

CHAPTER XIV

“ I AM sorry,” said Mr. Leslie, very stiffly, indeed, “ but I cannot possibly give my consent.”
“ In that case,” answered John, suavely, “ it will be necessary for me to marry your daughter without it.”

Mr. Leslie purpled. “ My daughter, sir, is under age and will obey my orders.”

“ I am in agreement with your first statement of fact but not your second. I must remind you that being under age is not a static condition. It alters with the years.”

“ You are impertinent, sir,” Mr. Leslie fumed. “ I must request you to leave my house or I shall have you—ah—ejected.”

“ I shall stay here,” announced John, “ until I have brought you to a more reasonable condition of mind. As for having me ejected, if you have half-a-dozen strong men within call, you are at liberty to try. If not, kindly refrain from talking nonsense.”

John leaned back and smiled happily at his unwilling host. The other began to splutter.

“ You will listen to me,” said John. “ And you will be good enough to refrain from interruptions until I have finished speaking. If Angeline loves me, I am going to marry her, if she loves someone else, she is going to marry that someone else, but in any case she is certainly not going to marry any nominee of yours to gratify your idiotic vanity.”

“ Have you no respect for your elders, young man ? ” stormed the infuriated Mr. Leslie. “ Have you no——”

"None at all unless they deserve it. I give reverence to accomplishment and protection to feebleness, but I give none to a man merely for growing old. That is a thing he cannot help and would if he were able. Besides, what has that to do with you? Do you rank yourself as an old man? I do not."

This was really a very astute move. For a brief interval the velvet glove had been slipped on the iron hand. Mr. Leslie was perceptibly gratified.

"I—ah—no. No, Mr. Woden, you are probably correct on that point. I withdraw my hasty remark. But I cannot permit——"

"I am worth," said John, blandly, "some twenty thousand pounds. More, very probably, if I cared to realise all my assets. I feel sure you will excuse my mentioning such a sordid detail as mere money, but as your future son-in-law, it is a fact of some moment."

"Twenty thousand pounds," remarked Mr. Leslie, stroking his chin. "H'm!" Then he remembered that Mr. Higgins was reputed to have two hundred thousand pounds, and he stiffened again.

"I am afraid——"

"It is my intention shortly to stand as a prospective Member for this division."

This was rather an audacious statement. So far from being a prospective candidate, the local party managers had never even heard of John. But he was a believer in Danton's motto: "*L'audace, l'audace, toujours l'audace,*" without in the least sharing that gentleman's heretical opinions.

"You? Bless my soul! But Mr. Higgins is to stand——"

"On the other side, of course, Mr. Leslie. As a Conservative."

Mr. Leslie looked at him rather blankly. It dawned upon him that this stalwart and enterprising young man might be regarded more favourably by the Redehall Division

than the rotund Mr. Higgins, who was not personally popular.

"I am also starting engineering works in the town," added John. This was another audacious statement, seeing that the proposed name had not yet been committed to paper, and that the project had no existence save in his brain.

Mr. Leslie was rocking in his decisions. He was no longer absolutely pro-Higgins. That marriage was still his ideal, but it might not eventuate. He had an uneasy feeling that Angeline for all her sweetness had a stronger will than he, did she care to exercise it. She did not look upon Mr. Higgins with favour; her observations had been decidedly adverse. And here was a young man—a rich young man—a prospective M.P. about to acquire a financial standing in the neighbourhood! Angeline favoured him. It might be well to temporise.

Mr. Leslie decided to entrench himself on the spot, lest he be driven from what remained of his original position.

"I—that is my daughter's happiness is the first consideration with me, Mr. Woden," he began.

"You infernal liar!" thought John.

"But she is—er—too young to contemplate matrimony. Much too young. You must see that, Mr. Woden."

It was the first sensible observation which Mr. Leslie had made, and John apprised it at its due value. Sixteen—even in those days—was certainly too young for wifehood: it was almost too young for betrothal. And John remembered Angeline's legitimate desire that they should both be certain. On the other hand, he strongly suspected that the objection would not have been offered to Mr. Higgins.

Mr. Leslie saw the Achilles heel, and rammed the point home.

"In another couple of years, Mr. Woden, when she is better able to decide such a momentous matter——"

John considered that he intended to be on the spot and in a position to counter hostile action, however surreptitious.

He rose from the chair and looked down on Mr. Leslie from his great height, that gentleman risking a crick in the neck to return the gaze.

"I shall give you no definite period," said John, "but as your suggestion to some extent coincides with Angeline's wishes and my own, I am prepared to fall in with it, more or less."

"It is really good advice." Mr. Leslie was recovering a little pomp with his success.

"I am always ready to listen to advice, Mr. Leslie, and to take it if it agrees with my own opinions. You understand, of course, that no obstacle is to be placed in the interim to my seeing Angeline as often as we both desire?"

"Well, I don't know about that," began Mr. Leslie, dubiously.

"Yes or no." John did not altogether trust Mr. Leslie, and he certainly did not trust Aunt Maria. He was thoroughly of the opinion that the best way to keep people honest was to give them no chance to be otherwise.

"Yes," said Mr. Leslie, sulkily.

"If any hostile action is taken by you surreptitiously, I shall discover it and know how to deal with it," observed John, menacingly. He was not enamoured of Mr. Leslie: how this person could be the father of his dear little Angeline almost passed his comprehension.

"Sir, you are insulting!"

"All right, I apologise. Where is Angeline now?"

"In bed," answered Mr. Leslie.

"Sure?"

"Really, Mr. Woden. Yes, she has indeed gone to bed. The hour is getting late and she is young."

It did not appear possible to verify the statement, so John accepted it. It was certain that the suggestion of a visit to the bedroom to satisfy himself would have met

with horrified protests. What Mr. Leslie would have said to the scene in the woods in the morning could hardly be conjectured.

"Very well," said John. "I shall probably—I may say certainly—see Angeline to-morrow. Good-night, Mr. Leslie. If I have appeared a little abrupt this evening, I beg of you to forgive me and make allowance for the special circumstances." John could afford to be magnanimous; he had gained a point: he did not want Mr. Leslie's plumage to be unduly ruffled, to the encouragement of a bad temper of which Angeline would get the repercussion. Mr. Leslie was just the kind of man to brood over things in the night watches and arrive at the breakfast table furious with the world.

"Very well, young man," rejoined Angeline's father, with a trifle of haughtiness in his tones.

John did not fail to notice it. "When I am a Member of Parliament, I shall introduce you to Mr. Disraeli and Lord Palmerston," he said, with his tongue in his cheek. "I feel sure you would get on excellently well together."

"My dear Mr. Woden," began Mr. Leslie, with no haughtiness at all, being completely taken in by this meaningless observation. He was not a clever man.

"A pleasure, I assure you," said John. "Again, I bid you good-night."