

CHAPTER XXIV

HOW John Woden came to be marching into Pennsylvania in a Confederate uniform was not to be put down to any particular explanation. Had the *Malvina* and her cargo survived, there would have been plenty for him to do in Charleston, but she and it and fifteen thousand pounds of his money were under the waters of the Atlantic. Instead of selling guns and buying cotton to run out again, he found himself really idle for the first time for many years.

With idleness, there came knowledge of what he had suspected oft before, and that was that in competition with the money mistress, the mistress of acquired gold, which many said dominated his life and interests, was another. This was the mistress of sex, that powerful siren, holding and making or marring the lives of men. Not necessarily the sex of the marriage bed or lawful wedlock, but the call of mate to mate, of unplanned passion. Long ago it had happened; this mistress had called in the little shop in the Strand in 1845, or he would not have been here in Charleston in 1863: so do some events beget others. Then the golden mistress had had him for succeeding years until he wedded Angeline: the sex mistress, respectable and orthodox, had watched a marriage bed.

He loved Angeline intensely and devotedly; nothing would have mattered to him had he lost her, so great would have been that loss. She had always been at his side, constant and delightful; no other had attracted. Other women had not appealed. Now she was away, and he

realised with something of a shock that they did appeal to some extent.

The tide of women's passions runs high in war; conventions are loosed. Many worthy ones in Charleston busied themselves with bandages and supplies and comforts for the soldiers; others gave of their comforts more directly and affectionately. The story of his long swim from the sunken gun-runner had spread, and he found many ladies, hero-worshipping, quite anxious to be kind to him and make him feel at home. He was young and strong and of gigantic stature: a prize for any lady so disposed. Some of them were so disposed. Their attentions became a little embarrassing.

"A little flirtation does no one any harm," thought John, very truthfully. "I have not been in this place a week yet. There is no harm done."

A lesser man might have stayed a month, until such sentiments were no longer applicable. John Woden remembered in time Angeline's words of love and trust, when going down the hill at Nassau. His brain cleared. Dolly and Sadie and one or two others appeared temporarily less seductive and more dangerous.

"I shall leave Charleston while this mood lasts," he resolved.

It was not a time for travelling and sightseeing. It was the *crux* of the war. It came upon him that he would like to leave Charleston to take a part in it.

He was in no haste to enlist for years, fighting another country's war thousands of miles from his home, and still less was he inclined to spend weary weeks in training. Things, however, could be "managed" in 1863 in ways which were not possible to later generations. His warlike experiences of earlier days in Paris and Vienna were counted to make him technically a trained soldier; a glib lieutenant assured him that he could leave the service when he liked. John did not believe him, but decided to take the chance.

When he was tired of the war, he would go home somehow. That, too, could be "managed." Meanwhile he donned Confederate grey.

If, in the meantime, he died, that was the fortune of war. John held that no man should seek to prolong his life by avoiding risk.

The tide of Confederate successes in Maryland had emboldened Lee to take his army into Pennsylvania. It seemed that the Yankees were on the run. Washington—actually the Federal capital—was more than seventy miles *south* of the army! The flutter of the Stars and Bars was in the North.

"We've got the Yankees on the run," said a grizzled sergeant from Alabama. "Old Meade will be shaking in his shoes. We're coming for his skin."

All round lay the pleasant Pennsylvanian countryside under the July sun, peaceful, lazy and—deserted. So far it had seen nothing of the war. Now Meade was waiting somewhere ahead, with many thousands of men, and Lee was coming to meet him with other thousands.

"They say he is digging in at Gettysburg," said John.

"We'll dig him out," asserted a stalwart Kentuckian. "A week or two, and we'll be alongside Canada. Sir, you hear me. They've no guts, believe me. Half of 'em are as wild with Lincoln as we are, freeing them slaves! Freeing slaves." He laughed. "Yes, I can see him doing it."

"They'll be enlisting the niggers as their soldiers yet," said another, darkly. "You watch 'em."

"Hell, no. White men wouldn't do that." The mantle of a prophet had not descended on the man who replied. Next year that infamy would come.

"I got a brother with the Yankees," said the Kentuckian more soberly.

John looked at him curiously "That's rough luck."

"We're rather mixed in Kentucky. It's hit us hard that

way. I hope we don't meet. I don't want to kill Bert, and I'd just have to if I saw him in that darned uniform."

He was no longer talking of marching alongside Canada. The brother who was an enemy dominated his thoughts.

"What' are you doing in this war, anyway, you Britisher?"

"Just looking for amusement," answered John.

"Hell, you look like getting it."

"Keep the step, forward there," yelled a voice. "Left—right, left—right—"

So the army marched on through a country of green woods shining under the summer sun. Here Penn had made peace with the Indians; had made white men to fraternise with red, in this place where white brother fought white brother. . . .

Gettysburg! Enemy bayonets are gleaming ahead; the outposts are coming in to the noise of sporadic rifle fire. . . . A few miles more; there is the crackle of rifle fire all along the line now, the deeper boom of artillery, and blood begins to show on the white roads and the green fields.

Forward! John found himself one of a line of men in grey running towards a distant line of hedge and ditch whence spurted flashes of fire. Bullets were whistling overhead and around, and men were beginning to drop. From somewhere ahead came a sound of chanting above the noise of battle.

*"John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave,
John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave,
John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave,
But his soul goes marching on."*

"Damn them," said the Alabama sergeant. "Come on, boys." Then he staggered and fell with a bullet through his throat.

They were near the hedge now. A line of men in blue sprang up to meet them. The clash came. John Woden's

bayonet was running with blood; how, he did not quite know. He saw a Federal officer raise a pistol; there was a bright flash, something struck the side of his head, and then came darkness. . . . He opened his eyes and it was night. It was quiet where he lay; the tide of battle had passed on, leaving nothing but quiet and dead men. Far away came the rumble of gunfire; although he did not know it, the battle was already lost to the South, and the remnants of the army with which he had come were in retreat.

It was calm and starlit. He raised himself rather weakly on his elbow, rather surprised at finding that he was still alive. His head ached and he felt sick. Somewhat unsteadily he got on his feet, and breaking through the torn hedge, stumbled down a road.

It seemed to him that he must have wandered for hours through a deserted land. The distant gunfire became fainter; he was utterly and entirely lost. Only his giant strength kept him going. He slaked his thirst from a muddy pool, but was desperately hungry and desperately tired.

Then far off on the side of a hill against a wood, he saw a light.

"I can't help it if they are enemies," he muttered wearily, and made his way towards it.

It was a little cottage, and in the garden was the scent of roses. It was the personification of peace. The gunfire was very far away now.

Someone opened the door as he rapped on it feebly. It was a girl tall and lovely, in one hand a lamp, the other a pistol.

"I have lost my way, and I am sorry to bother you," began John Woden, as he fell fainting across the threshold.

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