CHAPTER IX

TWO MEETINGS WITH LEN

I BOUGHT a blank volume at the stationer's near Clifton Hill and began to collect newspaper references to Len. At first he sent some to me, consisting mainly of notices of public dinners and his name in the alphabetical list following the words, "Among others present were—" I discovered in a financial paper a report of a meeting where he fought some of the directors, with, at the start, calls of "Time!" from other shareholders, and "Shut up!" and various discouraging ejaculations, but these (so far as one could guess from the report) quietened down, and then came "Good, good," and "Cries of Bravo," and at the end "Loud and long continued cheering." I felt as proud of this as Len himself could have done; blamed myself for daring to blame him for not giving me a chance to show off my new evening-suit (I did wear it at the Fowler's in St Donatt's Road one night, holding a kind of private view, and compelled to walk around the room a dozen times that Milly and all could admire the excellent fit at the back). I wanted to bring home a bottle of paste, but my mother insisted she was entitled to a share in the task, and for each slip made a fresh lot of flour and water. I found her sometimes poring over the extracts which she must have learnt, as I had learnt, by heart; it constituted one volume to add to "Queechy" which hitherto constituted her only literature. Milly and I each read, and kept in hand, three serials in the magazines or weekly papers, and when we met for walks, a good deal of the time was taken up in reporting the advance made, announcing that Princess Olga had not yet been caught, that Gilbert Hathering had discovered the missing document in

a secret drawer at the back of his uncle's writing-desk, that Lady Muriel Garthorne, in pretending to be a governess, had been so fortunate as to engage the notice of a youth employed in the electrical works who, unless the reader was greatly mistaken, would prove to be none other than Sir Hugh, the man she was called upon to marry under her father's will. Milly proved cleverer than I, for she could remember details; I recall one evening when we were walking up Pepy's Hill, and she was giving a spirited extract, an old lady with a lace cap took the trouble to come out of her house and run after us, begging, in breathless tones, that we would stop quarrelling, give way to each other, and make it up.

It was not at the bean-feast of that year, but the one succeeding, that I found an admirable opportunity of being grateful to Len. I had not seen much of him; he and Kitty Latham quarrelled, and something she said about him prevented me from speaking to her for a month or two, but she was able to inform me they had met again, bye-gones were to be bye-gones, she admitted she had tried to fall in love with some one else and failed. I felt very glad Kitty behaved sensibly, and on the understanding that she withdrew the remark concerning Len, we resumed terms of friendship.

"You and I are going to be chums, little brother-in-law," she said, "whatever happens. Look at this brooch he gave me!"

Mr Latham declared, admitting that on the previous occasion he might have had just a drop too much before the time came, there existed no good excuse for the behaviour of the men, and he threatened to give up the outing altogether, but I pointed out to him that it was a diversion to which the men looked forward; reminded him of the tumultuous cheering which came when he sat down. Mr Latham said that, wanting to be popular, he had no desire to buy popularity; if, however, I considered the men were properly grateful, he would give them one more chance.

"But Henery," he said, impressively, "understand this. You'll have to take it on this time."

"Take what on, sir?"

"The speechifying."

"But I—I've never tried anything of the kind!"

"Never too soon to make a start," he decided. "You have a go at it, and see how you get along. When the moment comes, I shall simply get up and say, 'Owing to me having a touch of a cold, I call upon my factotum, Mr Henery Drew, to speak a few words on my behalf.' Then," said Mr Latham, genially, "up jumps His Nibs and talks to them like a cheap jack!"

I rehearsed three separate and distinct speeches, with three separate and distinct manners, in regard to which Milly said that not one seemed to her to hit the exactly right note; I pointed out that our men were not nearly so difficult to please as were young women who stayed at home and helped their mother in St Donatt's Road, and did a little private dressmaking. I had nearly made up my mind to go to Len and ask for advice and help, when my mother announced to me one evening, that the lady next door informed her the name of Drew was mentioned in the local paper, and I flew to the Broadway to buy a copy of the *Kentish Mercury*. "Mr Leonard Drew," said the newspaper, under the heading of Personal, "will be amongst the speakers at the meeting already announced for Wednesday next at the New Cross Public Hall. Mr Drew, who was formerly a resident of the neighbourhood, comes to us with strong recommendations as a public speaker, and we promise him a cordial welcome."

"I'm going to that, Henry," declared my mother, slapping the table emphatically. "Say what you like, but I'm going. I'm going to that meeting and going to hear my Len get up before a crowd of people and speak. You do as you please!"

Milly very handsomely gave in concerning my evening suit, and gained her mother's permission to go without a hat,

wearing on her head something of a light, lace nature called, I believe, a cloud. There was difficulty in obtaining tickets for three, but I moved heaven and earth and Mr Latham, in order to avoid worrying Len; the third came on the very morning of the affair. My mother wanted me to send him a telegram—an extravagance I had never heard her suggest before—asking him to eat with us, but I mentioned he would probably come from town with other people, warned her we must on no account make ourselves conspicuous. If Len saw us, and if Len liked to speak to us, well and good, but it was certainly not for us to push ourselves forward and claim his time at a moment when he would be fully engaged. I begged her to take particular care about the front of my best shirt which she was ironing.

We held reserved seats, and I had impressed upon my mother and upon Milly the necessity of not reaching the Hall too early, but we were there in the passage at half-past seven just before the doors opened, my two companions declaring they had never before, in their lives, been compelled to walk at such a desperate pace. We found ourselves, when inside, the only occupants of the six first rows, with the lights not yet turned up, and a certain amount of uproar at the back, appeals to sit down, commands to take off hats, noisy orders to stop the noise. Young men began to come to the green baize reporters' table; a steward fussed around them.

"'Tisn't coming up to my anticipations," remarked my mother, dolefully.

"We must have patience," said Milly. "Twenty minutes to spare yet."

"Not much interest taken in politics about this neighbourhood," I remarked, standing to give folk at the back an opportunity of seeing me. They sent up a loud shout of "Waiter!" and I sat down.

The first man arriving on the platform and making his way through a thick forest of wooden chairs, received such a thundering burst of applause that he retired quickly. Folk

were shown into the reserved seats to our great relief, but a grisly apprehension began to possess me that I might prove to be the only man in the hall costumed with distinction, and I was about to put my light overcoat on when another evening dress youth came; we exchanged a look of congratulation and relief.

"Seems to be filling up slightly," remarked my mother.

"It will be a capital audience," prophesied Milly. "Do keep still, there's a good fellow, Henry; you're continually shifting about."

The platform folk came now in detachments of three and four, eyeing the back of the Hall; a few shook heads regretfully. The back of the Hall began to sing, and in the small gallery two young men blew tin trumpets. Some one in the seats behind us muttered appreciatively, "There's going to be a row!" I turned round and said in a sharp tone of voice, "There had better not!" and the man who made the remark asked what I had to do with it; I retorted vaguely I had a good deal to do with it; he insisted on further details concerning my responsibility, to which I answered, with increased mystery, that he had better wait and see. The chairman and some of the speakers came to the front of the platform, and those of us in sympathy cheered sufficiently to drown the less complimentary sounds.

"Do you see him, Henry?" whispered my mother.

"Sit down," roared the people at the back. "Sit down and keep down!" The man with whom I had had an altercation explained to them that I was the one person managing the entire affair.

The Hall listened to the Chairman because he possessed a white beard and a title; when, after giving the objects of the meeting, he announced it was not his intention of standing in the way of other speakers, applause came which apparently induced him to reconsider his idea of going on for an additional ten minutes. The prospective candidate for the borough spoke next and, possessing a tremendous

voice that increased its volume whenever any interruption or disturbance occurred, he too managed fairly well. But to the following speaker, a local man, the Hall definitely refused to give attention from the moment when he said, "My dear friends and fellow working men!" to the time when he declared they were a lot of noisy, snarling dogs, who ought to be wearing muzzles; if one of them bit him, he said, then for him the next train to Paris and a course of treatment by Mr Pasteur; he promised, scarlet in the face, and with threatening fist, that if they only waited for him outside, he would take them all on, one after the other; finally threw himself down with so much violence as to break the wooden chair, and the Hall, after a long scream of delight, prepared to deal with another speaker.

"I must really appeal to you—" shouted the Chairman.

"Trot another of 'em out."

"I must really ask you——"

"Next please!"

"I ask you, as Englishmen, and men of—" An old bowler hat whirred down to the platform; the chairman announced a name, the reporters putting hands to ears in order to catch it.

"It's Len," cried my mother and I, in duet.

He had been sitting at the side of the platform screened from us by a large fern, and came forward now to the Chairman's table, smiling at the uproar and holding in his right hand a card with notes. Len was looking older, just about the age I myself wanted to be; his moustache had become thicker, his hair was parted differently. He wore a most excellent frock coat, with a few violets in the buttonhole, not a full bunch. Mother and Milly, slipping off gloves, helped me in the effort to furnish a good reception, as he stood there facing the tumult.

"This is the sort of thing." They gave farm-yard imitations. "I thoroughly enjoy." They groaned. "I've been to a drawing-room meeting in the West End this afternoon."

Cries of "Snob," and more booing. "And there, you know, not a sound came from the audience from start to finish." Some one shouted, "You sent them to sleep, that's why!" My brother went on. "But this fine, crowded Hall, and this enthusiastic meeting is also graced by the presence of ladies, and not too many of them; just enough to make us feel that we have to be on our best behaviour in their presence." A few of the women said in shrill tones, "Hear, hear!" the clamorous young men moderated efforts. "Some of these good and charming ladies who have done us the honour of coming to our meeting, are known to you, honoured and respected by you; there is one here to whom I owe everything. One here to whom I am indebted for the happiness that came to me in early years. One here—perhaps she is the only one—who wants to listen to what I have to say. Gentlemen"—he paused and everyone leaned forward—"she is my mother!"

Len held them all right after that. I passed my handkerchief along, really needing one myself; my mother retained it, fluttering it now and again when the Hall cheered. Len told a story about a slow suburban railway train (always a safe subject) and the Hall rocked with laughter; drew a parallel between this train and the party opposed to us, and the Hall showed that it recognised the point; stopped at the end of ten minutes.

"There, mother," he concluded, glancing down. People stood up to look at us, and we became red with pride. "That's the best I can do, and I wish for your dear sake I could have done better. Gentlemen," addressing the Hall again, in a voice that broke slightly, "I want you—I want you to know that by listening to me courteously, you have made one woman very happy."

Loud cheers.

"And any man who can honestly say that to himself is a man who need not be ashamed of feeling he has lived to some good purpose!"

You might have thought from the subsequent behaviour

of the meeting that no idea of discord or of opposition had ever entered its head. There were three other speakers (not particularly fluent), and when they found attention slipping, all they had to do was to remark, "As my friend Mr Drew has very happily said—" and the Hall signified its pleasure in being thus reminded of Len's speech. He had gone back to the seat previously occupied, and presently, in the interval between two speakers came forward to shake hands with the Chairman, and whisper an excuse, watch in hand; the Hall cheered him once more, but he modestly ignored this and went off quietly.

"Then we shan't see him afterwards!" I remarked to Milly, disappointedly.

"You'll have plenty of opportunities of running up against him."

"Never so many as I want. Confess now," I urged, "don't you think he's a man anyone could admire? Isn't he splendid."

She spoke to my ear. "You're my boy," said Milly.

To the Keston Common outing I persuaded my mother to accompany me, and she assured me afterwards I spoke very well; better indeed than she had expected; the only thing was—it might have been fancy—she could not get rid of the impression that she had heard something like it before. My mother hastened to add that this was no doubt only imagination on her part. The newspaper cutting-book began to grow stout.

I wrote to Len, telling him how delighted we were, giving a message from mother, and an invented one from Milly, but he did not reply. Kitty Latham had a furious quarrel with me because I told her nothing about the meeting, declining to accept the explanation that it was impossible to obtain another ticket, and calling me deceitful, underhanded; accusing me of lack of straight-forwardness, and when I endeavoured to protest, took me once again by the shoulders and shook me fiercely. I knew before this she had a temper of her own, but its full violence had

not hitherto been exhibited, and I found myself irritated into expressing the view that she was not nearly good enough for my brother, upon which she burst into tears. Mr Latham came in at that moment. "Look you here, Henery, my lad," he said, shaking a forefinger at me. "Don't want to complain without cause, and don't want to go into the rights or wrongs of the affair, but if anyone upsets my girl, I shall upset him. I shall upset him in a manner that won't make it necessary for anyone ever to upset him again, as you may say!" It is fair to mention that Kitty re-assured him, declaring the fault entirely hers, and begging her father to dismiss the incident from his mind. "As you wish," he conceded. "Only I should like it to be gener'lly known that I don't always forget, and I'm one of the worst hands at forgiving that you'll come across this side of the river!"

Milly wanted to see *Dorothy* and had made herself acquainted with the music; when it became no longer possible to evade the hints given—I must have often appeared mean in those days, but really there was not a great deal of money to spare; both my mother and myself wanted to pay our way, and have the rent complete and ready by the end of each quarter when the landlord came to tell my mother how much better she was looking and to collect it—then I took Milly up to an afternoon performance and afterwards we had tea in Piccadilly. Being in the West End, it seemed right we should explore a neighbourhood not fully known to either of us, and we crossed and went up Sackville Street, which I thought led straight into Regent Street. Finding this was not the case, I took Milly into Savile Row, assuring her I knew the way, and there, after another turning, found myself in a perfect maze, so that it seemed likely one would have to submit to the indignity of putting a question to a constable. Keeping on, we came to Hanover Square where a distracting number of roads presented themselves for selection.

"Now," triumphantly, when we discovered ourselves in

Regent Street, "now say I don't know London. This is Verrey's, this corner restaurant."

"So I see," remarked Milly, "by the name at the corner. Which way do we turn now?"

A hansom pulled up as we were going to cross, and we waited to see who alighted; another followed closely, and the two well-dressed men who had stepped from the first, having paid their man, waited for the people in the second cab.

"Len!" I exclaimed, squeezing Milly's arm. It only required this event to set the top on an admirable day, and give me something of special note to tell my mother at home. "I'm going to speak to him!"

"Wait and see whether he notices us."

The large important woman in a white opera-cloak (not much over thirty-five, but that seemed to me then an advanced age) chatted to the two young men whilst Len found some silver.

"Now we are ready," said Len. "Exceeding sorry to have detained you, Mrs Woodrow. Allow me to go first."

I went forward and touching his coat said "Hullo!" He looked down, and it was clear he did not recognise me in my new bowler hat, for he shook his head and went on up the stairs. We heard the large lady saying the police, if they were of any use at all, should positively interfere and put a stop to all this pestering; twice that day she had been spoken to by dreadful men who wanted to sell bootlaces.