CHAPTER IV

LEN AND A QUARREL

PROGRESS on the part of a South Londoner is always exhibited by a move in a more southerly direction; the last idea to occur to him would be to take the desperate course of going over the bridges and taking up residence in the Western or Northern districts.

"Hampstead?" says the South Londoner, with a shiver. "Oh, I shouldn't like to live right up there."

Improved means of communication may have enlarged his views of London, but at the time of which I am writing, ambition took his thoughts into Surrey or towards Kent, and certainly, in our case, Blackheath was the goal. There were evenings when Len was compelled to stay indoors because he had a cold, and on these occasions we talked of Blackheath—which is to say that he talked and we listened—my mother and I, begrudging calls from the shop, serving customers who interrupted, and were prepared for leisurely exchange of views on public and private grounds with an alacrity that astonished and annoyed. We ourselves were forced to exhibit amazement on one evening of the kind when Len hinted that the Blackheath house might prove rather limited in space and accommodation, and began to talk of Chislehurst.

"But you don't mean to say—" began my mother, recovering powers of speech.

"The tendency is to go further out," explained Len. "There's a man at office only earning two-eighty a year, who has just gone to live at Blackheath. The district is evidently going down."

"A very good class of people," declared my mother,

"lived there in my day. Just round where our house was you wouldn't find many with less than a couple of thousand a year. Besides," she pleaded, "there's the idea."

"There are ideas," he said, "and ideas. Some are better than others."

"That is so," I agreed.

"I've an impression it would be wise to buy land and put up a house according to one's own plans. I go about a good deal, and I rather fancy the perfect house has not yet been built. For instance, I shouldn't let the architect have it all his own way."

My mother recalled an instance which occurred at a country village in her youth. A retired coal-merchant resolved to build a house out of his own head, and only when his attention was called to the fact by friends invited to look over the rooms, did he discover the omission of a staircase. Declining to admit himself in the wrong, he went to bed for the rest of his life with the assistance of a ladder.

"I must inquire about the shooting," Len went on. "Rather pleasant to be able to ask a few men down and to bring their guns. That won't be much in your line, I'm afraid," turning to me.

I suggested dexterity might come with practice.

"Cricket will be your department, I think. Between us we ought to be able to pick out some promising youngsters, and give poor old Kent a better chance of gaining the championship. Plenty of talent about. It only wants encouragement."

He accepted my earnest assurance that I would do everything possible to help the scheme.

"Of course," he pointed out, "all this won't happen for some time yet." My mother instanced the case of Rome. "What encourages me, if I may say so without conceit, is the level of stupidity I find around me in Great Tower Street. There are men, occupying good positions, who

really ought to be selling matches in the street, or playing with pebbles down at Brighton. How they get there is what puzzles me."

I suggested influence.

"Well," he laughed, "if that has anything to do with success, I shall use it for all it's worth. But ingenuity is what one ought to rely upon. In the long run, ingenuity must tell. And there's something else. Something else equally important. That is, not to waste time in helping other people. I've been told of cases where a man has been pulled back, and delayed all his life by a host of folk—relatives and so forth—just because he regarded them as having some claim upon him. I'm perfectly confident that isn't the way to play the game, and I'm jolly well certain it's not the way I'm going to play it."

My mother brought forward his tumbler of steaming black currant mixture, and warned him to be careful of his throat, but nothing ever stopped Len when he wanted to talk, just as few things could arouse him when he wished to be silent. He ordered me to bring a map of Kent which Ernest Fowler and I had bought for information concerning walks.

"You see how it all goes on this side of the river," he explained to me with his forefinger on the map. "Here we begin first with Rotherhithe and Bermondsey. Then comes, with a few intervening market gardens, our own delightful, idyllic New Cross, reeking with corduroy and the scent of soap factories. That's where we are now, and that's where I do believe you, yourself, are quite content to remain. We go over New Cross Road——"

"Takes a bit of doing."

"We go over New Cross Road, and then begins at once something more like decency and space to breathe. No more of those curiously frank backs of houses with sooty slips of gardens, and unspeakable people, but dwellings, don't you know, of a fair size and appearance. The Hilly Fields and Hither Green, and there you are bang in the country.

Remind me to find out, when I, get better, what a first-class season-ticket to Chislehurst costs.

"How long do you think it will be, Len," I asked, eagerly, "before it happens?"

He borrowed a pencil from me, made some calculations on the margin of his evening paper. Audited the figures carefully, and made more calculations. Then he tossed it across the table, and found his book. "Leave me alone now," he said, "I want to read."

We examined the notes he had made by the oil-lamp in the shop, and my mother clicked her tongue to indicate surprise.

"Mind you," I whispered, "he'll do it. Len is just the sort of chap who makes up his mind to do a thing, and allows nothing to stand in his way. If I had any money, I'd put it all on Len."

"It's wicked to bet," she remarked, "but I quite agree with you. Let's have a look at your boots. How do you wear them down at the heels, to be sure!"

The walking to and fro was an excellent idea (on some days in the winter I dodged it and took tram-car from the Gate to St George's Church). Early mornings and late evenings were still given to the shop: mother argued the success of such an establishment depended on the fact that people could say, at any time before eleven at night, "Better run to Drew's; Drew's is sure to be open!" Saturday afternoons too were reserved for Woodpecker Road, and Mrs Croucher, hard by, hitherto a bitter critic where I was concerned, began to compare me with her own son whose head, it seemed, was crowded with footb ll to the exclusion of all else. There is no need to take any creadit for the working at home; adequate payment came in the new terms existing between my mother and myself. Admitted now to an acquaintance with home finances, and allowed to inspect accounts, I could see there had been a fierce struggle in the years following the tumble-down at Blackheath; my mother told me that more than once she had been tempted to give up the effort

of keeping her head above water, and to finish it all in the canal. (You will observe it never is the fighting class, to which she by birth belonged, that ends trouble in this way; the emergency exit appears to be used by those who, accustomed to a well-made feather-bed all their lives, suddenly find in it a crumpled rose-leaf). I do believe my mother in looking back, considered the time of opulence as something in the nature of a disturbing, and a regrettable incident, and she always said that expensive cigars ruined father's constitution. We made an agreement, on her recommendation, that I was to smoke on my seventeenth birthday, not before, and that she would buy my first pipe.

An admirable disaster occurred in Great Tower Street, nothing less than the sudden disappearance of two serious and mature clerks—one the sober Rounceby—with a hundred and fifty pounds. They had been doing their work as cashiers with clock-work regularity for years; never late arriving in the morning, never early going at night; both married and with children. Sometimes in the lunch hour, which they spent frugally in resting on London Bridge watching the loading and unloading of big boats, I heard them confide to each other accounts of discussions which appeared to be one-sided and consisting of monologues for one female character, but it never occurred to me that these slightly grey, whiskered, and rather stout gentlemen would do anything sporting or adventurous. Len was greatly amused at the smallness of the sum they had taken; the fact that they were insured in a Guarantee Society enabled Mr Penshurst to look at the event from the same point of view. My brother found increased cause for satisfaction on being promoted to the desk hitherto occupied by the two emigrants where he had full access to all the books, and was able to pass on to some one else the task of running about during the day. I received an increase of four shillings a week and became a junior clerk; the new lad who took my place called me Mr Henry, and had to make toast for me at the gas-stove at four o'clock.

My mother would not, to mark the occasion, go to a theatre, although I made the offer of the Haymarket with "A Man's Shadow," and I compromised by treating her to the most conspicuous local entertainment. Mother's objection to a play was based on the grounds that folk seeing her in widow's weeds would remark she had easily forgotten her husband; she also contended it was impossible to go to any London place of amusement without meeting somebody from Blackheath. So Mrs Croucher took charge of the shop, and I escorted my mother up the hill, over New Cross Road (which always seemed to make a strict division between affuence and moderate income) along Lewisham High Road, where Milly Fowler and Ernest waited for us.

"The first time, my dear," said mother to the girl, "the very first time, I do assure you, that I've been to anything of the kind since my poor husband was taken. And now I shouldn't be here if Henry hadn't worried the soul out of me."

"Quite right of him," remarked Milly. She took the box of chocolates I had bought, and handed them to my mother, as we walked down the covered passage.

"Mind you, my dear, I'm not prejudiced. When I was a young woman—older than what you are at present, but still young—I was a perfect terror at getting about here, there, and everywhere. Flighty was the only word for it. I remember once going to see 'The Green Bushes' at the Adelphi, and I let the young gentleman I was with put down four shillings, four solid silver shillings, and take two checks, and we were inside and sitting down before either of us remembered that we'd come with two advertising orders. He pretended not to mind, but I tell you, it spoilt my evening. Here's where you pay, Henry!"

I was an amateur in taking care of ladies, and Ernest could not give much assistance, but we did the best we could, although Milly whispered to me once or twice a direction not to fuss. Some comedians who called themselves

The Phour Phunny Phellows, but whose entertainment scarcely came up to the standard suggested by the title, opened the evening, and if the performance had struck the highest possible note of humour, my mother could not have been more completely diverted. It was good to see her shaking with laughter; when she caught my eyes, she whispered to Milly Fowler that she supposed Henry had never seen her like this before; Len, if he had been here, would be able to tell them that he could remember the time when she was always merry and bright.

"But then," she explained, "he was such a jolly baby. Henry here, why you had to tickle him and pinch his nose and put your finger down his neck to get a smile out of him."

"Where's Len this evening?"

"I never ask, my dear," replied my mother, confidentially. "That's the greatest mistake a parent can make. Henry, of course, I don't let go out of sight if I can help it, but Len is older. Besides," she added, "if I asked him he wouldn't tell me the truth. I don't grumble though. I'm very thankful," impossible for me to avoid hearing this, "very thankful to know they're both living at home, and both getting on so well together. That's where the trouble would come, if they set to, wrangling. Now, what's coming next?"

The audience seemed to enjoy the exhibition of hypnotism, and I daresay I should have shared only that Ernest had so many theories to confide to me. First, the white-faced young men on the platform were all, in his opinion, paid to act the fool and pretend; later, the professor was a man accustomed to humbug people, but he could not succeed with Ernest; later still, the whole affair was undeniably genuine from start to finish, and there was more in this than some people imagined. A strong mind, contended Ernest when my attention wandered in the direction of his sister, a strong mind always influenced every other mind not so strong. Take the case of myself, for instance. I might not recognise it, perhaps, but those who knew us saw that Len at any moment could

exercise power over me and compel me to do almost anything. I argued that not Len, nor anyone else could force me to do anything against my will; Ernest retorted mysteriously he was not so sure of this. Meanwhile, on the platform continued the extraordinary sport of the Professor putting the subjects into a trance, giving them a glass of water, and telling them that it was port wine, or paraffin, or quinine, whereupon the taster immediately gave the contortion of features appropriate to the liquid named. Still in the hypnotised state, they were told that they were Kate Vaughan at the Gaiety and began to dance ludicrously; informed they were Sims Reeves, they sang "Come into the garden, Maud." At the end, all stood about in absurd attitudes at the command of the Professor, and as he eventually restored them to shame-faced consciousness by blowing sharply into their faces, the violin and piano played triumphant chords.

"I'm telling you the truth, my dear," declared mother to Ernest's sister. "Haven't enjoyed myself so much since my poor husband went bankrupt."

Ernest continued the argument on the way home, coming down so far as the shop in his anxiety to persuade me, pointing out that the mere fact that all these months I had walked to the City and back was a proof of my subjection to the will of Len, but I was able to answer that this arrangement had been mutual. Ernest declared I blacked Len's boots every morning; the reply was that the boots had to be blacked, and no one would expect Len to do this work himself. Ernest suggested the time had come when I should be known at office as Henry Drew; I retorted with an apt Shakesperian quotation. Altogether I answered him uncommonly well, and at any rate, when he and his sister left us, he asserted that I seemed to be getting more obstinate every day.

That evening at the Public Hall was the first essay made in escorting ladies to a place of amusement but not the last. One of our customers happened to be acting manager at the

West End theatre, and apart from the fact that Milly and I had sometimes to see the same piece twice or thrice, that we were generally placed at the side of the upper boxes, the arrival of orders by the morning post was a pure delight. An element of chance existed, for there were several clerks to whom they had to be offered ere they came down to me, and the decision occupied time so that occasionally it happened the tickets were not handed over until just before the hour for leaving; I never allowed them to go below. Then came a mad rush across the bridge to catch an earlier train than usual (the importance of the event justifying any expense); a bounding up the staircase at New Cross; breathless arrival at St Donatt's Road and the issuing of commands to Milly to obtain necessary permission from the authorities and meet me at the station at 7.25; home to Woodpecker Road, and an appeal to mother for special leave of absence, and the loan of one and six; lightning change with clean collar, clean cuffs, and furious brushing of hair; up the hill again, and, in the train, Milly and I always said triumphantly and exhaustedly—

"Another two minutes, and we should have missed it!"

These were exceptional incidents and for the rest, I still kept up the practice of walking to office, getting to know every shop-window in Old Kent Road, and nearly every article in every shop-window; becoming on nodding terms with some of the shop-keepers. Len about this time complained that constant supervision by the travelling collectors made his daily journey intolerable for him, and hinted that it would become necessary to take a room, or rooms in town; my mother greatly perturbed, pointed out that he could easily, at the expiration of the quarter, transfer his patronage to the other company.

"There's something else," he said. We were talking the subject over on a Sunday afternoon when we had induced mother to go with us by tram-car to Greenwich Park; some well-dressed young men had just gone by, giving surprised salutations to Len. "I get a number of things to do in the

evening after leaving office, and I don't want that journey down by train the last thing at night."

"Wherever you lived," said my mother," you'd have to get home somehow."

"It keeps the little man, here, waiting up."

"He does it of his own accord, so that he can have a chat with you, before you both go to bed."

"Mother," said Len, tipping his green chair forward and speaking decisively. "Over there, where I'm pointing with my walking-stick, is the house where I was born."

"That's right," she nodded, slightly relaxing her Sunday demeanour.

"I lived there for some years of my younger life, and you know what my ambition is."

"You hear what he says, Henry? Won't the people round-about talk!"

"For this purpose," Len went on, "I want to feel myself perfectly free and——"

"Untrammelled," I suggested.

"Perfectly free and at liberty to use every moment of my life. Besides, Henry would much rather have the room to himself."

"No!" I said.

"Yes, yes, you would."

"Len," said my mother, after making a semi-circle on the gravel with the toe of her shoe, "I quite understand all your thoughtfulness and consideration, and so on, but you want to do your duty by me, and I'm determined to do my duty by you. You mustn't go thinking it's any trouble, because it isn't. Until you're twenty-five I've got to look after you to the best of my ability, and look after you to the best of my ability I will! Now let's see about getting home to tea; I told Mrs Croucher to take in some crumpets if she heard the man with his bell."

Len and I went on the outside seats and talked; mother said it looked better, in her opinion, for ladies to ride inside.

He wanted to go up to town that evening to see some one on a matter of business, but my mother declared no good could ever come of any transaction conducted on the Lord's day, and he remained at home and read. At half-past nine my mother kissed us, told us not to forget to say our prayers and went up-stairs. Twenty minutes later she was back in her blue dressing-gown; one of the few garments that reminded us of Blackheath.

"Whatever are you two making such a hullabaloo about?" she demanded, sharply. "Never heard such a row in a house of mine in the whole course of my existence. Stop it at once!"

"Make Henry leave off," retorted Len, "and then I'll— How dare you touch me with your fist?" he asked, turning to me. "If you weren't my brother, I'd pay you for that."

"Henry," she cried, shocked, "I'm surprised at you. Thought you'd got better manners."

"Without a single word of warning," Len explained, "he suddenly raised his arm and gave me a most violent blow. I tell you what it is, mother; I can put up with a good deal, but I cannot and will not put up with this. The same house can't hold Henry and myself."

"And I thought," she wailed, "that you two were getting on so nicely together."

"Stood it as long as I can," he announced, banging at the American cloth-covered table, "been prepared to put up with a good deal, mother, rather than upset you, or cause you any annoyance, but this marks the limit. You don't know all I've had to endure."

"I'm dazed," stammered my mother. "It's all come on me like a flash of lightning on a clear day. I must be asleep, surely, and dreaming."

"I'm a quiet chap," continued Len, "and only want everything to go on smoothly. But my life here, at home, has for some time past been perfectly intolerable, and I'm determined to put a stop to it. This night," he announced, loudly, "this very night, I leave!"

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Henry," she asked, trembling, "or what? You stand there like a dummy, with not a word to say for yourself; I think you must be gone suddenly mad. Pull yourself together and tell me what it all means! Or must I give you a good shaking."

"Mother," interposed Len, speaking gently, "there's no necessity for this painful scene to continue. When we were talking this afternoon about my leaving here, I little imagined these would be the circumstances in which I should go. I'll pack my bag at once, and you can send my books on so soon as I give you an address. You can imagine how much it hurts me to say good-bye."

"My dear," she said, firmly, "you're not going to say good-bye. If, as you tell me, you and Henry can't get along together comfortably any longer, then it's not you who is going to be turned out. It's this bad-tempered boy here, who'll have to go."

They both looked at me; I kept my gaze on the pattern of the linoleum and did not speak. "That's what's going to happen," declared mother.

"No," cried Len, "no! We must try to look at the whole matter calmly, and do the right thing. Henry is still a mere lad. He requires a mother's care. Thrown out with no one to look after him, he would go from bad to worse. I've seen many cases of the kind, and I don't want to think that a brother of mine is going to add himself to them. Our family has suffered enough as it is."

She burst into tears, and taking his hand, kissed it.

"Henry," he ordered, "go upstairs and put all my things in my Gladstone bag. I want to speak to mother privately. Knock twice on the floor when you're finished."

My mother was more like herself when I returned. She pleaded with Len to forgive me and to part on friendly terms; he held out his hand and I took it. There was time by hurrying to catch the last Sunday night train to town, and when my mother asked where he intended to sleep, he protested, good-humouredly, that if he stayed to

answer all her questions it would mean walking about until morning. She offered to carry the bag, but he said that this should be my privilege, and I was ordered to go on with it in advance for fear my bad temper might again burst out.

"Thanks, very much, little man," he said, as we waited for the train. "Remind me to-morrow at office, in case I forget it, to hand over my season to you. It's nearly run out, but you may as well have it for the remainder of the time."

"But is it transferable?"

Len had to take the support of the closed bookstall.

"The strangest youngster," he declared, amusedly, "I ever came across. There's no guessing what attitude you'll take up next."

"At any rate," I said, rather warmly, "I did as you asked me to do this evening."

"You acted the part well," he admitted. "I was afraid you might overdo it, but you managed to touch just the right note. A pity to have to impose upon her; no one regretted that more than myself, but it seemed the only way."

"You'll ask me up to see your rooms, Len, when you're settled down?"

"That," he replied, rather doubtfully, "depends on circumstances."

For a whole week, my mother did not speak a word to me.