

CHAPTER XXXIV

JOHN Woden set his teeth when the dark hour came and waited, outwardly unperturbed. The loss of his favourite son, of the son who was to carry on his name, had hit him hard, but he was not the man to rail to the heavens which were as brass. There was Angeline to comfort; there was yet life to be faced in the years to come. His hopes had crumbled in the dust, but he would yet fight on.

"No doubt it is all for some wise purpose, of which we do not know," said Leslie, echoing the sentiment which had been expressed at the going of John's mother by the careful cousin.

John looked at him expressively, but said nothing. On a normal occasion such an observation from Leslie would have drawn the most caustic of remarks in reply.

"Will I ever see my son again?" sobbed Angeline, and John, for the first time since his boyhood, regretted the unbelief which had made him unable to assure her. He could only say he hoped so, that it might comfort her.

Amidst the turmoil of the disaster to his house, he found time to wonder again at the girl with the candle. Who—or what was she? A ghost? He did not believe in ghosts.

"I give it up," said John Woden. "I refuse to believe in the supernatural."

Yet this conclusion annoyed him. It was so very unsatisfactory. However, he had the strength of mind to relegate the happening to the limbo of unexplained affairs. It was for him to live and help Angeline to live and grow happy again. That was all about which he need bother.

The new country house in Suffolk was to be built with all speed.

Patiently, assiduously, he made Angeline forget her grief and take an interest in the new house for his sake and her own. It was to cost a great deal of money. John Woden reckoned that he was worth very nearly £450,000; the great house would take an appreciable slice of that total. Trying to forget Billy and the "might-have-been," he made it his principal aim and end now, and monetary considerations faded. It was to be a home for the Wodens of future generations, and must be a worthy one.

It was called, quite simply and yet grandly, "Woden." The territorial nature of that pleased John's soul; like many business men, he had a great desire to be identified with the land. Woden was his name, and it should be the name of his home; it might yet be the designation of a barony.

It was towards the end of 1879 that Leslie approached his father in some trepidation and announced his intention to enter the state of matrimony. It was necessary to seek sanction in that quarter for financial reasons, but after the cold reception which his previous project in regard to the ministry had received, he was doubtful. To his relief, John seemed pleased. He was thinking of the succession of the House of Woden.

"You are young enough, Leslie, but I suppose you have as much sense now as you ever will have—probably more. Who is the lady?"

"She is the daughter of a dean—a very good family."

"I don't want to know about the family, my son: you are not marrying them. I don't care if they are fishmongers. Tell me about her."

"She is one year older than myself, and her name is Felicity Dawson."

John nodded. "Short? Tall? Fat? Scraggy? What is she like?"

"She is tall and slim and fair," said Leslie, a little stiffly.

"Well, my son, get on with it. The financial side of the matter will be all right; you leave that to me. The fact is, Leslie, marriage will do you good; it will knock some of the nonsense out of you. Then, again, if she is a dean's daughter, the family may give you a leg-up in your chosen profession. More than I can, I daresay; my interests are not great in the clerical line. I can only supply the cash."

"Thank you, father," answered Leslie.

John sighed. Leslie always called him "father" or "sir." Never "dad," like Billy had done.

"All right, Leslie. When are you getting married?"

"At Christmas, if you approve, father."

"Of course I approve. Why not? Now hurry up and give your mother and myself a grandson. . . . Have a drink?"

"No, I have given up intoxicants since I entered upon my chosen vocation."

"You damned fool—all right, never mind; it is as you please. Bring the lady to dinner, and let us see her."

"Isn't it nice about Leslie?" said Angeline later, smiling at John. He was greatly relieved to see that in recent months she had been getting over the shock of Billy's loss.

"Splendid. Best thing he ever did. He needs a wife to keep him from being too much of a fool. I am curious to see the intended."

Felicity was rather a puzzle to John. She was certainly pretty—in fact, he wondered how anyone of Leslie's mental calibre could possibly have induced such a pretty girl to accept him. Possibly, he thought, it was not unconnected with the fact that Leslie was heir to a baronetcy and a good deal of money. Anyway, Felicity was pretty, but, in addition to her prettiness, there was something about her which reminded him vaguely of Delilah—his daughter of whom none of them knew.

"May develop into a bit of a prig and a prude," thought John. "I suppose it is being brought up by a dean? I expect she will be rather wild on the honeymoon; these chaste women always are."

It pleased John very much that in 1880 he became a grandfather. Little Timothy was lauded by the entire family, although John jibbed a little at the name which his mother selected.

"Why on earth did you call him that?"

"It is Leslie's and my wish that it should be something scriptural."

"I remember. Timothy was the man who received a couple of letters from Paul, though I never heard that he replied to them. You see, the devil can quote Scripture when he likes, Felicity. The name doesn't matter."

"Father, don't you think he looks rather like Leslie?"

"Yes, I am afraid he does, but that is immaterial as long as he is healthy. There, my dear, I was only teasing you. . . . Come along Angeline, we must be getting home now. You must take care of yourself now you are a grandmother, although you certainly don't look the part."

Angeline did not, being still quite pretty to the world, and lovely to John in particular.

In 1883, the arrival of young Antony made her doubly a grandmother at the early age of forty-four. Still she was lovely to John.

Time passed on, Majuba had come in 1880, and Gladstone had sown the seeds of a future war by a hasty and contemptible surrender. In 1885, some years later, by *not* making haste, he brought disaster to Gordon at Khartoum and the Liberal Government at home. As a big stone thrown into a pond makes many ripples, so these events incidentally caused Sir John Woden to step up another rung of the ladder.

Lord Salisbury's Government came into power, and was pleased to recommend that the long and faithful political

services of Sir John Woden, Bart., be rewarded by the conferring of a peerage. John went to the House of Lords as Baron Woden of Woden in the County of Suffolk.

Angelina was immensely pleased. She clung to John like a young girl fluttering round him as she had ever done alike in his triumphs and reverses.

"You must get an awfully nice coronet, John."

"I don't think they are worn much, and on occasions when they are, they are usually borrowed or hired. However, if you really insist, I'll get a new one."

The house in Suffolk was his principal residence now. Unlike many new houses, it blended well with the countryside upon which it stood, and was neither blatant nor offensive in any way. It was vast, convenient, but quite beautiful. It had no history, but that was a thing which John could not give it. Nought but the passing of the generations could do that.

In 1885, Harry, having arrived at man's estate left Cambridge before his time. He had decided not to go into the Army, and against several other suggested professions. It was plain that his desire was to be a gentleman of leisure. The only time he showed any activity was when in the vicinity of stage-doors and bars.

"Both very good places in their way," said John, "as I know. But there are other things in life. No son of mine is going to be a club-room loungee." He looked rather grim. "I don't seem to be very lucky in my family."

It is certainly true that he did not appear to be. There was a good deal of waywardness in Harry. It was this waywardness which had caused him to be sent down from Cambridge. The authorities are tolerant of the high spirits of youth, but not to an indefinite extent. It is unnecessary to particularise his offence, but women and wine played quite a considerable part in it. Discretion was conspicuous by its absence.

"If you must play the fool," said John, sternly, "for

heaven's sake don't jettison all your senses. You should always keep your hand on the brake."

Harry looked sullen. "It was only a bit of fun," he complained, "No need for them to make such a fuss about it."

"You should have had sense enough to keep your extensive bit of fun rather more in the dark," answered John. "What are you going to do now?"

"I think I'd like to travel a bit."

"Your life so far seems to consist principally of bits. . . . All right, perhaps it will be the best thing for you. Go round the world."

"I'll go to America first," said Harry brightening up. "I knew some American fellows at Cambridge, and they were fine."

"There are fine Americans and others," observed John, "I daresay you'll like them. I have nothing to say against them. The inhabitants of the United States struck me as being particularly honest. It costs at least twice as much to bribe them as it does the people of any other nation."

Other hints on travel he gave Harry, which went in promptly at one ear to be as quickly lost from the other. Harry started for New York and greater experience. He would probably get into mischief, advertent and inadvertent, wherever he was, and better, reflected John, on the other side of the Atlantic than this.

"I am certainly not lucky in this generation," thought John of his sons, "One a damned fool, the second dead, and the third an American citizen."

For Harry had written back that he liked New York so much that he intended to stay there for an indefinite period, and would probably become an American citizen. He added that he wanted to settle down, and study for some business or profession, and would his father send him some more money.

"He has travelled less than three thousand miles of his world tour, spent all I gave him and abandoned it," mused

John, "I wonder if there is a woman in the matter? What profession, or business will he study in New York? That of a bartender?"

It was very probable. However John sent money, advice and good wishes.

"I must wait for the next generation: perhaps it will be better. There is promise in young Timothy, despite his infernal name."

It was becoming a minor obsession with Lord Woden, to raise up a son or a grandson to carry on the family traditions; the name and the business enterprises. So far, he battled in his businesses alone; no other showed the least inclination or capacity to help in making the family monies, though swift as the flight of eagles in coming to help him spend them.

The years passed on. Harry still remained in New York. From reports John received from business friends there, there had not been one woman in the matter but several. John did not greatly object to that: there had been a number of women in his life, too, and might be more, despite his sixty-four years. For this was 1891, a very enlightened and up-to-date year. Bicycles had taken to themselves pneumatic tyres, and were becoming a curse and a menace to pedestrians, who fumed, not knowing their luck. For the motor-car had been born, a weird and erratic vehicle, the distant ancestor of the vast host which would clog future highways.

John, however, was only mildly interested in such mechanical inventions. He was much more concerned with horseflesh, and at sixty-four rode well and truly to hounds, his only trouble being to find an animal strong enough to bear his great weight. Sixty-four, clear-eyed, towering above most men, and all bone and muscle. He felt it good to be alive, but for his disappointing sons.

"I'll go over to New York and see how the fool is progressing—if he is progressing at all. These continual de-

mands for money are becoming exasperating. Besides, I ought to see Delilah."

His heart rather smote him that he had not seen her for twenty years. The truth was that he was not much enamoured of Delilah; he only cared for her for the sake of Lucy her mother. He had written her frequently, and had never noticed any trace of affection in her replies. He had kept her plentifully supplied with money. She was still at Easthampton. The aunt had long since died.

So in the December of 1891 he crossed the Atlantic again.

"Now look after your mother, Leslie. Angeline, take good care of yourself."

His last memory was of Angeline on the quay, waving her handkerchief.