

## CHAPTER XXIX

“**M**R. WODEN, we are losing thousands of pounds. This cannot go on. We must come to some agreement with the men.”

“Don't you think your cause as just now as when you started the conflict?” John Woden lit another cigarette and gazed round the assembly.

“Yes, but——”

“If you could not afford to concede the men's demands then, you cannot now.”

“It will take us years to make up the loss caused by this strike,” said the first speaker, evading the issue.

“No, it will not. It would not take you many months, at uneconomic wages, to run up another bill of costs as big as any incurred already.”

The temper of the meeting was against John. The strike had lasted a long time and the faint hearts were clamorous. It has been said that the British have a genius for compromise. It is a dangerous gift, at times to be regarded askance as much as any gifts brought by Greeks.

“Give in if you will,” said John. “My men go back on my terms or not at all. I made my businesses and I shall run them. Any employment given in them is in my gift, and need not be accepted unless the acceptors are willing. The first concern of any industry is to bring a profit to the shareholders, the second to give satisfaction to the customers, the third to pay the best wages which can be afforded to its employees. I have no faith in the creed that the last shall be first.”

"You are so damnably hard, Mr. Woden. How long is this strike going on?"

"Until it is broken or we are."

"It is marvellous to me how, with your methods, you remain Member of Parliament for this Division," said another bitterly.

"Marvellous, isn't it? Perhaps they will not kill me to make any of you a king?" replied John, evenly.

"I do not think you will hold the seat at the next election."

"Time will show. Meanwhile we are wandering away from the point. I cannot prevent you surrendering if you feel so disposed, but I shall not."

They looked at him rather frostily. John was much the biggest employer in the district. If their men went back now on their own terms and John's back later on *his* terms, their positions would be most unpleasant.

John regarded the assembly with a pleasant smile. Hardly a man there but was older than himself. It was an assembly of greybeards, of old men who wanted peace to last their time. A hairy gathering in an age which ran to copious growths on the face. John, clean-shaven, in defiance of convention, smoked cigarettes still regarded as "a damned foreign fad," and knew that he could dominate the whole crowd.

There were no personal friends there. He had no men friends; the predominantly successful are often without them. The green-eyed monster of jealousy sees to that.

So the strike went on for a few more miserable weeks, and then—first in small companies, and then in big battalions, the hands came back on John Woden's terms. It was the first great strike the district had known, and John trusted that while that generation held memory it would be the last. The first Saturday after work had been resumed he made a speech to a dull, discontented crowd, which would have liked at first to hiss, but dared not.

"AM of you here regard me as a hard man. Perhaps I am; I have had to fight for all I have made. You came back on my terms at the wages I chose to offer because I made the businesses and the jobs. You will find that I can be just. When trade improves, your pay will go up again to the figure it was before, whether the other employers approve or not, and you will not need to ask me. If it improves greatly it will go beyond that figure, and again you will not need to ask me. I promise any good worker more money for his work than any other in England; I promise any bad one immediate dismissal. . . . You will find I can be merciful. I know many of you are in debt to the local tradesmen because of the strike. Submit details to my offices and I shall help you as far as possible. That is all I have to say to you."

There was a faint cheer.

"Mebbe, he's nowt so bad as 'e's painted," said one hopefully.

"Ay. Coom to t' pub and let's maaake an account, lad. My missus is fair worried wi' butcher and baker. Won't gi' us nowt more, they say."

John kept his word and the skies cleared. It was shortly after this that he sent for Tom Bonvill.

"I have put you in a position far beyond your capacity, paid far beyond your worth."

"I am your son," said Tom, sullenly.

"And my enemy. You are foremost amongst those who instigated those poor devils to remain out during the late strike. Why?"

Tom remained silent.

"I can tell you," said John, sternly. "It was because you hate me. It was because you are a revolutionist at heart. You are being well paid with my money, whilst your dupes were starving."

"Who made them starve?" demanded Tom. "You and yours."

"More cannot be got out of an industry than is put in. There was work all the time at the best pay I could afford, had they cared to take it. No, it is you and yours who have inflamed the tempers of decent working men and driven reason from their brains."

"Why should they be your slaves?"

"You poor, damned fool," said John Woden. "I have made myself a master, as any one of them could—as you could—if they and you set courses and stuck to them. No, your type thinks that the apples should fall to it without the trouble of shaking the trees. You think you have a right to comfort and luxury and will not strive to attain it; you would fatter on the hands and brains of better men."

"Yourself, for instance?" said Tom, with a perceptible sneer.

"Myself, for instance," agreed John Woden, calmly. "I am sorry for you, Tom," he added, more gently. "You have the makings of a decent Englishman. When you came to my house that night three years ago, I recognised my obligations and would have helped you had you been willing to help yourself. I liked your looks, even though I was disturbed at your arrival; I thought I could make something of you. You have gone down in those three years, Tom, and the question I put to you—to my son—is, are you continuing to go down, or will you go up?"

"I never had a chance. I ought to have borne your name. Had you not seduced my mother——"

"You would not have been here at all. I know your handicap in life; I am sorry for it. But believe me, it is no good at all saying it ought not to have happened. It has happened. We must make the best of things as they are. If you are tired of the office, will you study hard with a 'coach' for six months or a year, and then go to Oxford? It is not too late."

"No. I am tired of this country. Will you start me in a business of my own?"

"Yes. Where?"

"I thought of Australia."

"So be it. What do you propose to do in Australia, Tom?"

"Oh, anything."

"That usually means nothing. However, you shall have your chance, and good luck to you. . . . Care for a drink?"

"No," sullenly.

In due course Tom Bonvill sailed for Melbourne, in which city a sum of money was placed to his credit. John had no idea of his intentions, but had a lurking suspicion that he intended to try his luck—rather belatedly—at the gold-fields. He was never to see this son again, though from time to time, the capital at the bank having been exhausted, requests came through for more. John gave it with a set face; it was part of the price for the adventure of years ago. Eventually the demands ceased, and when, at the gentle Angeline's solicitations, inquiries were made as to Tom's whereabouts, of him there was no trace.

That was to be in future years, and in the meantime John prospered. In 1867, for his prominent support of Mr. Disraeli's Reform Bill, he received a knighthood. John did not believe in reform, having no faith in humanity, and considering that, when valuing the human nature of human beings, you should rate it at its lowest. He knew his people, and knew that reform would be bad for them.

However, he was certain from the first that the bill would become an Act, and so voted for it, even made a speech in favour of it, and received his knighthood for it. This was greatly to the delight of Angeline, terrifically proud that her John was now "Sir John Woden," and considering hardly at all the dignity that was upon herself in being "Lady Woden."

"Another rung of the ladder," thought John.

So the years passed on. He frequently had little letters from Lucy of the Pennsylvanian hills, always sent to his office. Not for worlds would he have hurt the feelings of Angeline, his wife, whom he loved devotedly. He also loved Lucy in a rather different way. In fact, he had arrived at an age when he had come to the conclusion that it takes more than one woman in a man's life to make him happy.

A cynical conclusion, and by no means every man's, and that of few women, but it was John Woden's.

Sometimes Angeline read the papers.

"I see some horrid gentleman has committed bigamy, John."

"No gentleman would commit bigamy, Angeline. It is a very middle-class crime. A gentleman would buy the second lady another establishment."

"John, you are dreadful," she laughed.

He lapsed into discreet silence. Just as there are times when expediency is better than justice, so there are other times when opportunity is better than chastity. So thought Sir John Woden.

It came upon him that he would like to see Lucy again—and little Delilah.

**H**is only daughter. Yes, he must certainly see her.

The years passed on. 1868, 1869 and then 1870. In 1870, aided by a little skilful forgery of a telegram, Germany succeeded in finding a plausible excuse to strike a hammer-blow at France—a bombastic, over-confident France, supposedly ready "to the last gaiter-button," actually unready to the extremity of her clothing, preparedness and all else. In 1871, a poor, bruised France, hopeful of a future restoration in a distant time, was compelled to cede her fair provinces of Alsace and Lorraine to a swaggering Germany. Germany had acted on the principle that while it may be more Christian to forgive your enemies, it is infinitely safer to leave them only their eyes to weep.

Meanwhile the *doyen* of the London Press was rejoicing

that "these indisputably German territories have at last returned to their rightful owners."

So much for history. In that year, 1871, strong, stalwart Sir John Woden, very young, strong and stalwart for his forty-four years, decided that his business interests necessitated his making a trip to America. He sailed for New York at the end of July.

The first night out from Liverpool he scanned a letter in Lucy's handwriting.

*"I have taken your little daughter to Chicago. She is getting a big girl, and must soon go to school. John, I reckon I don't like to leave the birds and the little rabbits, but I must think of Delilah. She is the cutest kid. I wouldn't go to New York. I am thro' with these Eastern States after Bethel, Vermont. They say Chicago is tough, but I found an old Aunt there, who doesn't mind about Bethel, Vermont, and I say Delilah ought to have a relative this side, if only one. . . ."*