.

Soon after the midday meal. It was just five o'clock when I was able, being on the look-out, to announce that Len had turned the corner, and (better still) that he was not alone; this was a surprise, for the idea had been that there should be a meeting in London later on, after Len had paved the way.

"I should have known you," cried the old gentleman, "known you if I'd met you in the street."

"You've not altered," asserted my mother, "much."

"Oh yes, I am. I've been looking at myself in the mirror a good deal on the way home, and I can see a lot of difference to what I was years ago on the journey out."

We took him to the back room; Len, to my astonishment, folded arms and stood silently in the corner.

"This is the one, then, named after me, is it?" He put on spectacles, regarded me, and gave an "Ah!" that might have meant anything. "He's rather like my fourth."

"Your fourth what?" asked my mother.

"My fourth boy. Perhaps you didn't know I was married. This other one of yours, he talked so much, I didn't get a chance of speaking until just now as we were coming along from the station. I insisted on coming down to see you, because I've got to be off to Germany the day after to-morrow. Oh yes, bless you, we've got ten or eleven children; upon my word, I couldn't tell you the exact number without putting their names down on a piece of paper. And as I've been telling the other one, it costs me about every penny I earn to bring 'em up. Well, how are you, after all this time? Sorry to hear about your loss. To tell you the truth, I hoped to borrow a bit from him."

He gave me, before leaving, one and sixpence, and told me to make it last a year.

On a Monday, when we had only taken eightpence halfpenny at the shop—a few other callers applied for change and children had come asking for the date, and a lady tried to make me buy a church magazine—I walked determinedly and biting my underlip to meet Len at the station. Allowed him, of course, to say good-bye to his friends before speaking; they, after pressing him to accept cigars and cigarettes, went up Amersham Road, parting from him with a regret that one could easily understand.

"What you doing here, youngster?" he asked, taking my arm.

"Len," almost crying, "I want you to help me. Will you help me? Will you give me your word?"

"Little man," he said, as he walked by the shops, "you're exaggerating your small troubles. Take an example by me, and never worry about things that don't matter."

"I'm willing to take an example by you, Len, but I'm not getting a chance. If only I could get a start, I should be all right."

"It isn't only the first step that counts."

"Can't do anything until I get the first step."

"I'm having to dash round now," he went on, "and I can tell you that if you think you have all the troubles in the world, you're mistaken. You just stay on and help with the shop, and something is certain to turn up. Particularly want you to stick to mother."

"I promise to do that."

"Because," tapping the ash from his cigar, and speaking carefully, "I find it rather tiresome to run the continual risk of my friends discovering where I live. I've told them, when they asked me, nearly every place but Woodpecker Road, and it's so difficult to remember in case they ask twice. So, later on, I shall want you to help me to get away, and set up in diggings of my own."

"I'll do that," feeling, all the same, rather choked in the throat at this prospect, "if you give me a hand now."

"Let me see!" After a few moments of thought. "How would you care to come into our show as office boy?"

Nearly dancing on the pavement near the Wesleyan Chapel, I assured Len it was exactly what I should prefer of all things. How long had there been a vacancy? My spirits went down when he told me there was no vacancy at present; they went up again when he said it could be easily arranged.

"I'll take you up with me in the morning," he promised,

"if you can smarten yourself, and look a bit more like Great Tower Street, and a good deal less like Woodpecker Road. Where are you going?"

"Why," I said, "up to the Fowlers, of course, to tell them all about your kindness."

"You might mention it to your friend Kitty Latham, too, if you get the chance. Say something pleasant about me."

This would have been done that very evening, but when I explained to Mrs Fowler the reason why they had seen nothing of me for some time past, and Ernest had given me his latest views on Home Rule for Ireland, and I announced there was another call to make, Milly took me aside and said would I mind staying on to talk to mother whilst she herself went to Pyne's; my good temper enabled me to say that I could easily write to Hatcham and come along with her to Lewisham High Road, which amendment she accepted, dictating the letter and providing the stamp for the envelope.

It would not be easy to say how many times we walked between the draper's shop and St Donatt's Road; the repetitions were to be blamed to me, for each time I discovered something more to say and begged her to turn just once again. When I did at last give her back at her house, we had to submit to the reproaches of the family. Ernest, who might surely have held his tongue, declared that one of the most painful sights of the neighbourhood was the spectacle of young couples, scarcely more than children, promenading the main streets. My heart was light enough to permit me to smile at the comments; their blame made Milly and myself stand shoulder to shoulder. That evening, for the first time, I, in shaking hands with her, discovered she gave a gentle grip that was rather pleasing.

My mother had the new experience the following morning of saying good-bye to her two sons simultaneously; she called me back to kiss and wish me luck, and give a last touch to my hair with the comb. Len, who had a third-class

quarterly season-ticket, was about to take a third return for me at the booking-office, but I, seeing in this something that might tempt Providence, begged him to ask for a single; I could easily walk back.

"You do want exercise," he admitted, as we went down the staircase to the platform. "You're just the age when you ought to be hardening your muscles. I need comfort. Soon as I can afford it, I mean to go in for a second-class season."

"Look here, Len," I said, impulsively, "you get this berth for me, and I'll hand over what my ticket would cost, and walk to and fro instead of riding, and then you'll be able to do as you want."

"I was going to suggest that."

"Very glad I was the first to mention it."

With all the admiration felt for my brother, I think one never properly realised his wonderful qualities until that journey by the 8.33. A slight fog met us on the platform, and a statement came that it was thicker up the line. Len made his way through the crowd to the bookstall, bought a morning journal for himself and a picture paper for me. The train came in carefully.

"Stick close to me."

"Right you are, Len."

We raced up to the end of the platform and there found a third-class compartment empty but for two youths playing Nap on a spread-out *Daily Telegraph*; half a dozen followed us, and Len sitting next the door managed to hold it on the inside, preventing others from entering, and condoling with them on their inability to force it open. The train started, leaving a good many on the platform. I felt especially glad to find my friend Ernest Fowler opposite; he was scanning the leading article in his journal before applying himself to the news. The train stopped so soon as it neared the first signal box, and someone made a caustic remark concerning Sir Edward Watkin; conversation became almost general.

The thing which struck me about the behaviour of Len was that he allowed the rest to express their views, and only came into the discussion when urgently invited. I wanted to contradict when the task seemed easy, but he restrained me, and I imitated him in listening with an air of deference. Since then I have heard weaker arguments used in second-class carriages, and, in first-class, contentions still more feeble, but at the time the debaters seemed to me to be talking below my head; I wondered how an intelligent man like my brother could sit there without protesting. Ernest Fowler's manner, I knew, and when, leaning forward, he advised me to buy a different journal on each morning of the week—

"So as to get an all round view of affairs," he whispered, confidentially.

Then I understood and could pardon him. Ernest prefaced his remarks with "Thinking it out, it seems to me that——" and gave a quotation so far as memory permitted from the journal he held in his hand; others in the compartment (including the Nap players, whose game stopped because one had lost the maximum of threepence) gave views obviously their own individual property. Struggles were going on amongst dock labourers; a railway strike existed in Scotland; London postmen gave signs of mutiny; a battalion of The Guards had to be sent to the Bermudas. These incidents afforded a good, wide field for contention, and some excellent verbal manœuvring should, in my opinion, have taken place.

"Tell them what you think, Len," I whispered.

"Presently!"

We stopped at signals and between signals, with a loud report exploding occasionally beneath our wheels, causing me to jump and giving the rest excuse for laughing at my alarm. Not until we passed Spa Road, and it seemed likely we should get a clear run into London Bridge Station, did Len speak, and the rest having by this time exhausted their small stock of opinions, he was able to talk without interruption,

excepting from the person addressed, who tried to interject with—

"Ah, but——"

And

"Pardon me, but what I said was——"

The others insisting upon silence and demanding attention for Len. "You've had your say; now let him have his!" My brother simply bowled them over as though he were playing at nine-pins. The floor of the carriage became strewn with shattered arguments. I remember he was particularly caustic in dealing with one of the Nap players, who had pleaded that men who could only fetch and carry should, because of their disabilities, be treated with consideration; he finished by giving his own views concerning machinery, taking the whole question of the displacement of labour out of the mist of words in which it had become involved. It was really wonderful. I watched his eyes as he talked; made a note of one of his emphatic gestures; envied the gift of easy flow of words that could never be mine. Also, I observed with exultation the restless movements of the man with whom he happened to be dealing, the feeble attempts at indifference, the unsuccessful endeavours to smile, the involuntary frown which came when a sharp thrust was experienced; apprehension was exhibited by the next person on the list, and bitter complaints made of the slowness of the journey. As the train went carefully into London Bridge Station they gave a concerted sigh of relief.

"Not every morning!" Len replied, as we went through the fog in the Approach. "Did it this time to show off in front of you. Keep your handkerchief over your mouth, little man."

Left alone I should have found myself when the sun managed to pierce through, at Dockhead or East Smithfield, or somewhere more distant; only by preserving a tight hold of his coat did I manage to keep fear away. The river was full of fog up to the edge of the parapet,

and in the roadway drivers walked with lanterns at their horses' heads, but Len pushed his way along, knew the right turning when we had finished with the bridge, snatched me out of the way of a lumbering fish trolley, and brought me up safely at the door of Penshurst & Hill's at a moment when I began to feel certain we had gone miles beyond the place.

"Go along and wait near that chronometer shop until I send for you."

"Will it take long, Len?"

"I never take long over anything."

Len asked the office lad what the mat was doing outside the door; the office lad answered he supposed it was looking for a friend, and Len retorted (very properly, as I thought), that if there was any more impudence, the lad would change places with the mat.

Odd to notice how quickly the fog went, once determined to go. A slight moving in the air lifted it from the pavement, rolled it away in the direction of Tower Hill, where it apparently hoped to make a last determined stand, leaving the streets free, so that traffic again began to move industriously. Arriving clerks with black rims around eyes talked with enthusiasm of the delays experienced; City policemen slapped shoulders, saying to each other, "Well, that was a thick 'un, if you like!" gas was turned off in shop windows. As I waited impatiently for the summons, it seemed encouraging to find that a morning which, opening inauspiciously, thus suddenly changed its manner, and I did not mind the bustling people who resented my stationary attitude. The family whistle reached my ears, the one we always gave in Woodpecker Road.

"Is it settled?"

"I've done my part," he said. "The rest depends upon you. Take care not to pretend to be clever."

Len knocked at the door of a room in the offices marked "Private" and took me in. The room had but one window, and this had not received attention for some time; a shaded

Argand lamp sent all its light on a circle of the table; an intensified scent of the wine atmosphere that permeated the whole of the offices and a good half of the pavement outside was here. A gentleman, breathing heavily, sat in a semi-circular chair for which he had apparently been measured, and looking at his watery eyes, I had a sudden fear that the main features of the interview with Mr Latham were about to repeat themselves.

"This plays," he panted, "the deuce with me!"

"Never knew anyone suffer as you do, sir," remarked my brother, briskly. The gasping gentleman seemed gratified. "But asthma never kills. Medical men tell me it's often accompanied by perfect health in every other way. Strangely enough, it frequently attacks men of great mental ability."

"That's really so? Read you those verses of mine, didn't I? Those I knocked off the other day in the Underground Railway about hope?" My brother gave a nod which intimated that the privilege was not likely to escape memory; I wondered whether they had both forgotten my presence. "Rather a neat idea that of hope being swift and flying with the wings of a swallow, eh?"

"Poor Tennyson would have given something to have hit upon it. Much overrated, as a writer, don't you think, sir?"

"I daren't say that," remarked the wine merchant, examining the almanac printed on a paper-knife. "Whatever I may think, Drew, I dare not say it, because people would set it down at once to professional jealousy. What's that boy doing in the corner over there? Thought we'd just given him the sack."

"This is a lad named Henry, sir."

"Henry what?"

"Surname Henry," answered Len, readily. "Says he wants a berth as office lad. I've been talking to him, and he seems a likely chap."

"Know anything about him, Drew, apart from that?"

"He writes a good hand, sir, and he tells me he's living with his mother at—Where was it?"

"New Cross," I said, stepping forward. "In regard to what has been said about Tennyson, I don't altogether agree."

"Quiet, please!" ordered Len, in a voice new to me. "Listen to Mr Penshurst!"

Mr Penshurst shifted some of the articles on the table, a stick of sealing-wax, a tray of penholders, a paper-weight, and, his asthma returning, said I should have to be a good lad, respectful to my superiors. Willing, obliging, civil.

"And loyal," added Len.

"That's the word, loyal. Tell him what to do, Drew."

"Very good, sir. Shall we make it eight or ten?"

"Which you please."

"We'll say ten," remarked my brother, turning to me and again speaking sharply. "Bear in mind the good advice Mr Penshurst has given. Don't talk to the other clerks until I have seen you. Go outside and wait!"

Len, to my great delight, did a gracious thing, that sent me up, on this eventful day, to the highest heaven.

"You'll come and eat with me," he said. "Be in Mincing Lane at one o'clock."

It was not easy to pretend calm, or affect composure in the busy streets, and more than once whilst waiting on the edge of the pavement I found myself spun around by the impact of some person in a hurry; the apologies I offered were ignored, and it soon became clear that it was useless to beg for pardon in the City; what one had to do was to guard oneself and dodge alertly. If you were near a side turning a perfect whirlwind of folk might come across at any moment; at no point were you secure from men who rushed out of doorways with sample paper-bags in their hands as though determined to beat the progress of the clock; the only satisfaction gained in the dizziness that came from these

surroundings was the hope that some day I, too, might wear a silk hat at the back of the head and race about in similar manner. Len, coming across the roadway, was caught by a young bare-headed man, going in an opposite direction; the two engaged at once in animated conversation, and I watched them interestedly until a nod ordered me to move away.

"Follow!" said Len, passing me presently.

He turned into a narrow alley off Fenchurch Street and, stopped at the entrance to a house with no sign, no name, no indication of the trade carried on there. On the dim windows could be seen, in silhouette, the shadows of a row of men wearing hats.

"If you ever catch sight of me again engaged in talk with some one in a public place," he said, quietly and distinctly, as I came up to him, "remember that it is not necessary for you to proclaim your interest quite so plainly. An open mouth, is not, in itself, evidence of an intelligent brain." I accepted the rebuke.

He glanced in at the pews on the ground floor where men, evidently belonging to the higher aristocracy of the City, were lunching. The place appeared to be full, and he turned and went up the narrow staircase to the next floor where two patrons were, most fortunately, at the moment giving up seats, and preparing to give a penny to the white capped cook, a penny to the lad who had attended to them, a penny to the head waiter. Len issued his orders; we had scarcely the time to hang up our hats before a wonderful steak was in front of each of us, with a dish of cabbage pressed down into a slab shape, and potatoes in their jackets.

I cannot remember, before or since, any meal so good, or any taken in less comfortable circumstances. We were on a narrow form against the wall, the white cloth'd table in a position that left scarcely an inch to spare; the table, it may be added, was so narrow that one's bread easily became confused with the bread of the *vis-à-vis*. The rule of my

youth, that it was wrong to speak wit
appeared to be here suspended ; I co
understand the talk that was going on, fo
the edge of understanding something ab
wheat, than I was taken off to shipping,
jump to sugar, thence to coals.

"A bottle of cider," commanded Len.

"A bottle of cider, sir; yes, sir," s
"James, a bottle of cider for these two g

It tasted to me more like wine than
sipped, and I readily agreed to Len's
glass should be only half filled.

"Do you come here every day, Len?"

"Can't afford it," he replied, "or el
great believer in good feeding. A m
to keep body and soul together."

No one realised the truth of this more th

"I'm just giving you this as a start off,"
because I want you to see how well a ma
in the City if he only has the good luck t
position. People will talk to you about
that is an old-fashioned theory, and they
from force of habit. Good luck is the grea
luck comes, sooner or later, to everybody
the important matter is to keep a sharp loo
make sure it doesn't escape you."

"Like wicket keeping."

"Exactly!" (You cannot guess how plea
receive Len's approval.) "Let the ball go p
one else may secure it and get all the credi
have to do is to stand up close to the stu
ready for everything. I've done fairly well
what I have done is nothing compared with
going to do. You see that rather bald cha
out?"

The man was having some dispute with the
waiter in regard to the quality of a coin.

est scamps this side of Ludgate Circus,"

t to allow him to come into a decent
"

rtled me so much that I found myself

come in here or anywhere," contended
I say he's a scamp, all I mean is that
anybody if he can, and that in regard
there's a man who enjoys every moment
you. Always plenty of money, and
like a prince. Can you guess what he
?"
to be one exceeding my most adventur-

life with that of Rounceby in our firm.
n who looks after a Bible Class on Sunday,
orm of amusement whatever. If he takes
t of the drawer for his private use, he puts
nstead of just inserting some name and
book. The other day, he jumped into a
mpartment at Ilford by mistake, and at
t insisted on paying excess to the ticket
iceby wears one collar three days. You can
. that Rounceby has had chances that come
all of us, and has declined to take full
hem. Waiter, bring some of that cheddar
ery."
o me again.
ch would you rather be of the two?" he

ere other alternatives, Len?"
d the question, and I felt myself compelled
wer that I knew he wanted me to give.
ht!" he said, approvingly. "If I thought you
o join the Rouncebys, I shouldn't take any

further interest in you. I should drop you, just as I drop this piece of bread now. Try to recollect what I've told you, and run off back now to Great Tower Street like a good chap."

When Len returned a quarter of an hour later he asked me rather sharply, in the presence of the others, whether I had been out to lunch.

I assured him later that I perfectly understood his motives in regard to the selection of a name; it was clear the other clerks might speak of influence and favouritism if our relationship became known. All the same, it did seem peculiar in the early days to be ordered about by Len, to be reprimanded by him, for him to stand by whilst the rest were chaffing. The work was not hard, and one of my principal duties, apart from running to the Customs House, and taking messages to the firm of carriers who had a contract with us, was to submit to the rather clumsy efforts of the clerks to perfect themselves in the art of what they called chipping. It pleased them to assume I had come to Great Tower Street from the Foundling Hospital, and when they discovered in the agony columns of the daily papers, inquiries concerning the whereabouts of some missing person, the elaborate joke built upon this lasted for a day. They borrowed paper from neighbouring offices, and sent notes to me saying that if Mr Henry would call on the above firm at 1.30 p.m. on Thursday he would hear of something to his advantage; I was just sharp enough, thank goodness, to parry all these attempts, but the hard thing was to keep back the retorts that were ready. Good repayment came at the end of the first week when I walked home with my wages in a handkerchief carefully concealed inside my left boot. I reached Woodpecker Road limping, but my mother's gasp of astonishment when she saw the lordly column of silver beside her supper plate, enabled me to forget this.

"Had my worries, in the past," she confided to me, "daresay I shall have worries in the future, but with a dear

boy like Len, and another coming on like you, Henry, why I can see that there's good cause to be thankful. Help yourself to butter and radishes, just as your brother does."

A great evening that, an evening of emancipation. I warned myself never to forget that it was to Len I owed my first start.