## CHAPTER VIII

### AN IMITATION OF LEN

NOW that you see me arrived at a settled position under my own name, escaped from the scent and surroundings of the general shop in Woodpecker Road, and entered upon a life which did not keep me always glued to a high stool, comes opportunity to tell more about Len. At the first visit to Osnaburgh Street, I had been too much dazzled by the exuberant manners of his friends to bear myself with ease, and a lurking fear possessed me that one would not be asked again; of this there would be no sound reason for complaint, for Len had a perfect right to choose his own friends, and if I did not come up to the required standard, why so much the worse for me. When, at Latham's, I had half an hour to myself, I sometimes wrote out all that could be recollected of the remarks made on that first evening, and against these placed several answers which did not occur to me at the time. For instance, one said, "Excuse me, but are you a member of Parliament?" and the answer I gave, reddening, was "No." Here then was a retort to be improved.

1. Not at present.
2. Afraid the place is rather over-crowded with talent already.
3. Have you a borough in your pocket?
4. This is a very flattering invitation, but you must give me time to think it over.
5. No, but I always have my hair cut on a Friday evening.

None of these studied efforts approached in merit to the answer Len would have rapped out on the instant, and it

seemed obvious that the likelihood of receiving the same inquiry again was small, but it was surely wise to practise. I very much wished that at some place similar to the one in Lewisham High Road, where a patient bank clerk with a long family took trouble to encourage me over the earlier hedges of shorthand, and an elderly artist taught freehand drawing, one could find a School of Repartee; the accomplishment seemed so much more useful than any other. I did propose to Ernest Fowler that we should, in our evening walks through Loampit Vale and Catford and back by way of Forest Hill, take up the task, but Ernest possessed the serious mind, and any adventure into raillery or fanciful conversation was arrested at once with a "Yes but, surely you don't mean that!" and the experiments had to be relinquished. No doubt I assumed the manner of Len and his friends very clumsily, but my companion would have been equally difficult if one had done it well. With Kitty Latham there was better opportunity, and sometimes when she beat me at the game, I challenged the originality of some retort, asserting she had borrowed it from Len.

"You're always thinking of him," she said.

"And so are you!" Kitty was silent. "Why don't you ask him down here one evening?"

"He wouldn't come all this way."

"Try him and find out. Tell him you're asking me."

She was able a few days afterwards to inform me delightedly that her father said he had no objection to meeting the young fellow of whom he heard a great deal; she had written to Len enclosing a paid telegram form. The message came in the course of the afternoon at a moment when I looked in at the house on the expectation of finding a wire from the local theatre; the messenger boy wanting to know whether there was any answer. I opened it, without looking at the address.

"It's all right," calling up the staircase in going into the office. "He can manage to come."

She came flying down. "Where's the telegram?" she demanded, breathlessly.

"Just thrown it in the fire. It only said, 'Charmed to be with you.' Suppose you haven't seen anything of a business wire from——"

To my astonishment, Kitty shook me. "How dare you!" she cried, exasperatedly. "What do you mean by opening a communication addressed to me? If I were a man, I'd hit you."

It did not matter whether the communication was in his handwriting or not; it came from him and therefore she desired to preserve it. I contrived to mollify her by promising to go to the office and pay for a repetition of the message, on the excuse that it was feared some inaccuracy had crept in.

"Thank you, Henry!"

"But why in the world," I said, "should you put yourself into such a state of excitement over nothing at all?"

"Can't you see," she cried, impetuously," that I'm head over heels in love with him?"

It gave me a shock at first, and, having to go by train to Sydenham, there was no time to give the matter consideration, but before leaving that night, I asked Kitty to walk part of the way with me, and told her the engagement had my complete approval. She protested it was not an engagement; assured me she did not yet feel quite certain that her affection was fully reciprocated, and bound me to secrecy. Half the fun, said Kitty, now restored to her usual vivacious manner, half the fun consisted in not letting people know; I was to breathe no word to Len, or to any other human being. I said she would make a capital young wife, just the right companion for Len. She took my hand and kissed it.

"Shall call you 'little brother-in-law,'" she whispered, "when there's no one listening."

Len came down rather late on the evening appointed, and Kitty and I were nervous about this, for Mr Latham had a

strong objection to anything like delay with meals. Indeed he was becoming restive, had taken two appetisers, as he called them, and was giving signs of talkativeness ere Len arrived; the moment my brother came Mr Latham found himself like the rest, impressed into something like silence. Before we sat down, Len discovered that lumbago was the subject on which Mr Latham wanted to converse. Len knew a man, an Honorable Mr Somebody, who suffered in precisely the same way, was caught at exactly the same place in the back that my stout master endeavoured to indicate; not fully acquainted with the remedy which the Honorable Mr Somebody took, would ascertain all the particulars; what Len did know was that the patient recovered in a perfectly marvellous manner, and had never a twinge since. Mr Latham, having prefaced his statement with the remark that he would willingly give a hundred and fifty pounds to any one who would cure him, now said he was prepared to go so far as one and a penny halfpenny, providing a guarantee could be given that one bottle would do the trick.

"A beautiful bird," exclaimed Len, as a new dish was brought in by the maid. "I know it's extremely bad manners to make a remark of that kind—" accepting the cut from the breast. "You have a most excellent cook!"

Mr Latham pointed with his fork at Kitty. "Begged me to let her make a start."

"No," cried Len. "Not really! Is that a fact, though? Mr Latham, your daughter is a treasure."

"I suppose," said my master, "once that gets known, some young burglar will come along and rob me of her. His Nibs here will be the first, I reckon."

"Father!"

"Capital," declared Len, amusedly. "Henry, you and I must at once obtain a jemmy and a dark lantern, and all the other necessary requisites. Reminds me of a story I heard the other day."

He told stories so extremely well that we could scarcely

understand how he managed to listen to Mr Latham's clumsily related and not always discreetly chosen anecdotes. When we saw one coming that we felt sure would not suit Len, Kitty and I intervened, but for the rest we listened to the conversation with our eyes on the visitor. He would not hear of Kitty leaving the room after supper was over; if Kitty did not object to smoke she was to remain. Would she try a cigarette? Kitty glanced at her father, who said good-humouredly that he was not one of your old-fashioned sort, and she, accepting one from Len's case, pretended to be apprehensive, but all the same took a light from Len's cigarette, and I heard her ask whether it was a Muratti.

We went into the drawing-room and Kitty played. In turning over the pages of the music for her whenever she gave me a nudge, I, unable to keep my worshipping eyes from my brother, noticed that Len talked to Mr Latham, but did not commit the error of talking too much; offering all his attention to the other's arguments, sometimes not quite convinced at first, but giving in handsomely when Mr Latham became dogmatic.

"Can't play," said Kitty in an undertone to me, "when he's in the room."

"It's all right. He's talking to my brother."

"But I mean your brother."

Mr Latham said only for the fact that he was in his slippers, he would accompany Len to the station; moreover he found he had done something he could not recall having done for many a long year; he had, by oversight, forgotten his half past nine dose. I offered to go, and pointed out that the railway station was on my way, but Mr Latham, winking at me, remarked there was a matter of figures he wanted to talk over; if Kitty was not afraid of being seen with a young man, she might as well escort the visitor.

"Nice feller," declared Mr Latham, when they had gone. "Pleasant a chap as I've met for some considerable time. Very different from you, Henery!"

I admitted this freely.

"Can you guess what was passing through my mind as I sat here talking?" I mentioned that the impending bankruptcy of Mawson's was worrying him; he pushed this aside as a subject too small for present consideration. "Why shouldn't him and my girl make a match of it? She wants steadying down a trifle; he's just the very one for her. I never make a mistake in my judgment of a man. Give me three minutes' conversation with a chap, and I can size him up pretty correctly, whoever he may be. Now, Henery, this wants tact. This wants artfulness, as you may say. This wants something different from what we use in managing the advertising business. We must throw them together, Henery, as much as possible. You must egg him on, and I'll egg her on. See?"

I thought it would be better not to interfere.

"That's where you're jolly well wrong," he declared, vehemently. "A bit of a lad like you can't be expected to know; you're just the same in business affairs."

I tried to remind him of one or two cases where my advice had been sound and good, but he would not tolerate interruption. Agreeing it would be unwise to show all our cards, he, for his part, intended at first to say words depreciating Len and hinting at no anxiety to see him again; in dealing with the female heart, he assured me, you had always to keep in mind the important fact that it liked to find out a martyr and make a fuss over him. He failed to understand why I did not see the question in the same light; was I perhaps slightly gone on the girl myself?

"Very well then," he said, contentedly. "We'll see what we can do in the way of being matrimonial agents. Won't you have one with me before you go, Henery? Not just a taster? I don't like sipping alone, but if I can't get no one else to join me, what am I to do? If ever you get on in the world, my lad, which I don't suppose you ever will—your brother's different—you'll find that one of the greatest drawbacks is in not being able to turn

into any public-house you 'appen to be near, and call for what you want, stand treat to a friend, and perhaps," Mr Latham began to search on the carpet for no obvious reason, "perhaps exchange a lively word or two with the lady on the other side of the counter. Mixing with all sorts of society, they naturally make animated company, as you may say. Fit to go anywhere, and be anywhere, and talk anywhere! I don't care who says the contrary," with sudden truculence. "I m'ntain that the work at a public bar makes a woman good company. Good company that's what it makes her! And the fact that she's been married before is all in her favour."

I tried to speak of one or two matters of business, of the necessity of beginning to make preparations for the bean-feast of which the men were talking, but he would not discuss any other subject but that of love, and love between Milly Fowler and myself was of course interesting to me, but love in the general, and as seen through the slightly bemused eyes of Mr Latham, did not completely engage my attention. He declined to allow me to go until Kitty returned, and in the meantime endeavoured to explain to me how love affected a man, causing him to think of one lady and one lady alone, making him say to himself a thousand times a day, "Where is she now, I wonder, and what is she doing of?" sometimes affecting one to such an extent that one felt compelled to walk perhaps miles in order to get a glimpse of her. I assured him I perfectly understood, but he would not have this, declaring that a man had to reach the age of forty-six ere real love came to him; anything before that could be counted as boyish weakness. Mr Latham told me of his first wife, whom he referred to as a bit racketty in early days, but settling down wonderfully after Kitty arrived; you would scarcely have thought her the same woman. A pity she had not lived longer to watch Kitty, but these things were pre-ordained, and it was not for us to question the management of the world.

One great advantage to me in the new procedure was that I saw more of Len than formerly, had better opportunities for conversation with him and for imitating his deportment. No ingenuity was required from Mr Latham or myself to clinch the friendship; Kitty told me in confidence that it was a great relief to her to have everything fair and above board. I took her daily letter to post every morning; Len did not reply to these, and she explained that it was understood that he, a busy man, should not be expected to write, and she felt contented with the one-sided correspondence. Once when Len had called the previous evening, I asked her what she found to write about.

"Found to write about?" she repeated, dreamily. "You don't understand, you don't understand. Why, I could be writing to him all day long!"

"Of course, Len is an exceptional man!"

"There can't be anyone else like him in the whole world. I wish I could tell you, I wish I could tell him—Look," she exclaimed, showing me her eyes. "Crying. Crying, just out of sheer happiness!"

It seemed possible my efforts to model myself on Len were not too successful, for when at the Fowler's I, consciously or unconsciously, repeated his remarks in something like his voice and manner, I found myself detected and pulled up sharply by that candid household, and Mrs Fowler hinted it might become necessary to purchase a parrot-cage. Milly advised me to be myself and not attempt to become but partly myself, and partly some one else, contending it gave her no satisfaction to observe people laughing at me; I retorted warmly to the effect that when I was Henry Drew, she did not always give full approval; Milly argued that nobody could be considered perfect.

At home, in Shardeloes Road, the endeavours were received with greater approval. My mother would say—

"Why bless the boy, if he isn't getting wonderfully like his brother!"

And this gratified me, but I objected when called upon in the presence of the two ladies, whom mother called our boarders, to show them how Len moved his right arm when he talked of political matters. The two were inclined to treat me as a youth of seventeen and a half: they had not, I suppose, learnt that what seventeen and a half desires is to be treated as twenty-one, and becoming restive, I one night told my mother she had better give them notice to leave. It appears this course was, from a financial point of view, impossible; it was proved by figures that the house could not be run without the help afforded by the weekly rent they paid. To which argument I said some other remedy would have to be found. When a man came home at night, tired after a day's work, and anxious to pursue his studies, a man wanted, above everything else, peace and quietness; two cackling, chattering females were certainly not desired.

"Now do be sensible, Henry!"

That I, contributing so much to the up-keep of the house, should not only find my counsel discarded, but that I should be called upon to receive counsel, and counsel of a superfluous nature, was surely beyond the limits of human endurance. I had had about enough of it, and if my mother found no suggestion to make I was prepared to submit, as an alternative to my first recommendation, another scheme; she listened with eyes on her needlework as I, walking up and down the kitchen, proceeded to describe it. The weekly sum which Len had arranged to pay when he left home, I too was willing to pay; with the remainder of my salary a room could be taken nearer London in a position not perhaps convenient for my work, but this (speaking with the air of a martyr at Smithfield) I felt willing to endure. Having no desire to speak harshly, one felt bound to point out that few would have been inclined to put up with it for so long. I was old enough now to look after myself, and what I wanted was more space, more freedom, more time, more of everything.

"You do as you think proper, Henry!"

Prepared for opposition, and furnished with a stock of arguments, this took me aback. I had to change my attitude, pointing out one or two objections to the proposal; her loneliness, the necessity for increasing the number of boarders, the extra work entailed; my mother kept her head down, and repeated—

"You do as you think proper, Henry!"

A lively description given to me by Kitty Latham of an evening at Len's rooms, to which ladies had been invited, encouraged me to go on with the scheme; I could never hope to become my brother's equal until I cut myself away from the cramping ties and knots of home. I, too, wanted to entertain; I, too, wanted to get a circle of friends about me. The party had, it seemed, been one of special brilliancy with a young man whose name I had seen in the papers; everyone in evening dress, and some of the ladies, according to Kitty's opinion, in not quite enough. It was perturbing to think Len had not asked me, and, once settled down, my first endeavour would have to be in the direction of purchasing a suit of dress clothes, the absence of which ruled one out of polite and interesting society.

The assistance of Milly in choosing a room, though greatly required, was nevertheless dispensed with, and I started on the task alone. Near Great Dover Street seemed an ideal situation, and there was choice of two squares. Along the three sides of Merrick Square I went as though canvassing for votes; being, in fact (owing probably to my youth), taken for nearly everything but an intending resident; one determined woman, at a house where I made the ring of the bell a shade too important, called out from a top window that if she caught me at the game on a future occasion, she would give herself the trouble of calling round and seeing the head master, and I could let her know how I liked the consequences. A furnished room was wanted, and views of landladies concerning the articles did not always coincide with mine; the more aged and decrepit the sofa and chairs, the more enthusiastic the owners proved.

"Supposing new springs was put in, why they'd only be broke again, so, as I say, what's the use? Why the last gentleman who had this room, he objected at first, but I said, 'Oh, you'll get used to it!' and he did, too, and he'd be here now only, poor fellow, some girl snapped him up."

They had a confusing habit of turning the tables on me, so that, in asking questions, I found myself called upon to answer questions. Why was I leaving home; was I any relation to Drew who used to keep a shop in Newington Butts; what did I earn a week and should I expect to be waited on hand and foot; was my mother troubled with rheumatism; what did I think of the goings-on of these Irishmen in the House of Commons; did I keep good hours, and what chapel or church did I attend? Eventually, I found a small top room at the back that had a sloping ceiling, which the landlady declared to be no disadvantage to one of my moderate stature—"It'll learn you to be careful," she asserted—and a look-out which appeared to me to command a view of only a desolate yard; she urged me not to criticise this until the fine weather came round. I paid a week's rent in advance, and the woman said something told her I was a perfect little gentleman.

"Is it this evening you're going, then?" asked my mother, with some astonishment. "All right, only I didn't know you had decided. Everything packed and ready for the van to call to-morrow? Well then," looking cheerfully around, "there's nothing to do except to say good-bye."

"Good-bye, mother."

"Good-bye, Henry. Come and see me as often as you can. Because with Len gone, and you gone, why——"

"I shall look in very often and see how you're getting on. And I'll ask Milly to come round sometimes, and keep you company.

"That's good," she said, and kissed me.

I had scarcely reached the bend of the road, when finding in a pocket the latch-key, I ran back with it, opening the door and letting myself in.

"Recollected just in time that—— Why, what's the matter?" She was resting near the deal table; her back trembling; I put my arm around her neck. "What's the matter, mummy? Don't you want me to leave you?" She could not answer and I knelt down beside her. "Tell me which you'd rather I did, and I'll do it. Stop or go?"

"Go!" she whispered through her tears.

"Then," definitely, knowing she did not mean this, "I shall stop."

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I have found life on retrospection similar to a Continental trip, viewed from the same distance. At the time, a generous sprinkling of worry and anxiety; trouble in making oneself understood and in understanding other people; detrimental fellow passengers, with complete indifference on the part of those who ought to be active. Conveyances over-heated; difficulties in regard to sitting accommodation. Frequent arguments over the inspecting of tickets. A sigh of intense relief on the part of all when the journey came to end. But memory of irritants never lasts very long; a few days of interval and they are forgotten; only the pleasing circumstances remain. Similarly I can pick out the days of my youth that were specially joyous, whilst those which intervened have left no impression.

In particular, there comes to me with every detail, a day in Surrey. I managed to get passes from the advertising department of the South Western Railway for Henry Orew, Esquire and one; the intention being to take my mother. Len, asked to give approval to this scheme, went further, and declared it would be an easy matter for him to obtain leave for the day, upon which my mother, without hesitation, resigned good-humouredly, and sent us off in the morning with a newspaper parcel of sandwiches which Len pitched out of the window near Vauxhall.

"Nothing looks worse," he explained, "than to see a well-dressed man carrying a parcel."

We sang on the way down (I have never found my voice

sound anywhere so admirably as in a railway carriage) and he told me some capital anecdotes in regard to which my only regret was that I did not know anyone, but old Latham, to whom they could be repeated. The guard of the train, at first on the defensive, became, at each stopping-place, more and more the slave of Len, and at our destination, begged and entreated we should catch the six-thirteen back, for that would be the return train of which he took charge. We went across a large common in the direction of the village, and played about on the way as though we were boys again, challenging each other to races, and to jumping; finally we tried the old wheelbarrow form of progress. Len, as driver, dropped my ancles suddenly when two young women who were blackberrying came in sight; leaving me to regain dignity as well as I could, he went forward and politely assisted in releasing one from the brambles. Were we, might he ask, far from the village? They answered that a short-cut existed, discovered by them but a day previously, which would take us there in less than twenty minutes; they were, in fact, returning by that route. Would it be too much to ask that they should take the trouble to act as guides? No trouble at all, but a pleasure.

"Exceedingly kind of you," declared Len, with the easy manner that I always envied.

We walked abreast until a narrow path between bushes compelled us to divide, and then, as Len escorted the prettier girl, I found my natural awkwardness became more apparent than usual. For one thing, I was in love with Milly Fowler, and to speak to any other young woman in tones of even ordinary courtesy seemed to me then, disloyal. Len and his companion soon reached the stage of good terms, and when she espied nuts, he ordered me to devise some means of pulling down the branches; the nuts secured, I handed them to him and he presented them to the lady. They told us of a cricket match to be played that afternoon; this constituted, it appeared the first real incident of their stay in the country. The item of information led to others. Engaged in the same

place of business in Berners Street, Oxford Street, they had resolved for months to take their holiday together and to take it right away from all the clatter and turmoil of town ; the result of the experiment had not been entirely satisfactory—

"I didn't begin the row, Ethel."

"Don't be so silly, Janie. You know very well who started it."

—And the first morning had exhausted the attractions of neighbourhood.

"You'll be all right now," remarked Len.

"Does that mean you are going to stay on for several days?" asked Ethel.

"How do you think we can possibly leave until you are gone?"

They were to have lunch at one o'clock at the cottage where they were staying, and did not make any attempt to hide satisfaction when my brother fixed an hour and a place for meeting afterwards. We went on to the inn, and there the preparations for an evening meal for the two teams would have defied anyone but Len ; he found the proprietress who, declaring distractedly that her brain was giving way, consented nevertheless to see what could be done in the way of mutton chops.

"Now, what do you say?" he asked, over the rice pudding. "Shall we stay here and see the game, or shall we go for a long walk?"

"But we promised to meet them."

"That don't matter," he said, lightly.

A rare, an exceptional afternoon. The visiting folk were one short, and Len very kindly waived claims of seniority and allowed me to fill the vacancy. I could see him whilst I was fielding, the object of adoration on the part of the two London girls ; later when the chance came to do some batting, I observed that his audience had increased, and I felt happy in knowing that Len was enjoying himself ; he always appeared at his best with a good circle around him. When I was run out, by the stupidity of a youth who looked

like a butcher, and behaved as a lunatic, something that Len said, as I returned to the tent, gained a roar of laughter.

We gave the girls tea on the lawn at the back of a small house which advertised its willingness to provide refreshments by a coy notice nearly hidden in the window by fuschias, and my brother mapped out picnics and expeditions for several days ahead. They took little or no notice of me, and I sat back, listening to him and wondering, and worshipping.

"Let me see," he said, looking at his watch, "we ought to inquire about rooms."

We left them outside the cottage with a full and precise arrangement for meeting on the following morning. I had begun to expostulate with him as we walked away, when he suddenly left me. Returning, he mentioned that neither of them knew how to kiss, and turning the conversation, made no further reference to the two damsels, but began to reckon up disbursements of the day. It was wonderful, this ability of his, to dismiss a subject; I often thought that his mind had a number of compartments, upon any of which he could, at will, close the door.

In the following year I was a fellow traveller with the plain girl in a Bayswater omnibus, and her pretended failure to recognise me made the brief journey the longest I can remember. Still, the day was one spent in the good company of Len, and for that reason, worthy of record here.