

CHAPTER XXXII

AS the years passed and the unfolding of the characters of his sons became more apparent to John Woden's mind, it was clear to him that although the succession to his title must devolve upon Leslie, yet the succession of his business interests was for his second-born. From the first Leslie had shown no aptitude for commerce, for leadership, for any of the necessary qualities which the diligent in business must possess if he is to stand before kings.

When the boy was nineteen he had called him to him and asked him what he desired to do in life. It was time to put the matter to the test.

"I have been considering it very carefully, sir, and I should like to take Holy Orders."

"What? You infernal young fool!"

"It is my duty." Leslie looked offended.

"Duty? To whom or what?" John demanded. He had hoped that the boy, if not desirous of a commercial career, might become a soldier or a doctor. But a priest—John Woden's soul rose within him!

"It is a sacred calling," said Leslie with dignity. "To bring light to the heathen——"

"Who has been filling your head with this damned nonsense?" asked his father. "Cannot you leave folklore to the children and missions to the women? I know what has been happening to you, my son. You have been in too many churches. The pretty vestments of the priests and the lights of the stained-glass windows have dazzled your

eyes and brain. The incense has gone up your nostrils. You did not know you were in a theatre watching theatrical effects."

"I do not approve of theatres," replied Leslie, chillingly. "I think they are pernicious."

"And you are nineteen! You do not approve of theatres, and I have seen you muzzied after three glasses of port! Leslie, do you know any women in London?"

"Of course not, sir."

"There is no 'of course' about it. Take this ten-pound note and go to Piccadilly and find one. Spend the night with her and come back here in the morning. We shall then discuss your future."

Quite abruptly Leslie left the room. John smiled grimly and then sighed.

"He has taken the ten-pound note," he observed, "but I doubt very much whether he has gone to Piccadilly."

In fact, he had gone no further than to his mother. Angeline came into the big study, very agitated.

"Dear, what have you been saying to Leslie?"

"Merely giving him some good advice, little girl, but I don't think he is going to take it."

"He is terribly hurt. John, to tell him to go to Piccadilly and—really, John!"

"I want him to grow up, Angeline. I want him to learn something of life. I am not particular about Piccadilly—he can try Jermyn Street, if he pleases. . . . Now, don't look so shocked. Come and sit on my knee—Yes, you will. Let me kiss you. Blow Leslie. The fact is you did not spank him hard enough when he was a child."

"I never spanked him at all. Dear, he is our eldest son, and—and—you don't really want him to spend a night in the arms of one of those dreadful women—in her bed? Our son, John, and—a scented wanton. You could not have meant that?"

"I knew he would not take the advice," said John. "I

don't believe he has ever kissed a woman in his life—more shame to him.”

“How many women had you kissed when you were nineteen, John?”

“Oh, quite a few. I had to be the architect of my own fortunes and had not so much time to spare as I should have liked. . . . Now, don't pout and be jealous after twenty years of happy married life. I have always kissed you pretty thoroughly, haven't I? Like that?”

“Dear, you have always been good to me. But you say such dreadful things I am sure you don't mean. . . . Why cannot Leslie be a clergyman if he likes?”

“So he can. He can be a dustman if the fancy takes him. . . . Very well, Angeline, he shall be a priest. I am not much inclined that way, and I had higher nopes of my eldest son, but I must rely on Billy. You can tell Leslie that he need not go to Piccadilly to-night.”

So it was settled that Leslie should go his chosen course, and John had an interview with Billy.

“What do you want to do, my son?”

“I want to go into your business, dad?”

John slapped him on the back most heartily.

“That's fine. Have a 'b. and s.'?”

Harry was yet too young for a decision, though he had a vague idea just then that he would like to be a soldier. When John heard that, he remembered that other Harry after whom the boy had been named, who had died “way down at Bull Run.” It was curious to think that Angeline did not know after whom he had been named!

Delilah must be getting a big girl now. He would have to cross the Atlantic again and see her soon.

In 1878, it came upon Sir John Woden that his Angeline was looking paler than of old, less vivacious and quieter. Quiet she had always been and gentle, and her different demeanour was but the product of the passing years, but in his eyes she was so much the little dryad of the Redchall

wood, that he was fain to put it down to other causes. Thinking along these lines, he remembered how she had loved the flowers and trees and the open air, and now they were nearly always in London. No park or gardens, however beflowered, could take the place of the true country.

He was fifty-one, and still active as ever in business, always finding new outlets for his increasing capital; always his fingers upon the pulse of his enterprise. Time was flying, however, and before he was too old he would desire an estate and a house which would be more to them a home than the big house in Prince's Gate. That would please Angeline, and it would please him, as it would give him a greater standing in the country. He felt that with a territorial interest he would really be founding a family; perhaps in time Leslie would be content to settle down and succeed him. That was how John considered the possibility of his son leaving the Church. It was a faint possibility, he admitted.

It was his great regret that the laws of primogeniture would not allow his title to be inherited by Billy.

"Where shall we buy the land and country house, Angeline? Not in Redehall; they are spoiling the valley now."

"Dear, I have heard that they think they will cut down my wood. I cried into my pillow when I heard that. Let us stay in the South, John. I love the South with its sun and its warmth. Anywhere in the South, and you choose the place."

"I wonder?" said John, musingly, "I wonder if the Suffolk village where I was born is still as beautiful as ever? I have not been there for thirty-three years."

Grass never grew under John Woden's feet. That night saw him in the train; he walked out of the little country station into familiar lanes and well-known fields.

Nothing had changed at all; all was as in the time of the Sailor King. It was the South; the unchanging,

peaceful, uneventful South, in all essentials the same as for hundreds of years of time gone. He had come by train, his father had come by coach. That was all the difference, the village was the same.

Why, there was the Squire's house, as he remembered it in King William the Fourth's time. Old Sir Richard had long since been gathered to his fathers, and his son lorded it in his stead. There was his own sire's vicarage, to which he no longer had rights of ingress, egress or regress; for a moment he was tempted to walk up to the door, knock and ask for admittance to his old home. He refrained, for he was ever a man desirous neither of trespassing on other men's rights, save in the way of business, lest he be trespassed upon in his own. There would be time for that when he was settled here.

Lights through diamond panes and happy laughter came from "*The Goat and Compasses*." He pushed open the door under the thatched eaves and, going into the sawdusted bar parlour, called for beer.

Everyone turned to look at him, for he towered above them all. Gardeners, ploughmen and labourers were there in their strength, with country-bred muscles and brawn, but never so big a man as he.

"A rare, lusty one he's been in his time, and don't he take 'is beer down right manly-like, too? I loves to see that."

"Can you put me up for the night?" John asked the landlord.

"Ay, sir, that I can."

There was a murmur round the parlour. The big stranger was staying amongst them.

"Drinks round," said John Woden, affably, and won his first popularity in the place in which he meant to live. For here he would be a country gentleman, "hail fellow well met" with the land and those who lived upon it. Up North and in Rotherhithe he was a hard man, if a just

one, to his workpeople. In this place it would be otherwise.

Where should he make his home? Six miles away there was a large house held by one Todd, the founder of whose line was the shipowner baronet of Napoleonic times. Here there was the squire's domain. One too far, the other too small, and neither, perhaps, in the market.

"I shall build my own house," said Sir John Woden.

In his room at "*The Goat and Compasses*" he looked out of the window over the quiet fields, dark under the March stars.

Next day he made his plans and returned to London in the afternoon.

"Come, Angeline," he said. "I have decided upon our home. To-night, to celebrate, I shall take you to see *Olivia* at the Court Theatre, which is, I understand, another great success."