CHAPTER V

LEN BRINGS NEWS

MR PRENTICE sent for me one afternoon and spoke so sharply for a quarter of an hour, that I came out of his room with the feeling of one who had narrowly escaped hanging. His attention had been called to the fact that the writing of Mr Drew (at the cashier's desk) and the penmanship of young Henry (in the outer office) were almost identical; it had been pointed out to Mr Prentice that this might, in certain circumstances prove awkward and confusing, and he took me severely to task about it. Admitting that the natural act with youth was to imitate — Mr Prentice was acquainted with the work of poets who had not the wisdom or the patience to wait for maturity before dipping their pen in the ink-stand, and these invariably copied some rhymes of eminence in a slavish manner—admitting also that Mr Drew was a worthy example (Mr Prentice could scarcely understand why he was not more popular with his colleagues) still, two handwritings of an identical style could not be permitted. Not for a single moment. Quite out of the question. In no office would such a thing be tolerated.

"You understand. See to it at once. You're a good clerk otherwise; Mr Drew speaks highly of you, and I place every reliance on his powers of observation, but if you're going to do silly things like this, why——"

Mr Prentice waved a hand across his table and left the remainder of the sentence to my imagination.

I felt depressed, and clerks in the office, seeing this, foreshadowed the sack, the kick-out, the push, and several other variations signifying dismissal. A more cheerful view

presented itself, some weeks later, when I found myself able to do something for Len; something which, so he assured me, in his generous way, balanced accounts between us, and gave me the right, if I chose to exercise it, of regarding him as a debtor. Len allowed me to go part of the way with him that evening in the direction of his rooms.

"You can talk about it as you like," contended Len, as we went down the steps at Moorgate Street. "(Take your return half before I forget it.) You did me a service to-day that wont easily pass out of my mind."

"Didn't much care about it."

"A wise lie," said my brother, "is much more commendable than the clumsy truth. As a matter of fact, there was no harm in copying out the names and addresses of customers, and I daresay I could have carried them securely in my head, but there are one or two seniors in the place who have taken a dislike to me, and if I had had to confess to old G. W. P. that the list was in my handwriting, they might have made it warm. You behaved like a brick. Here's our train!"

He laughed at me for refusing to get into a first-class, and told me as we went through the smoky tunnel that I was an elderly spinster.

"It won't do you any harm," returning to the subject in the train, "because I can always smooth G. W. P. down. In fact, I told him just before he left this evening that it was the natural result of over-anxiety on your part; merely an excess of industry. I'll see that your position is secure, little man, before I go."

"You're not going to leave Prentice's?"

"Surely you never thought a man of my abilities would be a fixture there, like the bunch of wooden grapes over the doorway. You, yourself, will make a move sooner or later."

At Portland Road we stepped out into the thick clouds, and upstairs he showed me where I could take the train

back to the city. "Remember," he said, with his hand on my shoulder, "to come along one evening and see me. We'll fix up a date and I'll ask a lot of people. Don't lose yourself going home, and give my love to mother, and say I'm always thinking about her!"

I decided not to use the return half, although anything like waste was, at that time, extremely painful to me, and walked down Gower Street, which appeared to me less interesting as a thoroughfare, than Old Kent Road. With the exultation of mind which always came when I had been able to do anything for Len, I very much desired a companion, but only found a hoarse-voiced man who wanted to sell me some cigars which, he declared, had been smuggled (it was not easy to see why), and a poor old soul who came with an appeal to purchase kettle-holders. Consequently, when, at a corner near Bedford Square, I saw a young couple exchanging fervent kisses of farewell and heard the youth, lifting his hat, saying as he went in broken English, "I lof you!" it was gratifying to discover that the girl was Kitty Latham, who announced herself equally glad to meet me; she felt prepared to accept my escort to London Bridge Station, where I could also take train for home.

"Who was that chap?"

"Only a pick-up," Kitty answered, indifferently. "He spoke to me this evening when I was with a girl friend listening to the band in Hyde Park."

"Seems to me altogether wrong," with some heat, "for a girl of your age and your appearance——"

"Do you think I'm good-looking?"

"Matter of taste," I retorted. "Why do you let a man do that when he has only known you a short time?"

"I gave you a chance once," she said, light-heartedly. "You'll have to wait now until I'm in the mood."

"Good gracious," I cried, amazed at the interpretation placed on my inquiry. "I don't want you to kiss me, and I don't want to kiss you."

We walked down Holborn with a sufficient space intervening between us, but near Gray's Inn Road, two young blades, who had crossed from Chancery Lane, coughed and whistled and tried to attract her attention, and I went nearer to her.

"Daresay you're right," she said, penitently; "but you don't understand me, Henry, and sometimes I don't understand myself. If I had work to do, it would be different. If I'd something to engage my mind, daresay I should be steadier. But father won't allow me to do anything about the house; says he wants me to be a lady; expects me to stay at home in the evening whilst he——" She broke off hopelessly, "And there you are!"

As we walked along Newgate Street and Cheapside with only a few omnibuses and cabs taking the place of crowded traffic of day, I became eloquent, and she nodded her red hat, agreeing with every argument, saying, "Expect you're right, Henry!" and, "That is so, when you come to think of it," and presently delighting me by saying that my voice was almost exactly like the voice of Len. "Only," she added, and this pleased me too, "he, of course, is so much brighter!" Near the King William statue she promised she would never again allow a foreigner to speak to her whilst listening to the band in Hyde Park, and when I tried to widen the area, begged me not to be too hard. Kitty felt sure we were going to be friends after all, and I declared I had long since forgotten my grievance against her father. A man in a good position in Great Tower Street, with all the admirable prospects that the wine trade promised, could afford to put out of his memory an early rebuff.

As I said good-bye to Kitty outside New Cross Station, and accepted her thanks, my friend Ernest Fowler and his sister came up Amersham Vale. I explained everything to Milly at considerable length, and she spoke of the concert given to railway-men where Ernest had recited "The Signalman's Child," and she received an encore for a violin solo. Such a good-natured audience, she remarked; I said

that seemed evident; I offered to carry her case, but Milly expressed the opinion that I must be feeling tired after the long walk.

"You're huffy about something."

"Not at all!" she declared.

"Oh yes, you are. You're upset because you saw me with Kitty Latham, and you think that what I've been telling you about meeting her accidentally isn't true."

"Never imagined for a moment, Henry, that you had the sense or quickness to invent anything."

"Really?" hurt by this. "Then perhaps you will kindly allow me to tell you what happened at office to-day."

It was always difficult for me to understand why everybody had not the same regard and affection for Len which I felt, and Milly's comments seemed to prove one had overrated her intelligence. Ernest, called in to arbitrate, said, after taking time for reflection, that there was much to be said on both sides, and proceeded to say it, involving himself in such a mist of argument that Milly and I became, in contradicting his views, almost amiable with each other. We sent him on to open the door in St Donatt's Road.

"All the same," said Milly, lowering her voice, "I do think you ought to be careful."

"As capable of looking after myself as most people."

"Everybody thinks that about themselves. You don't hear all that I hear."

"I wouldn't be a girl," I cried, vehemently, "and go in for this tittle-tattle, and slandering, for all the money in the world. And you only say it because you're jealous."

"Jealous of you?"

"Jealous of me," I said, steadily.

"Now, I wonder," she remarked, "I wonder whether you're right. Anyhow, I'd rather be fond of you than of that brother of yours."

"Just shows," triumphantly, "what a poor judge you are. Why, there are girls who would give their front teeth to get a smile from Len."

"We can't settle it by talking like this. What's to-day? April the twenty-first, eighteen ninety-one? Now look here. In ten years time, that is to say, on April the twenty-first, nineteen hundred and one, if we are both alive, we'll arrange to meet and we'll find out then which of us is right."

"Arrange to meet?" I stammered. "Why, what do you mean? We shall be married by that time."

"Who to?"

"To each other!"

"You dear boy!" cried Milly. She glanced up and down the road, and gave me her lips.

Began, the devoted period that comes, one may hope, to most lads and to every girl. In regard to the work in Great Tower Street, it is probable an endeavour was made to give (as the shop circulars say), the same satisfaction as heretofore, although I often detected just in time, some ridiculous blunder. With every interval a terrible stab would come as my imagination thought of her as smiling or cheerful, when I happened to be gloomy and reserved. Every minute not given to her company seemed a woeful waste of time; I reproved myself severely on finding that, during some stress of business I had allowed five minutes to go by without thinking of Milly; my prayers at night assumed an extravagant length, and I was, I remember, careful to point out that whilst her happiness was most earnestly desired, this happiness had to be coincident with my own. In retrospection, the experience seems pleasant to regard, but it is impossible to conceal the fact that at the time I was disturbed to the point of acute unhappiness. Perhaps my mind was slightly unhinged; perhaps no youth, deeply in love, is in full possession of all his senses. Certainly, my love for Milly reduced every other interest to small dimensions. The political world ceased to exist, my annoyance with Mr Gladstone vanished entirely. I went to church because Milly went to church, but I should have become a Pedo-Baptist if she had been one, and instead of listening to the sermon, I counted the times that her lace collarette rose and

fell; sometimes trying to take her hand furtively and receiving a tap of reproof; in the highest stage of delight when we shared a hymn book. From Milly I accepted criticism that no one else had dared to give. Since the age of twelve I had been under the impression that I could sing the alto part; it was Milly who pointed out that merely to give the air an octave lower than most people, did not count for perfect melody, and her recommendation that I should, in future, abstain altogether, was readily taken. The idea that a green necktie suited me and struck a note of independence in my costume was similarly corrected. Milly hinted that she liked me best in a silk hat, and if the cricketing season had been on I should probably have adopted a custom of Hambledon players in the old days. It is not certain whether, in any case, I should have reciprocated with words of advice but, in point of fact, she seemed to me perfect. And how we chattered as we walked together!

Anyone listening might have thought we were acquaintances hitherto barred from exchanging thoughts and now permitted the first opportunity. My own part of the conversation was mainly devoted to the subject of Len and his prospects; Milly's share seemed to consist of inquiries concerning the precise moment when I found that I loved her, but apart from this there was never any lack of topics; frequently at the moment of saying good-bye, Milly would remark after hours of talk,—

"Something I particularly wanted to tell you, but it has clean gone out of my head."

And I always endured the torment after leaving her, of recollecting some item of the highest importance I had meant to communicate.

The walks we took were generally in common-place thoroughfares, but they never seemed common-place to us. Shops of Lewisham High Road, formerly reckoned of ordinary merit, were exalted by reason of a casual word of approval from Milly, and one narrow path leading from the top of Loampit Hill, and appropriately called Love Lane,

seemed to have been made specially for us; we strongly resented the occasional presence of any other young couples. It came out at the top of what is now a road of smart houses looking over Hilly Fields, and the great joy then was to lose ourselves amongst partially made streets and roam about until we struck a main road. We cherished a superstition that to encounter anyone known to us by sight was an occurrence little short of fatal.

"Did you see who that was?" whispered Milly, in tragic tones. "Hope to goodness she didn't catch sight of us. It'll be all over the place if she did."

It was not easy to decide whether annoyance was equalled or over-balanced by satisfaction when comments reached my ears. To Mrs Croucher news was brought, and Mrs Croucher entered on the task of rallying with extraordinary zest. It formed part of her humour, broad without being particularly deep, to assume that I was already married and with the responsibility of grown up children.

"Been thinking all the morning about Tommy," she would remark. "Seems to me it's about time we decided what to do with him."

"Tommy who?"

"I'm referring," with great deliberation and enjoyment, "to your eldest. What is he now? Turned sixteen, isn't he? What I thought was, you ought to see about getting him into an office. Does he favour you, may I ask, or does he favour the missis?"

My reticence, and my attitude of sulkiness, never succeeded in arresting Mrs Croucher until she had used up all her cartridges. Did I not sometimes wish myself a bachelor again, and would I allow her to recommend a good shop for children's boots? Boots ran away with a terrible amount of money to be sure. If Mrs Croucher mistook not, she had caught sight of one of my youngsters—the fifth, she believed—sliding behind a four-wheeler in Queen's Road, Peckham, a few days before, and it was on the tip of her tongue to shout out and order him to let go.

Were the smaller ones getting on all right at school? Great thing to make them keep their little noses to the grindstone, and acquire all the information that teachers could provide. Music knowledge too was not at all a bad idea. If Mrs Croucher were in my place, she would try to arrange an orchestra at home; the missis at the pianoforte, Tommy with his violin, Ethel at the harp, George at the triangle, Bertha at the 'cello, and the happy father giving a definite lead with the cornet. Thus Mrs Croucher, to her great satisfaction, and to my distress.

Nowadays, I have my opinion on early engagements, forgetting, I fear, how extremely wise and sensible Milly and I felt at that time. Our age and our experience and our wisdom were beyond all measuring. No doubt we knew we were open to the charge of precocity, but to a complaint of that kind, youth does not trouble to reply.

One of the Peckham girls came of age, and I remember the occasion because it was the first grown-up party to which I had been invited; this after earning my living in the City for some considerable time. For one thing, we were not acquainted with many people; my mother had always impressed upon us that we must never forget we once lived at Blackheath; one had to be amiable, she admitted, with customers in the shop, but there was no necessity to be friendly with them outside, and I do believe this attitude of aloofness impressed folk, and certainly they could not fail to be affected by Mrs Croucher's reports concerning our earlier days; the habit of that industrious woman being to use the multiplication table freely, so that four servants became twelve, one gardener became four, silver plate became real gold, and my mother in consequence was looked upon, in spite of her simple, ordinary manners, as a retired member of a royal family; one result being that she was called upon to decide questions of nice etiquette which arose within a half mile area, and sometimes on cases of a hypothetical nature, such as, "Supposing I sent in to the lady next door but one in Milton Court Road a slice of my

Christmas pudding and a mince pie, and she only sent me back one of her mince pies, don't you think, ma'am, that I've a good right to speak to her about it, and find out what she means by such an insult?" and other problems of a like delicate character. Apart from this exceptional position, to which our desire and Mrs Croucher's assistance raised us, there was, to explain the absence of parties, the fact that I was in the stage which comes between boyhood and a later period, counted too aged for children's entertainments, too young for entertainments organised on behalf of the mature.

Aunt Mabel exercised great efforts to induce Len to be present, and sent the two girls over to see my mother about it more than once; the ultimatum delivered was, that if Len could not be persuaded to come, then I might consider myself as uninvited. This caused me to bring pressure to bear upon Len; I had already bought a new fancy waistcoat for the occasion, and Milly had been teaching me how to dance, beginning with an intention of carrying me so far as the schottische, but finishing with the announcement that it seemed impossible to convey me beyond the polka.

"No, no," said Len, good-humouredly, "I've done with these wild suburban gaieties. I'm living in London now, and I must make up my mind to settle down. Besides, I'm getting too old for that sort of frivolity."

"And just this minute you were telling me you didn't get to bed until four this morning!"

"One can't do everything," he urged. We were talking in the luncheon hour at a fish restaurant in Arthur Street East; there were not many opportunities now for speaking to him, and at office I was still under a slight cloud of suspicion. Len glanced around from the high stools where we sat at the counter as each new client came in at the street doorway, and when it happened to be someone who knew him, he looked down and busied himself by rubbing his hands on the dependent towels. "I live a fairly full life," he went on, "and I have to be cautious not to overcrowd."

"Len," I said earnestly, "if you care for me at all——"

"Why, of course I care for you, little man," he interrupted. "Don't you ever have any doubts concerning that. Whatever happens to me, I'll see that you are not left behind."

"What I was going to say was," clearing my voice, "that you might go out of your way to give me one proof by coming to Aunt Mabel's party."

"You make it a personal matter?" he asked. "We'll try!" he announced.

This cleared the way, and my mother agreed I could now go on with preparations. She gave me a multitude of hints and warnings regarding behaviour, all in the style of those which she had been in the habit of issuing when was I a child, and had been taken securely wrapped up in a white shawl by a nurse, to be called for by the same young woman at a quarter to seven. I was to be careful not to over-eat, to be sure to speak only when spoken to, to decline a second helping of everything, to remember to say to Aunt Mabel at the end "Thank you very much for a most pleasant evening!" Looking back and reminding myself of this particular occasion, one can see that the good soul never, in spite of the alteration made when I took home my first wages, altogether ceased to regard me as a child. Even when I came near to eighteen she always ordered me out of the shop when lady customers began a confidential lecture on the favourite subject of their ailments.

If anything had been needed to increase my feeling of nervousness on going in at the side door of the undertaker's shop in Meeting House Lane, where the men shaved planks of wood industriously, with a small crowd looking between the diamond shields on the window—"Two orders came unexpected," announced Aunt Mabel, with pride as she received each visitor—it arrived on being asked by the small maid, who knew me quite well, to furnish my name; she took my hat and overcoat and placed them at the back of the shop, selecting, as it proved later, a comfortable couch of sawdust. I caught sight of myself in a glass-covered

engraving of Wellington surveying the field of Waterloo as I went upstairs, and discovered just in time that my necktie was awry.

"Mr 'Enery Drew, please!"

A last blow which sent me well against the ropes came at the sight of two lads in full evening dress; one with a frilled shirt-front that constituted a distinct transgression of the limits of reasonableness.

"You're looking well, Aunt Mabel."

"I suppose that means you think I'm stouter; a most unkind remark, Henry."

"Understood," continued my aunt, "that he was coming with you. You say he's coming on? Well, I hope that what you say is true. Go about and make yourself pleasant. Is that a smudge on your upper lip? Take your handkerchief and rub it off."

I explained this was the beginning of what, it was to be hoped, would prove an excellent moustache.

"And it seems only yesterday," she sighed, "that I was dancing you in my arms and singing 'Banbury Cross.' Look at my two girls with their hair done up and their skirts touching the floor. Dear, dear, how time does fly to be sure! But I musn't stay rattling on to you, you're only a relative. We've got friends who must be attended to; friends in good positions."

We were, so many of us, in such good positions, that we stood about rather haughtily against the rout seats fixed near the walls, despite the efforts of my two cousins who whispered agonisedly each time they passed near me, "The evening's not going, the evening's not going!" In the endeavour to throw off sulkiness, which was beginning to grip me, I went across the room and spoke to a young woman who snapped a "Beg pardon!" and when I repeated that the night was singularly fine retorted, "Thanks for the information!" and became engrossed in the pattern of her fan. The cousin whose birthday it was came and told me the number of presents she had received, and I recollected a

small tissue parcel; she took this and without opening it declared that here was the very thing she had been wanting all along. Some of the ladies hugged rolls of music or secreted them under the seats, and when asked to play or sing, became shocked, saying—

"Oh, I couldn't think of it, really. You must ask someone else to make a start. It looks so very odd to be the first!"

There came a moment of hope when one of the scarlet candle-shades of the pianoforte happened to catch alight, but once this had been extinguished and folk had expressed the polite hope that I had not burnt myself, conversation dwindled, and Aunt Mabel looked around as one making up her mind to bang two heads together. I found a grim and an entirely neglected lady, who had recently taken up spiritualism; she described a séance in Effra Road, Brixton, at which she had experienced the greatest difficulty in repressing an outburst of merriment.

"And I'm not one to shriek in a general way," she remarked solemnly. "Now, tell me! How do you account for that? I'm sure there's something in it!"

Aunt Mabel, in an audible voice, told the two girls something would have to be done; the two girls answered that their mother had only to give her orders and the orders would be carried out; Aunt Mabel replied it was not her party, and indicated that she declined to accept any further responsibility. Supper was handed round by the maid, but even claret cup—

"You needn't be afraid of it," said Aunt Mabel, brusquely. "It won't go to your head!"

—Even claret cup failed to excite in the visitors anything that could be called animation. I ventured to suggest a game of indicating some article in the room which had been selected in my absence, and chose the spiritualist lady as my confederate to remain inside, explaining the scheme to her quite clearly, but her thoughts were elsewhere and she made such an undeniable muddle of the proceedings that not

a single guess was adjudged correct; she apologised afterwards, and told me she thought that in questioning me she had to speak of the article before something that was black, whereas I, of course, had distinctly told her it must follow. I talked to a lad of about my own age in a corner on Ibsen, a subject that enabled us to meet on equal terms, for neither of us knew anything about it. Aunt Mabel yawned, and asked whether anyone possessed the right time.

"Mr Leonard Drew!"

At once, the room took a different appearance. At once, everybody seemed to wake up and raise the tone of voices. At once, all leaned forward eagerly as troops without a captain greet a new leader. Len had a handsome bracelet for the birthday cousin, and the ladies said enviously "Well, you are a lucky girl!" Len told Aunt Mabel the symmetry of her figure was perfect, and my aunt, when she had been corrected in regard to the meaning of the word, trembled with satisfaction. Len recognised one of the lads as the friend of a friend of his, and they had lively conversation about old F.B., to which we all listened interestedly. Len asked whether the dancing was all over, and being informed it had not begun—

"Thought they wouldn't care for it," remarked my cousins.

—Offered to play the newest waltz furnished by the Promenade Concerts, but no one would hear of this for they wanted him to dance. So somebody played a set of quadrilles, and Len took Aunt Mabel, and I selected a quiet girl who had not hitherto opened her mouth excepting for meringues, and others selected partners, and Len put us all right when moments of indecision came.

He had to go before twelve to catch the last train, and a moan of regret from the flushed delighted company followed us, as, at Aunt Mabel's request, I accompanied him downstairs. The two men had finished their shaving of elm planks; shutters were closed, but the small crowd that had watched proceedings of the shop and spelt out

name plates earlier in the evening, appeared to have stayed to listen to the music and romping on the first floor.

"By the bye," said Len, I helped with his overcoat and found his opera hat, "I've left Prentice's."

"No!"

"Or rather, Prentice's has left me. Deuce of a row there this evening after you left. Old G. W. P. and I called each other everything we could lay our tongues to."

"What are you going to do, Len?"

"I'm all right," he answered cheerfully, "I'm on velvet whatever happens. And you're all right, too. See now how wise I was not to let you call yourself by your full name. Anyone named Drew would have had to go with me; anyone called Henry is as safe there as houses!"