

CATS AND CLOVER

CHAPTER I

IN 1827, a long ago year, now thick with the dust of time, there was born in a Suffolk vicarage, a young gentleman of the name of John Woden. He was a vigorous young gentleman from birth, fat, buxom and lusty as any baby of 1927 or 1727 or, indeed, any year which you may care to select, and like them all, his elders and progenitors gathered round, prophesying great things and good fortune, just in fact as has been prophesied of every millionaire and profligate, of every success and failure, at all times in their babydom.

The Fourth George still reigned in the United Kingdom and the Electorate of Hanover, and was yet three years from the day when he would meet a certain Old Man with a Scythe. Canning held the reins of government for the last time, not being very sure of his friends, but most desperately certain of his enemies. The Duke of Wellington strutted the stage of life, crusted with a past reputation and a new unpopularity. Metternich remained a cloud on the Continent. There were wars and rumours of wars. But none of these things was so important to his immediate circle as the birth of baby John Woden, fat, buxom and lusty, and giving early signs of that determination, which was to serve him well and sundry others so badly.

His father was the vicar, and an extremely poor one at that, not only in his preaching but in his purse. His

standardised discourses were of a soporific nature; the richer gentry came to church, breathed fervently into their hats and went to sleep during the sermon; the choirboys were kept reverently awake by judicious jabs in the back of the neck. Nevertheless young John Woden's father was a nice man, and well liked in his parish, for he was a weak character and would stand an extraordinary amount of nonsense without protest. People like weak characters; they give others an illusory feeling of strength.

"Hear you've a son and heir, Woden?" remarked the squire, a bluff man, with a ruddy complexion, due to healthy country air and the cheapness of port. "How's he doing, eh?"

"Very well, Sir Richard, thank you. I believe him to be a remarkably healthy boy."

"Damme, that's good. Bring him up well and make a gentleman of him. The country needs gentlemen, Woden. It needs men." The squire shook his head, solemnly. "It's in a bad state. Look at these damned trade-unions! Look at the damned chartism. My brother was up in Glasgow last month, and he tells me that it is a hot-bed of revolution: a centre of sedition, sir."

"Deplorable, Sir Richard."

"I hear they're talking of another general strike. You remember that business in May '20?"

"I have a vague recollection——"

"Of course, the government will never allow that, but there's an infernally ugly spirit in the country, Woden. All this nonsense about reforming the Commons." He became choleric: "Well, if they do, I shall never sit in it again!"

This was a very good prophecy. After 1832, he never did.

"The fact is, Woden, we've never got over the war, and we never shall. That fellow, Napoleon, ruined us. By Gad, it's twelve years since we got our victory, and we're paying for it!" He sighed. "Subsidising our allies and

the rogues not paying us back. If you or I did that, Woden, we should be clapped in the Fleet. We'll be allies with the cursed Frenchmen yet, fighting some of the fellows who helped us to beat them."

"I hope there will be no more wars," said John Woden's father, blinking nervously.

"Do you, by Gad? Then you have a——sanguine temperament, let me tell you that. Excuse me!" The squire coughed, "Forgot your cloth, dammit. In my father's time a gentleman could live like a gentleman, but now the taxes and the wages don't give a man a chance. And I tell you what! They'll tinker with the Corn Laws next until they ruin the lot of us."

"Surely not, Sir Richard?"

"Mark my words they will. I declare the country is done for; the Corsican ruined us. We'll never get over it. What do you expect with the statesmen we've got? In my young days, statesmen were statesmen, but now—bah! Canning's a fool, and so's Huskisson, and so is Robinson. . . . fools, the lot of them." He coughed again, as Mr. Woden looked as pained as he dared, "Excuse me, forgot your cloth, dammit!"

"It's doesn't matter, Sir Richard!"

"Doesn't it? Well, it damn well ought to, let me tell you that. 'Doesn't matter' is the curse of the country, sir, and when our parsons get it, heaven help us. I'm ashamed of you. There man, don't look like a sick cow. How's the son?—Oh, I asked you that. How's the wife?"

"Poorly, Sir Richard, I am sorry to say. Very poorly."

"Damme, that's bad. I'll send her a bottle of port, and don't drink it yourself. Well, I'll be getting along. I'm as empty as a drum."

Mr. Woden wandered on alone, somewhat depressed, and meditating on the imperfect world to which young John Woden had come. It was a beautiful spring morning; the woods and fields were decked in a bridal green; there

were the scent and colour of flowers, and the warmth in the air breathed happy promises of summer. The little old village gleaming in the sunlight would have delighted an artist's heart. For that was in the days when artists painted men, women and things as they were, and not as they thought they ought to be, and were pleased and not offended, if you recognised what they represented.

Mr. Woden was not thinking of these things. He was thinking of the horrid, unpleasant tales his own father had told him of that Paris in which he had chanced to be in 1793; of the ordered, peaceful government of centuries broken up, stained with blood and our lives never the same again. Wars and revolutions, and the ancient ways passing; the old families too poor to hold their lands; the new upstarts, who had taken it from them.

Why look at the Hall in the next village, six miles away? The old family, founded by a successful London merchant in the Seventh Henry's time, had gone, Heaven knew where, to escape their debts, and in their place was a new-made shipowner baronet, called Todd.

All this chartism and the wanting of votes for everyone and payment of members—what was the country coming to? That was what Mr. Woden wanted to know, and none seemed inclined to tell him except the squire and what he mistook for his own intuition. They combined to inform him that everything was going to the dogs, and not gentlemanly dogs either, but radical barkers with bites in reserve.

"The country will never be the same again," thought Mr. Woden, sadly. And his wife had brought a son into the country which would never be the same again! Most distressing!

He made his way home, and gazed upon a wife who had given all her strength to the lusty son, clamouring for his milk. She was dying, and she knew it. "I think he will grow up to be a fine strong man," she said hopefully.

This was the fourth baby : the other three had ceased to breathe, shortly after commencing, evidently regarding the prospect of life in a vicarage as discouraging and unpleasant. We had a glorious birth-rate in those days, calculated to serve as a shining example to future generations, if the shine were not too much obscured by the ghastly returns of infant mortality.

"Yes, love," replied Mr. Woden, absently, for he was engaged in sundry upsetting calculations of a financial nature. This son and heir had to be paid for, and by some desperate means it was necessary that he should be brought up and educated as a gentleman. His reverence could but remember Elijah and the ravens, with some misgivings. For the Suffolk ravens seemed particularly fat, idle and self-centred birds, much too intent on their own comings and goings to remember and emulate the glorious deeds of their Eastern ancestors.

"I want him to be a power for good in this world," said Mrs. Woden faintly, "You must make him a clergyman, dear."

"We must see what his inclinations are when he becomes of an age to reason," answered his father, dubiously.

"As the twig is bent, the tree is inclined," murmured Mrs. Woden faintly, and turned her face to the pillow, somewhat exhausted by a more brilliant remark than usual. She spoke, however, of twigs and trees ; very dissimilar beings to babies and men. The young twig on the bed was not to prove of a particularly bendable nature.

In the course of a few days, Mrs. Woden passed to another, and it is to be hoped a better, world, amidst the tears of many weeping friends and relatives, whose disbursements of these were in inverse ratio to their disbursements of money. Mr. Woden would have found the latter more comforting.

"No doubt these happenings are for some wise purpose we don't know of," said a burly farmer, who was a cousin of

John Woden's mother. In voicing this fatuous platitude, he meant to be consoling.

"Exactly," answered John Woden's father. "Henry, if you could lend me ten guineas——?"

"No, that is quite impossible."

However, somehow, with the help of a hired woman from the village, John Woden grew and thrived. He toddled into the reign of William the Fourth, and when he wanted anything particularly, he usually howled for it, and obtained it by sheer force of character. He walked a sturdy boy of ten into the reign of Queen Victoria, and when he wanted anything at that period he usually fought for it.

At this time, he was imbibing knowledge at home from his father. He was an intelligent scholar, but a very critical one.

It was over a Scripture lesson that he first came into conflict with his easy-going father. He had just been listening to the story of Jonah and the Whale with growing scepticism.

"Is that true, sir?" he asked, abruptly.

"True?" Mr. Woden was much startled. "It is in the Bible," he said, sternly, under the impression that he had answered his son's question. "Everything in the Bible is true," he continued angrily, "It is Inspired. And whoso believeth not that, shall without doubt, perish everlastingly."

"Does that mean hell?"

"Yes, sir, for the wicked and unbelieving, it certainly does."

"Hell seems rather cruel," observed young John, thoughtfully, "When Wiggins, the publican's boy, put the cat's nose against the candle, I hit him, and you said that was quite right and he was a young villain and a brute and gave me sixpence. And yet God is going to burn some of us all up for ever and ever? I don't know that I *like* Him very much if he does things of that sort. It seems brutal whatever you've done. But, perhaps he doesn't

really? Some of these people may have been telling lies." He patted the Bible affectionately.

His horrified father promptly introduced a supple cane into the discussion, after which in much chaos of mind, he went to his study to prepare next Sunday's sermon. It was to be on the terrible blindness of the unreasoning heathen who worshipped idols. The collection was to help them replace such folly with the enlightened beliefs of 1837 England, including the vague belief that Cain's wife appeared like a rabbit from a conjuro's hat.

There were yet many years before Darwin would also be amongst the prophets. Science must wait long before she scattered her enemies, and did his reverence know it, those of Faith as well.

Meanwhile, young John, sorer and wiser, had learned the valuable lesson that silence is golden and less painful.

However Mr. Woden was a good man, who meant well by his only son, and in due course young John went to the school that had been his father's in the hope that he would eventually adopt his father's profession. In a less hard-and-fast age he might have done, and would probably have risen to be a bishop. But the barbed wire of mythology wound round and round belief in those early days. Young John had no liking for the barbed wire.

"I can't believe that silly nonsense," he said to himself.

It was a case of all or none. It became none.

In his first secret week of atheism, despite his strength of character, he went about in some qualms, lest fire descend from heaven and consume him; it is possible that a thunderstorm coinciding with morning chapel, would have sent him again to look at the Thirty-Nine Articles.

For he was still quite young, and to abandon a religion is an ordeal for a boy, especially during the first week.

However, there was no thunderstorm or fire. On the contrary he became head of his form, an event which had not occurred for some time. On Saturday, an uncle visited

him, having previously paid calls at the neighbouring races and the *Three Fishers*, and being in an expansive and alcoholic mood gave young John a sovereign. He began to think that there really must be something in his father's remarks about the wicked flourishing like a green bay-tree. He decided that there were worse things than bay-trees.

"Silence is golden," he said to himself, very sagely, knowing that thunderstorms and celestial fire would be as nothing to those from his temporal lords and masters, did the fact of his infidelity become public, for the headmaster was a very devout cleric, who always insisted on conducting morning and evening prayers himself, drunk or sober. A deficiency of belief in one of his pupils would have shocked him almost as much as some defect in the quality of his port.

"He would fail to understand," thought young John, "and I expect he would be violent. Why cannot a fellow think what he likes?"

For young John was of a tolerant temperament in such inexpensive matters, and already clearly perceived that it mattered little what faith a man held, so long as he did not believe in it.