

CHAPTER XI

JOHN having thought very long and carefully over the reported visitor to his uncle's room, finally came to the conclusion that he had insufficient data to form a conclusion and gave the matter up. There were three possibilities. Either the appearance was that of Lizzie Bonvill in person, or someone whom the disordered mind of the dying man had mistaken for her. These were the first two, and the last possibility was that of a ghost.

"I am thoroughly of the opinion," thought John, "that although this is a big universe there is no room in it for ghosts. I do not expect to give birth to one when I die, nor do I think any others have done so. Besides there is no evidence that Lizzie Bonvill is dead."

There were equal drawbacks to the theory that some actual person, Lizzie or otherwise, had obtained admittance at that time. He rather wondered whether Mr. Brown had hypnotised the doctor with what would be uppermost in his mind. John's scepticism was prepared to let a case be stated on the part of telepathy and an allied science.

There was no fear in John's mind. He was only desirous of investigating interesting phenomena, but he was too busy to go further into the matter just then. There were Mr. Brown's papers to investigate.

There appeared to be no relatives of consequence, and the will left everything to him: "*And I direct that as long as the premises in the Strand shall remain in the possession of my nephew, John Woden, he shall place every night a lighted candle in the window of Lizzie Bonvill's room until she comes home.*"

"Dear old uncle," said John, "I rather expected him to leave her something. I wonder why he did not? I suppose he thought a missing heiress might complicate the administration of the will?"

Some such thought had been in Mr. Brown's mind. In any case he relied so implicitly on his nephew doing the right thing by Lizzie if ever she returned that he had no uneasiness as to her welfare.

John gave his new position careful consideration. He was now in sole command, and the income from the two shops was sufficient to keep him in affluence. However, he was not a wealthy man, but merely comfortably off. The Will o' the Wisp of Ambition lured him on. John was a careful follower, and when Willy blew out the lantern was not likely to find himself in a morass.

Iron and coal and steel attracted him. He was not content to be a retailer all his life. Besides there was another side to the matter. He was now twenty-six and socially ambitious, and the people who mattered in the "fifties" were very exclusive.

The professions were received with limitations. Society recognised barristers but not solicitors, and doctors but most decidedly not chemists. Even barristers and doctors were admitted on sufferance. Trade was recognised in the persons of wealthy manufacturers, but retailers were shopkeepers and inferior beings.

Therefore it would be advisable from that point of view to cease to be a chemist and become something wealthier and more respectable. John decided to retain the Strand shop for sentimental reasons, which he would not admit even to himself, and sell the Piccadilly premises if he could get sufficient for them.

He not only sold them for their value but at a good deal over, leaving the purchaser under the impression that he had acquired an extremely valuable bargain. John's personality was a wonderful asset to him.

"Not so bad," said John, as he came away from the deal.

"Not so bad," said the purchaser, as John left him. He considered that his wisdom and experience had served him well, for he was fifty and of portly girth, which added dignity to his bearing and slowness to his progression. He thought himself much too clever for any young man of twenty-six.

"All brawn and no brains," he thought, as the Herculean frame of John Woden passed out of the doorway.

John had no time to waste in thinking about the late purchaser. He was in possession of a considerable sum of money which must not be allowed to eat off its head in its stable. How could it most profitably be employed?

The year 1853 was one of big events. Mr. Gladstone had introduced his first Budget. The hateful impost of a sevenpenny income tax annoyed him. He planned to extinguish it within seven years. Like many other hopes it was destined to be frustrated. In the meantime, he encouraged temperance by reducing the duty on tea, and cleanliness by abolishing that on soap.

Esmond and *Bleak House* were adding laurels to English literature.

There were little wars in Burma and South Africa, and we were drifting steadily into a great one with Russia.

This last development interested John Woden particularly. It seemed to offer many possibilities.

"Armaments," thought John Woden.

So taking time by the forelock, he contrived to float a little company having works by Rotherhithe, and by adroit means obtained from the very jaws of greater but slower competitors, a large contract from the Turkish Government for the manufacture of ball cartridges.

These useful articles were to be in great demand that autumn. The Turks—being our friends—had with great

gallantry defeated the Russians at Oltenitza. The Russians—being our enemies—had with great brutality defeated the Turks at Sinope. Therefore Britain and France forgot Waterloo and fell upon each other's necks in brotherly love.

John Woden secured more contracts. The little works at Rotherhithe enlarged and grew again. The bank balance swelled visably.

In 1854 the war began, and the Administration proceeded to take charge of it with every possible act of incompetence, blundering and wrong-headedness that could possibly be got together. Whilst Todleben was teaching future armies the value of earthworks, the devastating economy of Gladstone was starving the British army horses and holding up the transport. Florence Nightingale battled against medical ineptitude. The Russian winter allied itself to the Russian Czar, and the British troops were so dispirited that they even forgot to swear.

To do John credit, he would gladly have taken a hand in the actual fighting, but the period of the nation in arms was not then. Being at home, whilst others wagged flags he made ball cartridges by the hundred thousand and the million. Had he been called to fight, he would have gone without a murmur, but according to War Office methods then prevalent, the war would have been over before he could have got to it.

In the summer of 1855 having worked many months, untiringly without a holiday, it came upon John suddenly that he would like to take one and he thought of Angeline. "She will be sixteen now. I wonder if she still plays wood 'syrups' in the wood?"

He thought of Redchall and its pleasant woods glimmering in the late June sunshine. Around him was the dust of Rotherhithe.

So he went to the big new station at King's Cross, then thought a model of British architecture, and took a ticket

for the nearest station to Redehall. There was no station at Redehall itself as yet, but doubtless in time one would come and the shining steel rails bestride the valley like a giant octopus and greasy smoke waft into the scented woods.

"I wonder," considered John, "what is the best way of getting in touch with her? I must not earn her a whipping."

It was evident that considerable tact would be necessary. He put up at *The Black Bull* in the village, and smoking a pipe in his bed-room strictly against all orders, thought of the Angeline he had known. It was odd; it gave the practical calculating John Woden quite a thrill to think that she was so near.

In the morning he went into the back garden of *The Black Bull*, and threading his way through a litter of beer barrels and scattering chickens, opened a little wicket gate, and passed into the fields.

It was evident that he was trespassing pretty badly, but that did not worry him. Even respect for property rights must give way to Angeline. He made for her wood, and climbing over a fence walked through the trees with the stealth of a Red Indian. Circumspection was necessary: there might be gamekeepers. Worse still there might be Aunt Maria.

It was a hot summer morning. The trees were very still. Presently he heard the sound of splashing water.

He remembered what she had told him of the pond.

Coming through the leaves and branches he came within sight of sunlit water, and then caught his breath in awe. For, seated by the edge on the green grass was a young girl, nude as the morning star. Her beautiful white body was flecked with little gleams of sunlight; her dark hair caressed her shoulders. As he watched, she stretched wide her arms to the blue sky, and turning towards him their eyes met.

For a moment her lips parted in dismay, and she stiffened

in horrified surprise. Then a smile came; the colour was still in her cheeks, but she was no more dismayed.

“Why, it’s John!” cried the voice of Angeline.

He thrust aside the branches, like a more fortunate Actæon, and came towards her.

“Angeline! My little Angeline!”