

CHAPTER XIII

IN days when rapidity of thought was not supposed to be a characteristic of Englishmen, John Woden was singularly blessed by the swiftness and quality of his decisions. To use a colloquialism, it was his habit to be in the limelight striking attitudes, whilst other men were rubbing the glare out of their eyes.

He had become a chemist half-an-hour after first entering his uncle's shop in 1845. He had become a manufacturer of armaments eight years later, with never a falter after the decision had been made. Now the little girl he had rescued in Vienna had become a bigger girl, with budding womanhood in every line of her young body, in every expression of her opening mind. In an hour he had seen her again and loved her and asked her to be his wife.

It was rapid but decisive. He had made up his mind. Perhaps, almost unconsciously, she had been in his thoughts all these years? It was quite certain that only to her was he soft, yielding and sentimental, though never losing that manliness which women admire. Those who knew John Woden to be a hard man, merciless in any kind of a fight and intolerant to his enemies, would have exclaimed in amazement did they see him with Angeline.

He left Angeline in her wood—a crinolined and poke-bonneted Angeline—and, going back to his room at *The Black Bull*, considered his plans for the evening.

The armament business in Rotherhithe had done very well, but the war was drawing to an end. He reckoned himself to be master of some £20,000. This was a con-

siderable sum for a young man of twenty-eight, but he was most properly not satisfied. He and Angeline must take their places amongst the great ones of the earth and not merely amongst the not so great.

He had never lost sight of the fact that money was power. Judicious inquiries during the rest of the day elicited the fact that the fat and fiftyish Mr. Higgins had some ten times his fortune, and, being a landed proprietor, would appeal more as a suitor to a father regardless of his daughter's future happiness.

This matter had to be fought warily. Angeline was resolute, but Angeline was in the enemy's stronghold. His position, if they were hostile, was rather like that of a general seeking to relieve a beleaguered garrison with an opposing army in between.

"That idea of his being a Member of Parliament will have great weight with a man like Mr. Leslie," ruminated John.

Oddly enough, John had never thought very much of his own political label, though something of a political future. It was a time when political labels were rather mixed—a time of Whigs and Peelites and Tories and new Conservatives. As a manufacturer he had little sympathy with Disraeli's leanings towards protection. That statesman had not yet come to the conclusion that that policy was not only dead but damned. He had still less sympathy with Radicals, holding that the extension of the franchise ever lower as they would have, was a danger to the country, as the deeper it sank the more it penetrated waterlogged minds.

John had studied "the sovereign people" in Rotherhithe, and did not think much of them. In his business he chose the most efficient to have power; he did not see why the State should choose the inefficient.

"I shall be a Conservative," said John, "especially if Mr. Higgins is going to be a Whig. I don't really trust any

party: they are all damned opportunists, but then, so am I."

He took a careful mental survey of the constituency. It had been consistently Whig since 1832. The sitting Member was a gentleman who in his later years found it impossible to give both to politics and to whiskey that studious attention which each of them merited, and he therefore proposed to give up politics. After which Mr. Higgins intended to succeed him, and indeed stood rather a good chance, there not even being a Tory in the field. It was regarded as a safe seat.

A formidable nut to crack, but John thought that with a careful mixture of flattery and adroit manœuvring it might be done.

"I must acquire a standing in the town."

So the Redehall Engineering Company was born.

The war was still on, but it was the beginning of the end. With the peace the munition factories would fall in value. It would be possible to buy them more cheaply. John looked into the future. It was to his thinking a time of great expansion to come. There were nearly eight thousand miles of railways in Britain, and the mileage ever increased. The electric telegraph was already stretching mile after mile all over the country.

"I'll take a chance," thought John. "If I give work I get votes. If I get votes I may go to the House of Commons. And there are other reasons why I want an interest in Redehall."

He rose and surveyed the room at *The Black Bull* somewhat disparagingly. Already he had made a few improvements.

It was a time of a great aversion to fresh air. John had found the bedroom apparently hermetically sealed; he had by main strength forced open the windows, top and bottom, not without damage. The curtains which had surrounded the four-poster bed now lay under it. Caloric

remarks about dust had outraged the room-cleaner, but set her to work; a substantial "tip" had then brought smiles and promises of amendment.

Everything was cleaner since he arrived, and the pure air of the hills had been allowed entry.

"That is what Redhall wants; a thorough freshening," said John, "and I am the man to do it."

The chorus of a eulogistic song about beer came from the bar parlour.

"And you shall have that too, you swine, if you'll vote for me."

Saying which, when the time came, he dressed himself in his very best, which was very good indeed, shaved again, and set forth to interview the father of Angelinc.