

CHAPTER XVIII

THE fussy little tug-boat steamed out to sea until the land was a grey line in the distance, and Spurn Head white in the morning sun. It was a calm, clear morning; away to the eastward a single big ship was making her way south under a full spread of canvas, mounting to skysails and a crowd of jibs at the booms. Otherwise the ocean world seemed empty.

The paddles slowed down, and the tall smoke-stack of the tug gave a lesser volume of black smoke. She now had just enough way on her to keep her head to the incoming tide.

The skipper of the tug maintained a portentous gravity as befitted the occasion and the large sum he had been paid, but his crew were smiling. Not in wilfulness, but because Angeline was pretty enough to make all men smile, and the affair had in it a little romance, which went even to their rough hearts.

"Now then, dear, I see Mr. Baddeley is putting on his nightshirt."

"John, how can you say such things? It's a surplice, and I'm sure he looks awfully nice. . . . I am glad the boat is so steady. Do you know, I was wondering if I might feel seasick, and wouldn't it be terrible to be seasick at one's wedding? I'm fearfully excited."

"Nothing to worry about," said John, reassuringly. And then the ceremony proceeded. . . .

"I, John, take thee, Angeline, to my wedded wife to have and to hold from this day forward. . . ."

"I, Angeline, take thee, John, to my wedded husband . . . to love, honour and obey."

Then the skipper of the tug shook them by the hand, and his crew cheered, and they all trooped below to a wedding-feast in the tiny cabin, whilst the boat's head was put about and they headed for the Humber.

On arrival in Hull, John sent a long telegram to his agent, stating his wedding and the details, and inviting him to obtain all possible publicity for the intelligence. He had already smote Mr. Higgins and his designs heavily, and desired to smite him again. An electorate, he thought, is very like a child, infantile alike in its powers of thought and its emotions. He considered that the news might have a distinct appeal.

"I expect papa will be fearfully angry," said Angeline in the train.

"Don't you worry yourself about that, little Mrs. Woden."

"Mrs. Woden." She looked at her gold ring, "Doesn't it sound strange? To think I am a married lady. You must take great care of me, and be ever so gentle with me, now I am your wife."

"Of course, Angeline. I have taken you into my keeping for life, and I shall see that you never regret it."

"Can papa do anything horrid? About my being under age, I mean, and your marrying me without his consent."

"I believe there are several legal possibilities, but I hardly think he will take advantage of them."

"And I suppose our marriage was quite legal without banns and all that?"

"Yes, Angeline, it was, but I see you have a hankering for banns. We shall have them put up in your parish church to please you, and be done all over again."

"Two marriages to the same man: how perfectly thrilling," She nestled contentedly at his side.

John was quite right in his estimate of Mr. Leslie and that gentleman's emotions. After he had recovered from the shock given him by John's note, he raved all through breakfast-time, threatening penalties, possible and impossible, upset his tea and dropped his hot buttered toast on the carpet. Aunt Maria's shrill vituperations supplied a species of Greek chorus. It was Mr. Leslie's principal concern that he had no notion how on earth he was to break the dire news to Mr. Higgins.

However, after a little stimulant, he recovered, and reflected that the damage was done. He looked again at John's note, and re-reading the promise of indemnity for his financial follies, decided to make the best of it.

There was no need to break the news to Mr. Higgins. Shortly after luncheon, a human tornado burst through the doorway and proceeded to comport itself on the carpet.

"That damned young scoundrel—infernal thief—stolen the girl; made me the laughing-stock of the town, sir. All over the damned place; by Heaven you shall all suffer for it, damme, if you shan't."

"It was not my fault," protested Mr. Leslie, "I knew nothing until this morning. I was amazed—appalled——"

"I don't believe it. It is a plot, a dastardly plot. Making me a fool, sir, in the eyes of the constituency on the very eve of the election, curse it. That puppy shall suffer for it; confounded young jackanapes, and you too, I swear it. I'll sell you up."

"I beg of you, Mr. Higgins——"

Mr. Higgins raved a little more and stamped out of the house, leaving the other in a very apprehensive condition.

Meanwhile Angeline and John were approaching Rede and the Redehall Division. To-morrow was polling-day and John was due to make a speech that night. It would be necessary to go straight from the station to the assembly-rooms, and Angeline thrilling with excitement had promised to go with him.

John rather wondered what sort of reception he would get. Had Mr. Higgins known his business and not lost his head entirely, he could have spread throughout the electorate a story of a loving girl torn from her chosen husband and seduced by a cunning schemer. Had the circumstances been reversed that was undoubtedly the line John would have taken. However he rather thought that his opponent would be incapable of such an astute move, and in any event he hardly looked the part.

He was soon to know. As the train slowed into the station, he saw a vast concourse of people on the platform; as vast a concourse as Rede could muster. Hawkers were busily engaged selling his colours; deafening cheers broke out. Near the booking office a band struck up a wedding hymn.

"That man Jenkins knows his business," said John, quite enthusiastically, "I must encourage that fellow."

He helped Angeline to alight amidst a roar of applause.

"Speech! Speech!" yelled the crowd. Several dissentients of the opposition were hurled into the station yard.

"Gentlemen,"—began John.

His voice was drowned by shouts of applause.

"Gentlemen, I am more affected by your welcome home than I can say. Little did I think when I came quite humbly to solicit your votes and your confidence that the division would honour me by giving me a bride. You know the circumstances of my wooing—"

Here there were tumultuous cheers, varied by faint cat-calls at the back from the pro-Higgins section.

"It is not for me to say one word against my opponent in that matter. I have always held freedom in the choice of his or her own destiny is the heritage of every Briton. If my opponent has forgotten that fact it is not for me to reproach him now." John put his arm affectionately round Angeline, "My wife did not forget it, and she has chosen me."

"Ay, John, and we'll do the same," bawled a lusty artisan. John recognised one of his own workmen and held out his hand.

"That man was going to vote for Higgins," he mused, "it is extraordinary what a difference a little sentiment will make."

He and Angeline made their way slowly to the carriage, which was waiting for them.

"Tired, Angeline?"

"Dreadfully, Jo'n, but so happy. Isn't it an exhausting business being married? Do you think you will win this election, dear?"

"Yes, I think I shall manage it now. 'Tisn't a big electorate, and I have gained a lot of votes to-day."

And when the result was announced, Angeline was very happy and proud of John.

Woden	1492.
Higgins	780.
	—
	712.
	—

* So John Woden became a Member of Parliament, and climbed another rung of the ladder of success.