

CHAPTER II

IT was on a warm evening in the May of 1845 that young John Woden came slowly into the Strand from the direction of Drury Lane, and mingled with the jostling crowds on the pavements. It was a different Strand from the one we know and to our eyes a dingier one, but to John who had never before been in that part of London it was interesting enough.

Early lights were beginning to appear in the shop windows. Over the River there was merrymaking in the Gardens at Vauxhall, and in the Strand and about the Strand and over Western London, there were amusements enough, of sorts dubious and not at all dubious for any young man from the country. It was too late for "the Play" had he been so minded, the surging throngs in the bars did not appeal to him, and the London Rahabs, dolled and seductive, tried their blandishments in vain upon this stalwart young man.

Although but eighteen, he was over six feet in height and broad in proportion. The suggestion of latent physical power in the frame captivated women and made men envious; the mental power of the face reduced some to awe. Strength and determination were there, and more than that; ruthlessness and even cruelty could be shown if ever the owner felt it necessary to use those qualities.

So he pushed his way through the throng, looking up now and again at the numbers of the shops, and came presently to a very little shop, squeezed between two taller buildings like a small man who would see a procession, in seeming danger at any moment of being elbowed back out

of sight. "W. BROWN, CHEMIST. This is the place." He pushed open the door and went in.

An overpowering odour of musty drugs assailed his nostrils. It was badly lighted in the little shop, which at first sight appeared to be deserted. He presently became aware, however, that a mild old face was blinking at him inquiringly from the other side of the counter. Its owner was short in stature, and a pile of loathsome pomade bottles on the one side and repulsive cough mixtures on the other had almost obscured him.

"Good evening, sir," said a mild old voice from the mild old face.

"I want to see Mr. William Brown."

"I have the pleasure of informing you that I am he, sir."

"Then you're my uncle, for my name is John Woden. Shake hands, uncle."

John Woden shot a large hand across the counter with such celerity that his uncle stepped back in fright to the serious danger of a glass door behind. But he immediately recovered himself: a smile of genuine pleasure suffused his face, and he wrung the extended hand with his own two.

"Bless me! My own sister's boy. It must be nearly twenty years since we lost poor Mary."

"Eighteen, uncle."

"And you're only eighteen. What a giant! Last time I saw you, you were a small baby. I was sorry to hear about your poor father. How did it happen?"

"Overwork, uncle. Not enough rest, not enough to eat. Every greedy, grunting lazy swine in the parish could cadge off my father for food and fuel, and he even gave the brutes money—when he had any. I do not know how he contrived to keep me at school all these years—he must have starved—I taxed him with it sometimes, but he would never admit it."

"How very sad," said Mr. Brown. "So I suppose—um-ah—that is to say——"

"There is but little money, if that is what you mean, uncle. After paying the debts and putting the screw on in one or two places, I gathered the sum of thirteen pounds—a confoundedly unlucky amount—which I hold as son and heir. Fortunate there are not more of us, isn't it?"

"How very sad," said Mr. Brown again, at a loss for a more intelligent remark.

"However, I had some twenty pounds of my own, which I contrived to make whilst at school."

"Make at school? I didn't think you could make money at school! How did you do that?" asked his uncle, astonished.

"Various ways," answered his nephew, evasively. "However, school is behind me now, and the thirty odd pounds I have left will not last for ever. So I have come to make my fortune here."

"Ha ha! Another Dick Whittington. I thought you were destined for the Church? Could you not get a scholarship for the university? I am sure you have the brains."

"Too many, I hope, uncle, to be a servitor at Oxford. Too many, I hope, to be any man's servitor. Why should I become a clergyman? Talking nonsense to people who believe it little more than I myself."

"My dear boy——"

"I am not running down religion," said John, thinking it advisable to hedge a little. "It keeps people quiet. It has its uses."

His uncle looked at him rather doubtfully.

"The fact is," continued John, seeing that he had ventured on thin ice and skating off it rapidly, "I am a little prejudiced when I think of my father. He wore out his life for those human animals he called his parishioners."

"It is natural that you should be a little bitter, my poor lad."

"Well, uncle, what is past is past, and I have to think of the future. My future lies in trade."

"If I could afford it, I would help you to Oxford and to take Orders, myself. We were all so proud when our Mary married your father."

"There is a social *cachet*, isn't there?" asked John, smiling rather sarcastically. "But I shouldn't sponge on you, uncle, even if I wanted such a career, and I certainly don't. Do you live here? Over this shop, I mean?"

"Yes."

"Can you lodge me here? For payment, of course."

"My dear boy, if you do not mind a very small room, facing the river, I shall be delighted. But I don't want your money."

"Never refuse money, uncle. I don't intend to. I should prefer to stay with you rather than seek lodgings at large. I stayed at an inn at Woodford last night, and was glad to leave. After midnight the landlord's daughter must come to my room, and be insistent that I share my bed with her. I thrust her out and put the wardrobe against the door."

"Good Heavens! What an infamy! I am thankful you had the strength of mind to resist temptation."

"Well, she was over thirty and abominably fat. Otherwise I shouldn't have minded."

His uncle looked at him blankly.

"We can consider that my lodging here is fixed then, uncle. I shall arrange terms with you to-morrow. Is business good?"

"No, my boy, it never was with me."

"It ought to be. The trade depression is going; there is more money about. Look at Mr. Peel's last Budget. There is going to be a lot of money in this country in the future, uncle, and it is for us to get as much as we can for our own personal use. Do you have to give much credit?"

"I have to, John. There are a lot of poor people round the Strand, and near the Market, and they cannot always

pay promptly. Sometimes, poor people, they cannot pay at all."

"But that isn't business. It is all right to give credit to the rich; if you want the money, it is there, and you charge them extra for the accommodation. But not to the poor; credit to them is not worth while, and the risks are too great."

"Perhaps I am a bit too soft-hearted sometimes, John. It is the way I am made. There is a lot of work, John, and I never got very much out of it, somehow. Had I your youth and determination it might be different."

John looked thoughtful. "You spoke of putting me up for nothing, and I protested. I'll make a bargain with you; let me manage the shop for a bit in return for my board, and you take a rest."

The old man brightened up. There was something reassuring about John; he radiated strength and confidence. Besides Mr. Brown did not wish to take money from his nephew's scanty store, scanty as was his own, and this arrangement might please both. "Manage it by all means, John," he said, at once, "but I don't need a rest."

"I am sure you do. There has been no customer since I entered, and waiting is more tiring than work. It eats out the heart. I'll make trade; if it will not come to us, we shall go out and fetch it. Is it a bargain?"

"Yes," said his uncle.

"Good! Now I see a fellow looking into our shop, as though he wished to purchase, though I think he is not good for much. Shall I walk out and ask him to step inside?"

His uncle laughed. "That's poor Huggins, the actor. I expect him to enter presently and ask for half-a-crown till Friday. He was a great actor once."

"He does not give me that impression. Has he had many half-crowns till Friday?"

"A few," admitted Mr. Brown.

"And paid them back?"

"Well—no. He is really rather poor, and the tales he tells of his straits—I simply have not the heart to refuse sometimes. Here he comes."

John Woden smiled politely at the "customer," but his eyes were stern.

"My nephew, Mr. Huggins," said Mr. Brown, nervously. He had not failed to notice his young relative's expression.

Huggins swept off his greasy hat with a low bow, "I am honoured," he said, proffering a flabby hand, which somehow the young man failed to notice.

"What can we sell you to-night, Mr. Huggins?" asked John, suavely.

"Sell? Ah, well, as a matter of fact, I desired to have a transaction of a business nature with Mr. Brown—privately."

"No," said John Woden. "We are entirely out of stock of half-crowns till Friday. Shut the door arter you as you go out, will you?"

Mr. Huggins started and drew himself up. "Sir?" he remarked, frostily.

"Good-night," said John, blandly.

"My dear boy——" began his uncle, nervously.

"Leave this to me, uncle."

"I have knocked a man down for less than you have said to me, sir," stormed Mr. Huggins, furiously.

"Then he must have been a much smaller one than I am."

The other looked at him venomously, and John made a slight move in his direction, Mr. Huggins disappeared through the door. John laughed at his perturbed uncle.

"It's all right, uncle. You don't want that sort hanging about."

"I am afraid you have offended him, John. He was

trying sometimes, but I have always' been on friendly terms with Huggins."

"Friends of that sort are no good to you. I never knew fellows to be so pleasant to me, like me so well and value my character so highly as when they wanted to borrow my money. When friends come and borrow money off you, uhcle, it is best to lose them."

His uncle sighed. His philosophy of life was different. Still, perhaps John was right. He had always been kind-hearted and invariably had patches on his trousers as long as he could remember.

"I think we'll lock up now," he said. "I'll tell Lizzie to get us a little supper."

"Who's that?"

"My little housekeeper, John. I don't know what I should do without her. Lizzie!"

"Yes, sir?"

She was a medium-sized girl, somewhere between sixteen and twenty, with a round, dumpling, good-humoured sort-of face. The charm if any, of her figure, was obscured by the appalling untidiness of her attire.

"This is my nephew John. He is coming to stay with us, Lizzie."

"Yes, sir."

"He wants some supper now. He has come a long way."

"Yes, sir."

"Say something to her, John. Lizzie likes to be spoken to."

"When did you last have a bath, Lizzie?" asked John, curiously.

Lizzie's jaw dropped, and then her face wrinkled in a bashful grin. "Lor^s, sir! Me have a bath? The things you say!"

"I should like to see you have a bath, Lizzie."

"My dear boy——" Mr. Brown coughed in embarrassment.

"I am only thinking of her welfare, uncle. It would do her good, and now I am manager I shall have to look after things generally. . . . What's that? . . . No, no, I didn't mean that at all. You misunderstood me."

"Will you 'ave the cold bacon or a negg or two?" asked Lizzie, demurely.

"Yes, thank you," said Mr. Brown, who was feeling rather hot. "Please."