

CHAPTER IV

IN a few months the ascendancy and dominance in the firm of W. Brown had undoubtedly passed to John. Where Mr. Brown formerly had been monarch of all he surveyed, like Robinson 'Crusoe, and had muddled along in a way which would have made that capable mariner aghast, there was now another in control. The "half-crown 'till Friday" fraternity had been frozen out; never had there been so much money in the coffers, so much coloured water in the bottles of medicine, or so much misplaced faith on the part of the customers.

In the matter of actual prescriptions, Mr. Brown was still very necessary, for he possessed some technical knowledge of such things and his nephew did not. John was wise in his generation and knew his limitations; had inquests occurred as a result of misplaced zeal, it was as likely as not that the presiding coroners would have considered him to blame in some way, and that would have been bad for business.

But in all else John was the dominant partner, and partner he actually was now. An agreement had been drawn up, much to their mutual advantage; for if John could and did drive a hard bargain, he had certainly rejuvenated the firm of W. Brown. If ever a labourer had been worthy of his hire and a partner of his partnership, John Woden was certainly worthy.

Mr. Brown was not a man wise 'as serpents, and the events of the last few months had opened his eyes to many possibilities. He still, however, retained his large stock of original innocence and it was some time before the case of Lizzie commended itself to his notice.

"Impossible!" gasped Mr. Brown.

Nevertheless, he knew it was not and in some perturbation of mind he went to consult his capable nephew, not without qualms at the idea of approaching so young a man on such a delicate subject.

His nephew heard him out with a perfectly expressionless face.

"I feel in a way responsible for the girl, John. She has no people; such an innocent little thing. Why, she hardly ever goes out! I am very upset about it; I ought to have warned her. I put it down to her inexperience."

"You had better put it down to mine!"

"Eh?"

"The fact is, uncle, these things will happen."

"What?"

"One drifts into these affairs, and—I drifted. The awakening consciousness of sex; a very powerful factor in human life, uncle."

"Good heavens, John!"

"It isn't as though I had done the girl any harm!" observed John.

"Haven't you?" gasped Mr. Brown.

"Of course not. Why, I have taught her to wash herself and keep clean and tidy. You, yourself, have told me of the great improvement you have noticed in her."

"I know, I know, but this—this—what's to be done?"

"You leave everything to me and it will be perfectly all right."

"Are you going to marry her?" asked his uncle, faintly.

John said nothing, but just looked at him.

"Oh, all right, all right; I was only just making a suggestion," said Mr. Brown, in some haste. "Dear, dear, this is terrible," He mopped his brow.

"Do you know if the new labels for the cough mixture have arrived yet?" asked John.

"Labels for the cough mixture! Bless my soul!" The dazed Mr. Brown staggered to the other end of the shop.

"You don't, eh? By the way, there was one thing I wanted to ask you. What is her surname?"

"Whose surname?"

"Lizzie's. I never asked her."

"Bonvill. Yes, B-o-n-v-i-l-l. My dear boy, what a disaster. How can you take things so calmly? Yes, she is probably of Huguenot extraction. John, what will people think?"

"They will probably think you are responsible."

"What?" shrieked Mr. Brown.

"You see, I'm so young. Cheer up, uncle, you will be thought no end of a gay dog. I shouldn't be surprised if it were not quite good for the business."

His uncle disappeared from view, much too overcome to speak.

"Lizzie!" called John. "Come here; I want you."

She appeared wiping her hands on her apron.

"There is a smudge of blacklead on your right cheek and your hair is coming down. Attend to both those matters, please, when you go back to the kitchen. Now, listen; I propose sending you to a small village in Suffolk for a few weeks, until after this happy event. Have you ever been in the country, Lizzie?"

"Not further nor 'Yde Park, sir."

"Then it will be a most interesting experience for you. I know the countryside; my father lived there. A most charming locality."

"Are you coming too, sir?"

"No, Lizzie, I fear that would be a rather improper proceeding in the circumstances."

"Wen Sal's young man put her like this, 'e married 'er."

"A most reckless and ill-considered enterprise, Lizzie."

"Made an honest woman of 'er," observed Lizzie, somewhat agitated.

"That is a very common error. The marriage service could not possibly have had such an effect; it was merely a pandering to scandal-mongers, take it from me. At any rate, I do not intend to marry you."

She looked at him dumbly.

"For any sake, don't cry. You will be quite all right and your job will be kept open for you. You will find me remarkably generous according to the state of trade, and I think it will be good. That will be all for the present, Lizzie."

"I must be more careful next time," murmured John, as she left. "Marriage—and with her? The gods forbid! . . . Qdd, how these old tricks of speech will cling. No, no, John Woden, you are on the threshold of life. Your gods are money and power. This affair is unfortunate, but do not be discouraged. Treat it as a mere incident."

And calling his uncle to mind the shop, he went for an evening stroll.

Lizzie was sobbing in the back kitchen, but she was a girl without vision, who did not understand.

John walked idly along the Strand, past Charing Cross and down Whitehall. A very presentable young man, fashionably and tastefully dressed, and most attractive to women.

He did not look a mere tradesman of 1845, a year when tradesmen were mere indeed. But then, he was wise and, knowing that most of the world judges by appearances, he took measures accordingly.

He came in sight of the new Houses of Parliament raising their majestic bulk to the darkening London sky. Like the old buildings, which not so many years ago had gone in flame and smoke, an old order was passing in Britain and a new one would rise to the skies.

A young man of a Jewish cast of countenance passed him as he stood in Parliament Square.

"That damned fellow Peel is going to wreck the party," he was saying to his companion.

"I cannot believe that Mr. Disraeli."

"So that was the popular novelist and M.P.?" John gazed after him with much interest.

"Parties are wrecked and others are made," he mused. "Is there no hand in this for me?"

The hour boomed out solemnly as he listened.

"What does she say? Money is power. Money is power. So be it; in the meantime, I go back to my shop."

And turning on his heel, John Woden went towards the little chemist's shop in the Strand.