

## CHAPTER XVI

**A**T the end of 1856 the Redehall Engineering Co. Ltd was in full swing. Prophets of woe had shaken their heads, pointed out that the war had ended and the call for armaments ceased, and had prophesied thin times for all manner of enterprises, particularly engineering. John had listened, smiled and gone on engaging hands. Presently those hands were busy turning out steel rails, which were destined to spread out like a spider's web over the land of Britain. In the United States too, the vast virgin lands west of the Mississippi were to be enmeshed with the same great web. The time of the Indians and the buffalo was drawing to an end : and the time of the steam engine and the corn lands was arriving.

Between the Mississippi and the Rockies, there was a call for the iron road. In Kansas, Colorado, Idaho and many more states and territories would soon be found the products of the Redehall Engineering Company. So John resolved.

Meanwhile to the great wrath of Mr. Richmond Higgins, a shaft was being sunk on the lands lately surrounding *The Black Bull*. John was backing the geologist's opinion that there was coal under that land, and he was backing it very heavily.

"Damme, sir, it will ruin the district," Mr. Higgins stormed and raved. "Pits and chimneys with stinking smoke, sir, and dirty colliers all over the valley. Well, he'll lose all his money in that pit, the impudent young

scoundrel, mark my words. There's no 'coal there," he wound up inconsistently.

There was coal there. Just as the whole of the prospecting syndicate except John were getting nervous, they found the seam. John's fortune multiplied vastly overnight,

It was a long business sinking the shaft and whilst the fortunes of that enterprise were yet in the balance, another shock descended upon Mr. Higgins. John managed to get himself adopted as Conservative candidate for the Division !

"The impudent young scoundrel ! Does he dare to think that he can be a Member of Parliament at his age ? An adventurer, Mr. Leslie, a damned adventurer !" Mr. Higgins stalked about the room, up and down, until his rotund form paused for want of breath. "Making me spend money in fighting him at the next election. H'm !" Mr. Higgins was ambitious, but miserly.

Mr. Leslie watched him nervously. "I hardly think he can win against you."

"Win ? Of course not, Leslie. Don't talk like a fool. But I tell you what : he is hanging round here too much. Can't run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, and I tell you so plainly, man."

"He is Angeline's friend," began Mr. Leslie, wishing to temporise.

"Don't I know it ?" roared the other, "At her age, sir, she has no right to have a man friend at all. It's improper. It's disgusting. Send the young devil about his business. He has the impertinence to become my rival, Leslie. Send him about his business."

"May the best man win," ventured Mr. Leslie, who wished to wait to see how the cat jumped. That kindly wish did not appeal to Mr. Higgins ; it would have been too disastrous to himself.

"You know what was agreed between us, Leslie ? You

know I hold a mortgage on this house? You know the money you owe me?"

Mr. Leslie knew it only too well. He was the kind of man who habitually lives beyond his income, and his friend had been generous, regarding such disbursements as part purchase price of Angeline.

"It will be repaid," he said weakly.

"Not in cash, Leslie, as you very well know. You had better see about matters." With which threat he left the house and his very uncomfortable host.

On March the fourth, 1857, Lord Palmerston's Government were defeated in the House of Commons on the Chinese question. A general election was imminent and John began to prepare for war, and clear his decks for action.

It would have been very difficult for John to be sincere in his campaign, so at the outset he very wisely resolved that sincerity should find no place in his armoury. He admired Lord Palmerston much more than his opponent, the opportunist Disraeli, and he knew him in this matter at issue to be undoubtedly in the right. It was an odd freak of fate which had brought Liberals to the espousal of a war against Chinese aggression and Conservatives against it. However, John was a Conservative, that being rendered necessary by the fact that his chosen opponent was not.

He began by stealing some of his adversaries' thunder, and opened his campaign on the *Civis Romanus sum* note. It was necessary to counteract wanton aggression against our interests in China; at the same time any further war-like commitments were to be avoided. Everything that was necessary to uphold the dignity and honour of Britain was to be done: everything that was necessary to reduce taxation was to be done.

"Look here," said his agent, bursting in upon him, "those farmers who were in here yesterday say you have promised to vote for the re-introduction of the Corn Laws."

"I wonder why people will gather such impressions?"

mused John. "All I said was that anything *practicable* for the advancement of agriculture would have my hearty support, even to the re-introduction of the Corn Laws. They are as impracticable as possible as you very well know."

His agent looked at him doubtfully.

"You have given the manufacturers the impression that you are all for Free Trade——"

"So I am. You know as well as I, my dear Jenkins, that Protection just now is simply not practical politics. Later on, it may crop up in England, but not now."

"You have pledged yourself to the maintenance of the Establishment——"

"I believe in a State Church," said John, blandly. "These big corporations are useful allies in politics."

"But, hang it, Mr. Woden, the Baptist and Methodist crowd are going about talking about your enlightened views on freedom of worship and abolishing tithes and church rates and that sort of thing."

John looked pleased. "I am glad to hear that. I thought I had fetched them. Lots of my employees are their followers, and it will be useful. And I do think tithes and church rates ought to be abolished. Why should dog eat dog?"

The agent sighed. "You have told the total abstainers that true temperance is one of your highest desires for the nation."

"So it is."

"And every publican in the town thinks you stand for the right of man to drink when he likes and as much as he likes."

"I see nothing inconsistent in those two statements, Jenkins."

"Nothing inconsistent? Good Heavens, Mr. Woden, I have never been associated with any candidate who appeared to pledge himself right and left to such a mass of contradictions as you have done."

"I have not pledged myself to anything," answered John, "I have only appeared to as you say. The fact is, my dear sir, this election business is all humbug, as you are perfectly well aware. I have to compliment these people on their enlightened views, on their sapience, the high level of their intellects. Whereas in truth, their brains are of the consistency of mud, they are dolts as their fathers were before them and their sons will be after them. Beer is their highest delight, babies that of their women-folk, to whom I am thankful no one has yet been fool enough to give votes. I must pretend to be pleased at their approbation, while their personal habits disgust me."

"Really, Mr. Woden——"

"Don't be shocked, Jenkins. I want to get into the House of Commons, and if these people are fools enough to send me there, let them."

"But they will remember your pledges, Mr. Woden——"

"Not they. They will forget them almost as soon as I do. Besides, I should be in the Opposition, even if I carry this seat. Lord Palmerston is going back with an increased majority. I think so, and I hope so."

"You hope the other side are going to win the General Election? Well, upon my word!" Jenkins was completely gravelled.

John enjoyed his discomfiture. "I admire Lord Palmerston and I think he is perfectly in the right about this China business. If I get to the House I shall vote for him on it. Otherwise I am a good Conservative. Now, go away and sleep my dear fellow. I must prepare a speech for to-night. This election will be quite a close thing. The division has been solidly Whig for years and you know what a time it takes to get any new idea into the heads of the masses."

It was likely enough to be a very close thing, and Mr. Higgins was still quite confident.

He was confident of another matter too. Gradually the pressure on the unfortunate Mr. Leslie had been increased. On the day of this speech which John was to deliver, the threats had been very open indeed. In addition to that misfortune, Mr. Leslie had received a writ, and knew not where to turn for the money.

Mr. Higgins offered the badgered man a solution.

"I'll pay up everything and give you a fair sum in addition, if you do as I want. If not, you can go to hell. Damn it, can't you control your own daughter? Isn't she under age? Who is this fellow, Woden—a jumped up adventurer? Goes up like a rocket-stick and comes down the same. I know the sort. I want my engagement announced before the election too. These romances please the people."

Mr. Leslie gazed dully at the romantic lover, with his red face, his obesity and his straggling whiskers. "I'll do what I can."

"I want it fixed now."

"Well, take it so then," said the other sullenly, "Announce it, if you like. She will not dare to upset me after that, when she knows the facts."

"Good!" Mr. Higgins went to address his constituents.

So it came to pass that a neat, if not coyly romantic announcement was made to Mr. Higgins's supporters. The lady's name was given amidst loud cheers. John's agent came in with a long face.

"That fellow, Higgins, has stolen a march on us. Nonsense of that sort always goes down with the electorate."

"What has he done?" asked John, and Jenkins told him.

John's clean-shaven face set grimly as he listened. In a world which grew luxuriant hair, he obstinately remained shaven clean, which gave him an odd, but a very formidable appearance when his jaw set as at present.

He had not been able to see Angelina for three days,

and could very well visualise the pressure which must have been made before this announcement was possible.

“The story is not true, Jenkins,” he said, quietly, “You can contradict it.”

“But Higgins himself said——”

“What Higgins said was a lie. Contradict it.”