CHAPTER VII

LEN CALLS ON US

MY mother, always plucky and determined in the presence of disaster, and only depressed when prospects seemed bright, assured me a great load had been taken from her mind; admitted she had failed to get rid of the impression that the moment she left the shop in Woodpecker Road, something of a serious nature would happen. With her sister, who came over from Peckham to announce that the eldest daughter had secured the desired young man, and had received the engagement ring—

"He can't back out of it now," remarked my aunt, triumphantly.

—With her, my mother found it necessary to take up an attitude of definite opposition, declaring she could not recall the occasion when the other foretold that I should only remain at Great Tower Street long enough to turn my cuffs, although my aunt described with much apparent accuracy the exact spot in the room which she occupied when making the prediction, the position of those about at the time. We both opposed her later when she argued there was no excuse for blaming Len; as we pointed out, with a good deal of warmth, such an idea had not come within a hundred miles of our thoughts. Len was perfectly innocent in the matter. No one would be more perturbed than Len when he came to hear about it; ours was to be the duty to keep the news from him as long as possible. My aunt went, after giving a broad hint to the effect that if we really wanted to give her elder girl a wedding present, an eider-down quilt would be as useful as anything.

There was no time to be wasted. Necessary to set about immediately upon the task of finding a new situation, even for no other reason than to escape the satire of Mrs Croucher; the apologies of Ernest Fowler (who urged me to believe that he had blundered unintentionally, declaring it a mistake that anyone might have committed, and begging it should not be looked upon as betokening want of general intelligence), the sympathy of my mother. Milly snipped from her father's newspaper each evening the likely offers and those less than likely, from advertisements to all who wished to earn £3 a week easily, and in a refined manner —these were commonly from jewellery firms at Birmingham and led to no satisfactory result—to vacancies for sub-editors on a provincial daily journal. Having done what was required of me in the shop, I occasionally walked swiftly up my old route to the City, and called at some of the chosen addresses, hurrying from one to the other with such feverish haste in my anxiety to lose no time that the leisurely advertisers who wanted a premium or a sum invested in their concerns must have thought me slightly demented. Milly always met me near Old Kent Road station at a time appointed with a fresh collection of cuttings.

Unable to endure any longer the disappointments, I resolved one evening to go up to see Len and, explaining the situation—or want of it—to ask for influence and assistance. It was a shame to trouble the dear chap, and I particularly desired not to be a drag on him, but this step would certainly have been taken if I had not by chance met Kitty Latham in Lewisham High Road.

"Don't go this evening," she said, at once. "He's engaged this evening, and he won't want to be bothered with callers."

"Should be very careful not to bother him."

"I'm going up to town," she remarked. "Supposing by chance I run across him."

"That isn't likely."

"But if I should do so, shall I mention it to him and ask whether he could do anything? By the bye, do you know shorthand, and can you draw at all?"

I did not know shorthand, I could draw a little; my manner conveyed no keen desire to extend knowledge.

"Instead of going up to town," she said, stopping, "call at this place and start taking lessons. I'll pay the fees."

"You'll do nothing of the kind."

"You may as well let me," she contended. "Father gives me money when I ask for it."

The refusal was repeated definitely.

"That reminds me," she went on, accepting my decision, "why not call and see father?"

"Did that once, and I'm not likely to do it again."

"Don't be so ill-tempered," she commanded, pinching my ear. I begged her to cease. "Because you've had a whack from one person, you want to quarrel with everybody. Do as I tell you, like a good little boy. It may lead to something. As a matter of fact there is a vacancy."

"I'd a jolly sight rather go up to the City again."

"And the City would apparently a jolly sight rather do without you. Remember, you're going to start on these classes this evening. Call to-morrow night and," looking at her parasol interestedly, "there's something you might do for me. You can mention casually that I called on you and your mother, and spent two or three hours. I don't want him to think that we walked about chatting in the main thoroughfare like this. Father is so particular."

Milly, when I told her of this encounter, pressed her under-lip thoughtfully and I attributed the advice she gave to the antagonism always exhibited towards the Latham girl. I argued that one should speak of people as one found them; no sort of prejudice should be allowed to interfere; if folk behaved well to me I thought well of them; the greatest blunders had been committed as a result of unreasoning animosity. All the same on calling the next

night at the house and offices in Hatcham, I found myself, in walking up and down to fill out the time, suddenly deciding to adopt Milly's counsel.

"Hullo, here's His Nibs," exclaimed Mr Latham, when Emily, the maid, announced my arrival. "Thought you'd emigrated. What do you want? What are you after?" In his shirt sleeves, he was smoking, and wore a cardboard cap like to those that carpenters held fashionable in the sixties. "Got quite enough to worry me, recollect that!"

"How's business?" I asked, familiarly.

"Business," he replied, sinking carefully into a springless leather chair, "might be better, and couldn't be worse."

"Things seem to be looking up in the City."

"You got a berth there, did you, after all. Hope you'll keep it. I'll tell you what's ruining my trade, and that is——"

"Drink!" I said. He stared at me and taking the cigar from his lips, placed it carefully on the mantelpiece. "Drink's ruining your trade. Apart from the money it costs you, it makes you fuddled at night and stupid in the morning."

"Always know when I ought to stop," he growled.

"But that doesn't make you stop."

"Look here," said Mr Latham, restively, "I don't allow anyone but my girl to talk to me in this way, and she has to pick and choose her time pretty cautiously. Moreover, the next time she tries it on I've got an answer for her. Close on twelve before she come in last night, and it's no use you telling me that's proper behaviour for a girl of eighteen, because I know better. If her poor mother was alive——"

"Forget the exact time I said good-bye to her, but I know it was pretty late."

Mr Latham took up his cigar and lighted it between the bars of the grate. "If she was with His Nibs," he said, to the fire, "that's different. I've got the responsibility of

her. If anything mis-happened to her, I should—I should give it all up."

"The drink?"

"Leave off harping on that," he ordered, explosively. "It's the only hobby I've got. Might do a lot of things worse. It's an amiable weakness, after all."

"I'm in the midst of it day after day," I remarked. "The scent of it's around me from morning till night, and perhaps I get too tired of it to be a fair judge."

"That's where I ought to have been," he remarked. "Living here amongst paste and brushes, why naturally enough when I want recreation I fly to something stronger. And mind you, there's no telling where I should have been without it."

"That's true!"

"Ah," he exclaimed, jovially; "knew I should get the best of you in argument. Now, draw your chair up, and let's have a comfortable chat, and put all personalities at one side. That's what I always say at the meeting of the Board of Guardians; no personalities. Once you begin on them you lose sight of the main question. Tell us what this office of yours is like. Do they have samples all over the place? Does the firm open a fresh bottle when a good customer calls?"

It is to be hoped that a line will be drawn hereafter between harmless exaggeration and malicious inaccuracy; certainly I, that evening, made liberal use of the first. Mr Latham was particularly gratified with the instance of a client in Hertfordshire who returned, with a severe letter of complaint, a consignment of hock, and the bottles being repacked in fresh cases, and a new bottle taking the place of the one which had been opened, thanked us, in proper terms, for attention, and accepted our apology for the inexcusable blunder, adding that he owned a palate which he flattered himself had never yet failed him in time of need. Mr Latham was so pleased with this that I fear I capped it with an invented circumstance, and he recipro-

cated with one or two self-congratulatory references to sharp practice on his own part, referring with special pride to an accident to one of his posting stations where he obtained, on threat of legal proceedings, full compensation from two separate and distinct parties.

"I've lost my right hand, though," he added, regretfully, "and the widow's pestering me to do something for herself and the children, but," with energy, "I jolly well shan't. I paid him his market value when he was alive, and he ought to have put by like the rest of us."

"Was he a good man?"

"First class! He could write my letters for me; he could go out and swear fairly well at the chaps if they wanted it; I could lend him my frock-coat, and he'd call on a firm and behave himself so that they couldn't tell but what he was a gentleman. He was really better at that game than I am myself. I can mix among ordinary people, as you may say, and hold my own, but once I get into the society of toffs I begin to lose 'eart somehow. Let them ride rough-shod over me. There's a young swell in a soap firm; he's had what they call a University education, and I can no more——"

"Give the widow something," I said. "Give her a lump sum down, and get a receipt in full. Point out that she has no claim on you, and give her twenty-five pounds."

"You're like most," he grumbled. "You enjoy giving other people's money away."

"You'll get a cheaper man in his place. Could he write shorthand?" Mr Latham shook his head. "See that the new one can write shorthand. It's a great help in office work."

"How does it act?"

I found pen, ink, and paper on the sideboard, and commanded him to dictate a letter. Mr Latham closed his eyes and obeyed. I made some of the elementary curves and dashes learnt but the night before,

and told my brain to store carefully the purport of the note.

"Marvellous!" he exclaimed, gazing at the communication, fairly written out. "Whatever will they go inventing of next! And fancy a bit of a chap like His Nibs having it all at his fingers' end."

"Would you like to see the same letter written out in French?" I asked.

"It'd be somewhat of a joke."

A Paris firm might not have been able to comprehend fully the meaning of the communication, but the beginning was correct—"J'ai l'honneur de vous informer—" and the end was clear enough—"Agreez, messieurs, l'assurance de ma considération distinguée."

"A knock-out," he admitted, gazing at it respectfully. "And do you mean to tell me this is the way a Frenchman would write that letter? Well, well," he said, "they're a queer lot. What I mean to say is, they might just as well fall into line and adopt our methods, instead of putting themselves to the trouble of learning a— What does aujourd'hui mean? To-day, eh? Well now, see how much simpler and shorter we put it."

I was fearing Milly's plan might not prove successful, and had almost decided to change and make an appeal, when Mr Latham asked how much the firm in Great Tower Street paid me.

"That's a tidy screw," he remarked.

I said the general opinion seemed to be that I was worth more.

"An article's worth what it fetches," he conceded. "Ever thought about making a change?"

"Shouldn't do anything without taking my brother's advice."

"What sort of a chap is he?"

I was on my own subject here, and talked with enthusiasm about Len for twenty minutes by the clock. Mr Latham interrupted by asking whether Len happened to be out of

a berth; I laughed so much at the inquiry, that he excused himself for putting the question on the grounds that something had flashed through his mind.

"As for you," he said, "you stay where you are, and you do your best for your employers. Don't you go in for the rolling-stone business. Any man who's sitting in an easy-chair is a fool to get up out of it."

"Quite agree with you, Mr Latham. Your clock right?"

"Don't be in a hurry," he begged. "I'm giving you good advice. If people come and tempt you with offers of a bigger salary, don't go falling into the trap. A morsel of toasted cheese won't last for ever."

"Remember me to Kitty," I said, rising. "Tell her I called."

"Now, now!" he urged, also rising. "Let's begin talking plain to each other. I'm a bit of a globe-trotter—had to go to West Drayton only yesterday—and I've always found that wherever you may be, straightforward language is the best. I'm going to put a question to you, and I want an answer—yes or no. Will you give up your present employment and come here and be my head cook and bottle-washer, as you may say, for fourteen shillings a week?"

"No!"

"Fifteen?"

"No!"

"Sixteen-and-six?"

"No!"

"Look here," said Mr Latham, irritated, "you seem to have a fairly good idea of your own importance. Name your own figure and give me a chance of thinking it over for a week or two."

"If I name my own figure," trying to keep my voice steady and resolute, "I shall want an answer now before your clock strikes the half-hour."

"Go on then!"

I mentioned a sum, and crying "Goo' gracious!" he conducted me to the front door. This was almost my first essay in the game of bluff, and even now it is difficult for me to understand why I did not break down on the steps and say, "Oh Mr Latham, I've only been pretending, do give me something to do, and I don't mind what you pay me!" Instead, I turned up the collar of my overcoat, bade him good-night, and went.

"Boy!" His voice came as I, crossing the road, was formulating the bitter phrases of reproach to be used to Milly when we next met.

"Yes, Mr Latham."

His card-board cap blew off and I returned it.

"Sure you can't take less?"

"Quite sure!"

"Then we'll call it a bargain," he said, reluctantly. "Call it a bargain," offering his hand, "and if you don't suit me, I shall out you before you can say Jack Robinson!"

A month or two later my brother paid a swift visit to see us in the new house in Shardeloes Road, approved everything, told my mother she was looking absolutely girlish, said a gracious word to the two City warehouse ladies for whom we provided bed and breakfast, told me he heard old Latham was satisfied, ran off to catch a train back to town.

"My Len!" said mother, happily.

"Our Len!" I said.

Len never had any fear about getting on in the world, and it is certain we had no doubts concerning him. I cannot recall that at the time he ever spoke of himself in any tones but those of perfect confidence, and this, which would have been, in any one else, instantly resented, was accepted. A hint from Ernest Fowler that he intended some day to make the attempt to succeed in literature drew from me severe warnings and ridicule; even his sister was not allowed to speculate too hopefully concerning the future without receiving an imperative instruction to

touch wood. In my own case, there was the case of Buckmaster. Ernest wanted to write a short story about the sixties, and requested me to look up the period, and to furnish him with a few details outside his personal knowledge. I found in a library at the back of a Berlin wool-shop in Queen's Road, on shelves mainly filled with old three-volume novels tied in sets with stay-laces, and bearing stimulating titles such as "The Dashing Miss Courthope," and "Why Did He Do It ?" the very book with a quantity of information concerning what it frankly called fast life. There, amongst the author's experiences of the King and Heenan prize fight, with golden youths paying a guinea at London Bridge for return tickets that bore no destination, dodging from one county to the borders of another, and a picture of Mr Heenan as he appeared at the end of the struggle, I found many partially veiled references, one relating to dear old Harry B—km—s—r, the brightest dare-devil of all. Further on was what the author called a most diverting incident at Cremorne, where the admirable Harry had started—for no apparent reason—a terrific riot, finishing, so far as he was concerned, by knocking a policeman senseless, near Chelsea Hospital, taking the coat and top hat, and conveying the policeman to the nearest station to be charged with disorderly conduct, and interfering with the police in the performance of their duty. The humour of the various situations did not appeal to me, but I thought it would interest Buckmaster to see a name identical with his own in print.

"That's me!" said the old chap, setting down his paste-pot and brushes. "Needn't let it go any further, Mr Henry, but it's me that's referred to."

"In which case," I remarked, incredulously, "you can tell me perhaps who is meant by the reference to the Marquis of H."

"Knew him better than I know you."

"And the Blue Posts, and Barnes's, and Barrons Oyster Rooms."

"Wish I was there now."

"Evans's?"

"Evans's was a bit dull," said the old man. He turned over the pages and found an illustration. "There," he cried, excitedly. "Now, perhaps you'll take my word for it. I recollect, I do, when that was done. I recollect the young artist chap coming into the place and doing of it." He found, with trembling hands, his spectacle-case. "There am I," his voice quavered into shrillness. "That's meant for me. Waltzing round with Lardy Wilson. Like me too, as I was then. Not," he added, turning away and gazing at the almanacs on the walls, "not as I am now, Mr Henry."

Old Buckmaster brought one or two documents to prove the truth of his assertion, and I was forced to admit that here, in one of our least capable old hands, was a man who in his day had, as he put it, fluttered with the best. With a good deal of trouble, I induced him to allow Ernest to share the confidences, and Ernest received good value for the five shillings handed over; to me, the disconcerting fact was exhibited that one might be, at a certain time, near to the very top (Buckmaster's proudest memory was that Royalty had once slapped him on the back and he very nearly reciprocated), and, at another time, carry a ladder and fix bills concerning the marvellous value of Bigden's Guinea Overcoatings. Knowledge of my father's disaster was impressed by this case of Buckmaster's; it seemed that the world was like my old toy kaleidoscope with some one giving it, every now and then, a frolicsome shake. Buckmaster did not complain. He said, quite candidly, that he had had his fling and enjoyed it at the time; declared that if he had his life to live over again, he didn't know that he would care to make it different. As for the come-down, that was to be expected. He counted himself more fortunate than many of his contemporaries in that he was still alive. His advice to Ernest and to me at the conclusion of our talks never varied.

"Enjoy yourselves whilst you're young," said the unreformed old fellow. "When you're old, you won't have the chance."

I envied, more than ever, the fine and complete assurance of my brother Len.