

CHAPTER XXVIII

“ **I** ALWAYS gravitate to the side of the oppressor ; he is usually in the right.”

“ John, dear, I don't like to hear you say things like that.”

“ It is true, Angeline. I have stood up for the oppressor all my life ; you know what people say here.”

Angeline looked troubled. “ I wish they didn't say such things about you. I hate to hear them. I know you fought for the slave States—I didn't really care for *that*, John, but it was your business. And then you were so very full of praise of Mr. Eyre when he killed all those negroes in Jamaica.”

“ He hanged and flogged and shot without mercy. I should have done the same.”

“ John ! ”

“ I should, Angeline. I wish I could have been there to help him. I was never so pleased as when I heard how he had executed that damned half-breed Baptist parson who had a hand in the trouble. Of course, he would have the wolf-packs of the Churches yelping at his heels. It is all right to sit at home in safety and moralise. A day is coming in England—it may not be in my time or yours, dear, but it will come—when this liberty they worship will become dangerous at their very doors.”

It was in May, 1866. That grand old man, Lord Palmerston, a much grander old man than he who afterwards usurped that title, had passed away in the previous year, to the sorrow of his country's friends and the delight of

her enemies. Governor Eyre had saved a British Colony from negro rapine, white men from black massacre, and had for his pains been recalled at the instigation of the sentimental and the safe-at-home. The United States had finished their war and gone back to business. In England, cattle disease, cholera and financial instability held sway.

"I fear we shall have trouble here in Redchall."

"John, why?" Angeline laid down her sewing and gazed at him anxiously.

"I shall have to reduce wages for the time, at any rate, and figure in the light of an oppressor myself. I trust the workpeople will be reasonable about it; personally, I don't think they will. I have studied them very carefully, and have never observed any signs of reasoning power in their minds."

"They won't like their wages reduced, John."

"I didn't like Overend and Gurney failing on the 11th, and I don't suppose they liked having debts of £19,000,000. I am sure their customers did not."

The "Black Friday" of May 11th, 1866, was but days old, and its far-reaching consequences were causing the financial heart of the country to quake and wax faint.

"How does that affect you, John? I don't understand business."

"The banks are calling in loans, and money is tight, and customers bankrupt. I have to economise, and one of my economies must be in the wages. Otherwise the pits and the works must close. All the employers will have to do it for the time being."

"John, why must you? You are so rich."

"I am worth, personally, ninety thousand pounds, Angeline, and it would have been more but for the *Malvina* being lost off Charleston. If there should be a strike, I shall budget for losing twenty thousand, but I should certainly sink more did I go on paying uneconomic wages. My enterprises must be self-supporting. When an enter-

prise cannot subsist, except by charity from private or Government purses, it is time it came to an end."

Angeline sighed. She had faith in John, but her tender heart did not allow her to take kindly to the idea of reduced wages for Rede and Redehall. She knew too many of the mothers and children.

Perhaps even John did not realise how very many voters voted for him at elections because of Angeline's charm and personality.

"I saw Tom this morning, John."

"Well, what had he to say?" John's voice and expression were a little grim. Tom Bonvill was a thorn in his side. A weaker man would have sent him away from Rede, but John Woden had given him employment, and good employment, in the town.

"He doesn't seem very pleased with his work, John."

"I'm beginning to think he never will be pleased with work, Angeline. I should have educated him, but his mother had kept him away too many years. She had spoiled his chances. Oxford or Cambridge: he was unfitted for either. I gave him a tutor; he wasted his time. I give him well-paid, indeed overpaid, employment in my office at Rede; he wastes his time again. At seventeen he was tolerable; at twenty he is becoming impossible."

"John, you mustn't be hard on him. The boy is honest and well meaning, but—but he thinks he should be more of a son to you—less of a dependant."

"He would proclaim the relationship to-morrow did it serve his purpose. If he were not honest and well-meaning, he could raise the fires of hell before I lifted my finger to help him. He is disgruntled; he thinks he should live a life of ease and idleness because I am rich. Your own boys will not do that, Angeline."

"I'm sorry for Tom. After all, he is your son."

"Angeline, you are very sweet about that, and I love you for it." He drew her on to his knee.

"Oh, dear, my sewing! You have spilled it on the floor."

"Never mind the sewing, Little Miss One-Shoe-Off-and-One-Shoe-On. Never mind Tom. Never mind anything but being my little wife."

"I want to mind about anybody who is unhappy, dear, and I want you to be kind to that boy. I know how he feels the position."

"All right. I'll raise his wages when the others are cut. But he is full of fads and fancies."

"I am afraid he is. He is so sensitive and so—so broody. He has joined up a society started by some man called Karl Marx. It seems rather a funny society. Do you know it?"

John frowned. "Never heard of it. What is it's name?"

"It is called the International."

"Sounds like a cricket team, but he doesn't seem to care for cricket. I wish he did. However, it doesn't matter."

Thus was dismissed Karl Marx and his International and the first intimation John had of the insidious poison which was to work such devastation in England in years to come.

"You must be nice to Tom and remember he is your son, John. Isn't it funny, all those sons and never a daughter?"

Away went his mind to the Pennsylvanian hills and woods, where the little daughter he had never seen played with Lucy her mother, who had "gone pagan."

"John, dear, why so thoughtful? You are wrinkling your brows just like our baby Harry when he is hungry."

"Harry." It was Pennsylvania in his thoughts again.

"*No one's ever kissed me since my Harry went to Bull Run.*"

"Big, strong John, have you lost your tongue? Must I charm you to speak like a Delilah?"

"Delilah." Lucy had said, "*If anyone gives me a daughter, John, that will be her name.*"

Well, he had given her a daughter and every comfort she would accept. He loved Lucy, and yet he loved Angeline. John began to realise that some men are polygamous at heart, and that he was one of them.

"You are just the dear little wood 'syrup' I have always known, Angeline."

"Wasn't it dreadful when you found me that day without any clothes on? But I did like running wild; I wish I could do it now."

"Why not? It will soon be warm enough, and we can give the servants a special holiday," he said, laughing, and remembering how Lucy's white body had looked against the green American woods and her own gold hair.

"I wonder what there is about a woman unclothed which so attracts men?" mused Angeline roguishly.

"It would take a cleverer man than myself to define and state it, Angeline. But it is a clean attraction, the call of nature, the call of—the old gods."

"They must have been dreadfully improper people, but rather nice to know," said Angeline. "I am afraid, John, I have encouraged you in a lot of things I shouldn't."

"Not you. Do you remember how I bathed you on the way home from Vienna? And the big sponge we bought in Coblenz?"

"That was the first thing that shouldn't ought to have been," she said, ungrammatically. "Wasn't I an awfully innocent child? Isn't it a pity I grew up?"

"No, I protest, lady love."

"How big and strong you are, John! I love to sit on your knee like this. . . . John, don't ever use your bigness and strength against the weak and poor, will you? You know Shakespeare or Milton, or one of those people said something about using a giant's strength like a giant, and I want my husband to be my ideal."

"Little girl, you are thinking of my workpeople again. I declare you spoil them, but I promise you they shall have justice."

"'Tisn't justice people want so much as mercy sometimes. . . . Oh, I do hope there won't be a strike here."

"I hope not, too," said John, grimly. "But if there is, I'll break it."

In the following month the great strike in Rede began.