

CHAPTER XV

THE Redehall Engineering Company from being an idea became a scheme; from being a scheme it became a fact. John was in no particular hurry. Munitions of war were still being made, and apart from the fact that the Rotherhithe trade in them had not yet begun to wane, it kept up the price of the Redehall premises he wanted to acquire. He watched his time. When Sevastopol fell, he disposed of a great part of his Rotherhithe interests at the top of the market; when the peace conference sat in Paris, he bought his Redehall interests at the bottom of it.

The new concern was one of the first floated under the new law of limited liability. It had excellent premises near the railway. Already there were rumours that that railway would shortly extend to Redehall itself, up the lovely country valley to the dismay of lovers of nature's beauty. The growth of the small town of Rede had sufficiently troubled them. Once it had been a mere village by the river; not sufficiently important even to give its name to the Parliamentary division. Then it had grown to a blot on the countryside; the trout had fled from the sullied river and black smoke drifted over the fields.

Now it seemed that the octopus was unsatisfied, and that he desired to devour lovely Redehall. Once or twice people had talked about boring for coal, feeling sure from geological signs that it was there; but no one had let them do it.

John heard these things and became thoughtful. Privately he became acquainted with a clever but im-

pecunious gentleman who had made a special study of geology. He entertained him royally at *The Black Bull*, and generally, and listened attentively to his opinions. The geologist was garrulous and bored most men, but John let him ramble on unchecked. After he had gone he bought quite cheaply *The Black Bull* and some surrounding acres, keeping the transaction quiet and suffering the previous landlord to remain *pro tempore* as a tenant.

And in between the multifarious business affairs he spent a great part of the summer of 1855 in Redehall seeing his little wood "syrup" in her secluded wood by day and sometimes openly at nights in her father's house.

John would sit by the side of the pool, whilst his Angeline paddled in it, and the blue haze of his cigarette smoke would rise into the summer air.

Once she tried the novelty, but coughed and spluttered so much that she was fain to desist.

"Oh, John, I don't know how you can like them," she exclaimed after being patted industriously on the back.

"It is a bad habit, puss. Don't you acquire it."

"I think they look nicer than the pipe, John."

"I like them better."

The cigarette was coming into its own in England, though still regarded as something of a fad. Clarendon had scandalised the Foreign Office by finding inspiration in a bundle of them constantly at his side. Even with this patronage in high quarters they were regarded askance.

But in this, as in other matters, John Woden was a law unto himself.

"Aunt Maria was talking about your smoking them the other night. She said that smoking was ungentlemanly and ought only to be done in taprooms and stables, and she had no patience with footling paper tubes stuffed with weeds. And Mr. Higgins said they were a damned foreign fad anyway, but what was to be expected of a young man who never went to church on a Sunday."

"You know, Angeline, I have the idea that your aunt doesn't like me."

"John, she hates you. I think it is because she can't snub you. When she says anything particularly waspish, you just look at her, or say something ever so smoothly which goes right through her, and she is all bottled up. Papa stuck up for you."

"Did he? How did that happen?" John was really surprised at unsolicited support from that quarter.

"Mr. Higgins had beaten him at whist, and upset him. He said your father was a gentleman, anyway."

"That's true. He was a vicar—a much put-upon parson. Too soft-hearted and one of the very best of men."

"Papa said you had been to a good school, and were a coming man in the district, and knew all sorts of *real* people."

John wondered if the dozen of port and the birds, of which he had begged the favour of Mr. Leslie's acceptance, had had anything to do with these opinions.

"That's good, Angeline. I hope he keeps favourable."

Angeline sighed. "You know papa; I'm afraid he won't. Mr. Higgins will let him win at whist and lend him some money, and then be talking about marrying me. Ugh!" She shivered. "What a terrible thought!"

John looked at her whimsically.

"You know, John, if you don't mind my speaking frankly, it must be quite an ordeal for any girl to go to bed with a man for the first time. I should be all of a flutter the night after the wedding, and he would have to be a very nice man to keep me from going into hysterics or something."

"I expect most brides are of the same mind, but the nervousness goes. It is like plunging into cold water; rather exhilarating after you have plunged."

"All the same, John, the first night of the honeymoon must be rather tiring. Still, people seem to like it for

some reason or other. Isn't it strange that they do, John ? ”

He regarded her rather oddly. It came into his mind to wonder for the first time whether she were totally ignorant of the facts of life and sex. It was probable enough : she had no mother, her father was a man unlikely to be communicative on such matters, and the vinagery spinster, Aunt Maria, much too prudish. It was a day when girls were left brutally to learn such things from their husbands. . . . He thought of his own adolescence.

“ Have you ever been to bed with any girl, John ? ”

The question startled him with its utter unexpectedness. It was said quite innocently ; the same absolute unsophisticated innocence which had led her to see nothing wrong in her nudity, the same beautiful purity which hallowed all her doings.

“ Great heavens, what a question ! ” he exclaimed. And as he spoke, he thought of Elizabeth Bonvill, and a shade came over his mind. John was not proud of that episode in his life, now that it had sunk to the horizon behind him. He was never a man to indulge in vain regrets for past mistakes ; never one to feel useless remorse. At the same time, he wished he could have come to Angeline free from the memory of Lizzie.

“ I expect you have, John : you have done most things, haven't you ? You are such an enterprising young man.”

“ I have had all sorts of experiences, Angeline, good and bad,” he replied, seizing the opportunity of turning the conversation at a tangent.

It was only later on that she realised he had not answered her question.