

CHAPTER VI

AN INVITATION FROM LEN

ERNEST FOWLER told me that age was the only thing which ripened experience; he found his earlier arguments in favour of taking a desk in the employ of a large company, or a great corporation (such as the Insurance Office to which he belonged), possessed a flaw. What a man, setting out in life, ought to do was to accept service in a small private firm (resembling the one in Great Tower Street with which I was connected), for there a man's abilities became recognised, and the withdrawal of one comparatively senior clerk meant for other men another good step up the ladder. Ernest tempered all this by the warning that one should not place too much reliance on luck, and when I protested against this remark, found in his pocket a reply from some lady expert in graphology, which he declared settled the point once for all.

"You read what she says," he remarked, handing over the half sheet of note-paper. "It cost me eightpence, but I don't begrudge the money. I sent her a letter you wrote to me a few months ago, and that's her answer."

"You'll excuse me," with stern politeness after reading the ambiguous prophecy, "but at the time you speak of, my writing was exactly like that of Len. Almost exactly like that of Len. So that whatever this woman says about me, applies, to an equal extent, to him."

"Now you're begging the question."

"On the contrary," triumphantly, "I've got you in a corner, and you can't get out of it!"

"Well," he said with reluctance, "suppose we admit that it applies to both of you."

"In that case, I can say that I wish for nothing better than to have the same future Len will enjoy."

Ernest looked about the compartment of the 8.33 in an endeavour to find answer to this.

"How did Surrey get on yesterday at the Oval?" he asked eventually.

With promotion came a sort of knighthood, for I was called Mr Henry by all at office, excepting by Mr Prentice when he was angry and excited; as a set-off to this one had to endure, without a word, comments made by Mr Prentice and the staff on the conduct of my brother. Len had transferred his services to an opposition firm of comparatively modern date in Seething Lane; a firm which possessed a large brass plate, aggressive partners with features made of a like material; a method of advertising which older firms thought undignified. A sale of wines from a royal cellar had taken place, and Len's new people, having secured a small quantity, hinted broadly through the medium of public journals that they had secured possession of the entire stock, offering to send single bottles, as samples, well packed, at prices that made us give the long sniff of contempt. An accentuation of this attitude, with another feeling, came when it was found that some of our customers whose names had been on the books for a century, ceased to give orders; reminders to them either proved unanswered or elicited the reply that they had decided to give another firm a trial. On these occasions, Mr Prentice would give up the furtive manufacture of poetry, and resigning all pretence of self-control, bounce into the outer office demanding sympathy and support.

"It's that infernal young Drew!" he stormed. "I know who it is we have to thank, as well as anybody. No need for you to tell me. He ought to be locked up!"

The office turning on its high stools, gave a sympathetic murmur. I, alone, continued writing.

"If he doesn't look out, I'll go round to Old Jewry and get the City detectives to watch him. A fellow of the stuff

that Drew is made of, is pretty sure to get too far some day and get his neck well into the noose. When that happens, I'll be there to give it an extra pull."

Office showed deferential agreement.

"Met him in Gracechurch Street this morning, and he had the confounded impudence to lift his hat to me." Office shocked and pained. "Mr Carmichael," to the senior clerk.

"Yes, sir!"

"I want you to issue an order to all of the clerks, instructing them that they are to hold no sort of conversation or communication whatever with this scoundrel. If I find that any one has been exchanging with him so much as a single word, I'll pack him off about his business instantly. Henry!"

I brought my scarlet face round.

"Why don't you listen as the others do, when I'm speaking? Come here, at once. Have you seen anything of this Drew person since the day he left?"

I replied truthfully.

"Now, you're a sharpish lad," holding me by the shoulder. "I'm going to think the matter over before doing anything, but it's possible I may want you to do some special work for me. May want you to go about after this fellow Drew and report each day what he's been up to. I'll see you again about this."

The others, so soon as G. W. P., still grumbling, had retired to his room, where he relieved himself with a furious row over the telephone with a railway goods station, came around me, with congratulations on the signal honour, offering assistance, and expressing surprise that I did not give signs of satisfaction. One who played with the Canonbury Amateur Strollers promised to look after the make-up, strongly recommending black side-whiskers, clerical collar, white tie: for alternative, there was the costume and hat he had worn as Conn the Shaughran at the last quarterly entertainment.

At home in Woodpecker Road I kept all this from my

mother, and indeed there was enough to talk about in a new topic. This wonderful progress of mine suggested it, and as after the closing of the shop (however late we put up the shutters there was sure to be at least one customer banging at the door) we walked down by the market gardens towards the canal bridge and the railway arches—

“A breath of fresh air is what I want, Henry,” she remarked, “to put me right. Don’t go too fast, I’m not nearly so young as I used to be!”

—This was the question we discussed. With my amazing advance at Great Tower Street (Aunt Mabel declined to talk about me when she called, always turning conversation to the impending engagement of her elder daughter who, my aunt hoped, was going to do fairly well for herself and transfer the expense of her support from Peckham to Denmark Hill) and the prospects that everyone, excepting the lady delineator of character from hand-writing, prophesied for me, was it not convenient, and would it not be possible to give up the small general shop, with its mixture of odours and its jumble of stock, its chances of doubtful debts, and its constant demand for attention; sell the contents for what they were worth, and the goodwill for what it would fetch, and, taking courage in two pairs of hands, migrate to the southern side of New Cross Road?

“But have you the leastest idea, Henry, what the rents there run into?”

The question of rent had been examined. Twenty-eight pounds a year seemed a lot, but we might let one of the rooms if my mother felt so disposed. Let it to some young clerk, or some young woman engaged in the city, and the payment would help. I could guarantee sixteen shillings a week, which certainly left not a great margin for luxuries, but compensation would be awarded in the withdrawal of work, morning and night; it was possible to find some paying occupation for evening hours, such as looking after the books of some tradesman in Deptford, or acting as secretary to some public man at Lewisham.

"Don't want to see you work your finger to the bone, Henry. You're still of the age when a boy wants a certain amount of play. Besides, Len would help like a shot if we let him know."

Here I had to exact a promise. Len was making his own way in the world, and we ought not to hamper him in any manner. What I recommended was that we should charge ourselves with the task and responsibility of the removal, and then ask him to come down some Sunday afternoon, and watch his face when he discovered what had happened.

"It would be a lark," she admitted, with relish. "He'd enjoy the joke as much as we should. But I wish you were a trifle older."

Admitting that my years were few, I claimed possession of a wisdom beyond my age; only with an effort was information concealed regarding the understanding come to between Milly and myself. Mother, declaring at first that it was good enough for talk, but not sufficiently good for action, came after a few months to concede that there might be something in it; agreed later that I could give notice to the landlord and look out for a small poster announcing, "This Establishment to be Disposed Of," a bill not, however, to be fixed in the window until she gave the word.

Ensued, a careful searching by Milly for a house small but commodious, cheap but in a good road, and sometimes we went about the task together, feeling tremendously grown-up, and flattered to the uttermost heights when some tenant assumed we were about to make our first start in married life. We discovered a small house in a road which had the advantage in my view of beginning with large houses (which shows that I had something of the snob about me) a long narrow garden at the back, and at the front brick fields, and there the woman gave us a quantity of good advice on the wisdom of giving and taking, avoidance of the first row, toleration of each other's relatives, concession of a certain amount of freedom. The landlord promised to re-paper

the front room, and Milly and I pored over a giant volume, making a selection with great difficulty only to find that the presentable patterns had a price which made the landlord say, "You must think I'm a jay!" whilst the figures he was prepared to give belonged to patterns that gave a mid-Victorian scream. I think the experience aged us, and certainly it revealed the fact that house-keeping was not exactly the merry jest it had hitherto appeared.

"I'd like to ask advice of Len," I said.

"Has he invited you yet to see his rooms?"

"Milly," I cried, "that's a most unkind remark. You know as well as I do it's the one thing which is worrying me."

"Send him a note," she said, soothingly, "and say that you want to see him. I'll dictate it."

The letter certainly gave my brother no convenient means of escape, and in a week or two I received at Woodpecker Road a line from him—he was too wise to address it to the office—saying that he had been waiting for me to fix the evening; would the following Thursday fortnight be convenient for me to come to Osnaburgh Street. Eight o'clock; not evening dress. Mother said it was very kind and thoughtful of Len to give me so much time; she herself had always found the pleasures of anticipation more acute than those of realisation. Meanwhile nothing further was to be done about the house in Shardeloes Road for fear Len, finding the arrangements completed, should feel hurt and express annoyance at the omission to ask his advice and to this I agreed, although it was hard at the time to brook anything like delay. At that period, if my mind once began to point, the interval that elapsed before securing the bird proved almost intolerable. A new shape in collars attracting my attention in the hosier's window of Walbrook, life seemed flat and dreary and grim until I had secured a couple; an advertisement of some newly invented liquid "Guaranteed to make the Hair wave Naturally" and I was restless, and almost sleepless until I procured a bottle. The keen impatience of youth finds parallel in the nerves of middle-age.

When the evening came, I found it a hard task to keep the information regarding my social engagement from the clerks at office. They recognised that something of a high and important nature was about to happen, and tried in several ways to extract information, first, by pretending they knew where I was going (which frightened) second, by declaring they had no anxiety whatsoever to be made acquainted with the facts (which annoyed). They were all good chaps and since the time I left the lowest rank, there had been no cause for complaint regarding their deportment; with at least three of them I was on such friendly terms that it seemed ill-mannered on my part to keep from them any secrets; assuredly they kept none from me. (I must have preserved reticence on other matters, or they would have resented my silence; they used to tell me of contention with parents, and give verbatim reports of discussions with girls; gaining nothing of equal value in return.) They allowed me to go at half-past six, begging me to give their united love to the lady; Mr Prentice who had been staying late left at the same time.

"You don't go my way, Mr Henry."

"I am going by omnibus, sir, from the Bank."

G. W. P. pulled at his chin thoughtfully. "A turn of exercise," he said, after deliberation, "will do me no harm." Then announcing it as though he were going to accompany me on a fortnight's walking tour, "I'll come with you as far as the Mansion House!"

He asked for my opinions concerning the political situation, taking the first subject offered by the newspaper placard and I ventured, with respect, to express my views concerning the action of Lord Randolph Churchill.

"Speaking of pushful young men," he interrupted, when we had been momentarily parted by the crowd on the pavement, "that fellow Drew is keeping quiet; I suppose he began to see he was going too far. For the last month or so, we've heard nothing of his proceedings. May have disappeared for all I know. 'What's become of Waring!'" Mr Prentice quoted.

I answered that th^{is} name was new to me. "You don't know your Browning, my lad. You ought to read your Browning. I owe a great deal to Browning. Browning has influenced me very considerably."

I put an adroit question, and before we parted he promised to give me a copy of his new book of poems with an autograph inscription; he said publishers were difficult people to deal with, but the coming volume had been arranged for on very advantageous terms; previously he had been called upon to pay £85, but by taking up a firm stand he induced them to accept this time £70, and he reckoned the bargain one that satisfied all parties. He showed me a new poem beginning,

"As I hold you in my arms, my dear,
Your heart is fluttering 'gainst mine,"

and I ventured to point out that this with two people, standing face to face, was improbable; he admitted that there existed a difficulty unless one of the parties wore the heart on the right side.

"Good luck to you, my lad," he said, benevolently, in bidding good-bye. "Let me know if you hear anything of Drew."

The servant who opened the door told me Mr Drew was in, adding that I was a jolly sight too early; she, however, conducted me up to the second floor and showed me into a sitting-room with two windows, and, against the walls, comfortable chairs and couches; in the corner a writing-desk with a photograph of mother, taken in Blackheath days, and a photograph of myself in Highland costume and holding a toy gun. On the mantelpiece, portraits of three or four young women who appeared to have been caught by the camera in the act of what is called making eyes, one of Kitty Latham had an inscription scrawled just below the neck. At the side of the mirror cards bearing the words "Mrs So and So. At Home," and invitations to dinner with the Auld Lang Syne Club.

"Shan't be a minute!" cried the cheery voice of Len from the other room.

A scent of yesterday's cigars in the room ought to have made one feel inclined to open one of the windows, but only gave a highly agreeable suggestion of expensive living; the top of the pianoforte had the marks of two or three apparently ineradicable circles. Out in the road, the traffic going north and south rumbled pleasantly.

"Why, it's my own long lost brother," cried Len, fixing his tie as he came in. "How are you, little man? Sit down and make yourself comfortable. Pull up that easy-chair and tell me all the news. Upon my word, I'm awfully glad to see you again: been looking forward to this meeting for weeks and weeks. Anything happened since I saw you last? How's old G. W. P.? I suppose," going on rapidly as a knock came to the front door below, "he thinks he has a grievance against me; he'll certainly think so when I launch my bomb-shell to-morrow. I'm going to blow some of the dust off you chaps in Great Tower Street to-morrow with any luck. Lord, what a rattling good game life is, to be sure. What, my old friend Murcell?" to the newcomer with enthusiasm. "Come in, my sprig of English nobility, and let me introduce you to my young brother. The infant prodigy. The hope of the family. Our bright particular star. Our ten o'clock turn."

Six or seven entered soon afterwards, all rather heavy about the eyes, and all begging for immediate refreshment, and I sat watching them eagerly, listening to everything they talked about, and not always able to follow the trend of their remarks. Two, when they had tired of the task of chaffing the others, turned their attention to me, but Len interposed and they reluctantly stopped. There was, I remember, a good deal of talk about women; now and again Len diverted this to another topic; it seemed to me that, if the evening had a fault, there was rather too much filling up of glasses. Good though to observe that Len kept his head clear; it appeared he was able to take a fair amount without giving the signals of excess shown by the others. Altogether a splendid, grown-up evening for me; one that widened my

outlook, one for which I heartily and earnestly thanked Len when in going at half past-ten, I took my walking-stick from a guest who was imitating musical instruments.

“Come again,” he said, hospitably. “And be sure to give my love to mother. How is she? Forgot to ask. You can find your way downstairs, can’t you?” I begged him not to think of leaving his guests. “Fact is,” he said, confidentially, “they’ll be up to some ridiculous practical joke if I turn my back for long. An amusing set; they’d think nothing later on of throwing the furniture out of the windows if I were not there to stop them!”

In Great Tower Street at about twelve the next day, G. W. P. came from his room and I knew the bomb-shell had exploded. He had to stop himself for a moment because my friend Ernest Fowler called at the counter and asked whether Mr Drew was in. Mr Prentice striding forward took upon himself the task of giving a vehement reply to the question. Ernest explained it was not Mr Leonard Drew but Mr Henry Drew he required; the one known here, as he just recollected, under the name of Mr Henry.

Twenty minutes later, I found myself drummed out of Great Tower Street with ignominy.

