

CHAPTER XLIX

ONWARDS and ever onwards. Man lives and dies, whilst Empires wax and wane and civilisations rise and fall. Of old it was said that the life of man was a swallow flying into a lighted hall and then again into the darkness of the outer night. He is young and strong, in full pride of love and life, and slowly but surely grows old until presently his early memories are the history of a time that is no more.

So it was with John Woden. He had fought and loved and lived, and now the sands were running out. His great strength had given him great length of days, but the strength was going now, and inevitably the life would follow.

"The days of our years are threescore years and ten, and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off and we fly away."

He heard that in church. Poppy had been horrified when she heard how many years it was since he had been to a service, and insisted on taking him at once, the very next Sunday.

"I am quite shocked, gran'pa, old thing, and if you can't manage any other way, I'll push you in a bath-chair."

"Bath-chair be damned—sorry, Poppy. I never was in one of those infernal things yet, and I refuse to be if I live as long as Old Parr."

So he attended the parish church where his father had been vicar, oddly interested.

"Eighty years and more since I was here, and then I sucked toffee during the sermon."

"Hush, gran'pa," said Poppy.

John Woden hushed, and they found a pew, the centre of local interest, and under all eyes.

It was unfortunate about that psalm. Everyone saw the Earl of Woden half rise, as if in indignant protest, and then be pulled down by a scandalised Poppy.

"Nonsense," he growled, sinking back.

"Gran'pa, do behave," she breathed.

Poppy scolded him on the way home.

"I am really very sorry, dear," he said, contritely, and promised amendment. That afternoon he watched her from the library windows as she played tennis on the lawn.

"I am beginning to think that the modern girl is sounder at heart than any I have known. Dammit, in the old days they went to church because they dared not stay away for fear of the neighbours. As for playing games on Sunday——" He chuckled. "Now, Poppy is a natural child, worshipping when she will and playing when she will—God bless her! . . . Did I say 'God'? I might never have been such an infidel if that had been the way of it when I was a boy. . . . Well, it is too late to change now—cowardly, too, at my time of life."

Poppy was of a different opinion.

John watched her, intently.

"I wonder whom she will marry. I hope I live to know. Not Delilah's boy, the young ass. Poor old Delilah—puritan, would-be-woman-of-the-world. What a mixture! What a thing to do with one's life."

He sighed. Sometimes his neglect of his daughter smote his heart. It was true as things had been, he could not have had her with him, but then, if he had been true to Angeline——

“What’s the good of worrying at my age! I loved my wife and I loved Lucy and I loved Diane. I think men who can be true to one woman are the happiest. I wonder which woman—oh, what’s the good of worrying at my age? . . . Wallington, Wallington, get me some of the Normandin ’75.”

“Certainly, my lord.”

“Any news in to-day’s papers, Wallington? I couldn’t be bothered to read the confounded things this morning. No time; hurried off to church; hurried off to church at my age, Wallington.”

“Very trying, my lord.”

“No, it wasn’t, Wallington. Is there any news?”

“It is not considered that this Labour Government will last long, my lord.” For this was 1924, the first Wembley year.

“I should hope not,” said Lord Woden, indignantly.

For his old eyes from the Peers’ Gallery had scanned the new Government. He had seen the representatives of the Clydeside, and had been very sorry for Glasgow.

“The second city of the Empire, and those represent it!” He had nodded, despondently. Well, he had seen Argyll Street on a Saturday night; perhaps they did represent it.

“Glasgow was always the very dickens of a place for sedition. I remember old Sir Richard talking about it when I was a boy.”

He became aware that Wallington was still standing by his side, in an attitude of grave attention.

“Gad, I was day-dreaming. A bad sign, Wallington; a very bad sign. . . . Do you know you grow more like your father every day?”

“Indeed, my lord?”

“Indeed, yes. Well, I shan’t see another generation of you, that’s pretty certain. Though butlers last long. . . . Mistake to give them the keys of one’s wine-cellar. Always

have thought so. Makes 'em fat and lazy, and live long. Any more news, Wallington?"

"Some trouble with the Senegalese troops on the Rhine——"

"A disgusting business. Like the Yankees did to the South after the Civil War. Black over white; vile, unspeakably vile. . . . Jove, how history repeats itself. . . . Pour me out another drink and go, Wallington."

Wallington withdrew and John settled down to doze in the afternoon sun. Yes, how history repeated itself! The mutinous crowd, the same after this war as all wars; first the chartists, then the socialists—he had run guns into America, where now they were running rum—Nassau was still the jumping-off place, growing rich from her big neighbour's necessity—outside a girl's voice on the lawn—Angeline——

He woke with a start as a young man bustled into the library.

"Just come from London," said Harry Todhunter.

"Why?" asked John. "Who wanted you to come from London?" He was awakened, and was cross.

"I thought——"

"Thought? You?" John laughed.

"I've come to talk business with you, grandpopper."

"Talk it, and for Heaven's sake don't call me 'grandpopper'."

Harry was a little disconcerted by this mode of address, but he was a young man with a thick armour of entirely unjustified self-confidence. He had been some years, in England now, and had devoted much time to carrying out the plans of his late mother, with regard to Poppy. Poppy's sweetness and amiability had misled him; he had recently read a novel, glorifying the "modern cave-man." These two circumstances had brought him from a London week-end to take action

"It's about Poppy."

"What about Poppy?" John was more alert; anything about Poppy held his interest. Harry took the altered tone as a sign of encouragement.

"I want to marry her."

John looked at him. "Does she want to marry you?"

"I shouldn't wonder."

"You mean you have not yet found out? I should have thought you ought to make these advances to the lady herself."

"Got to have your consent and approval," murmured Harry.

"You don't require my consent; you require Poppy's. I shall say nothing to deter her, if she can find her happiness with you. You can't have my approval."

"Oh, I say! But you won't 'can' it for me?"

"If, as I understand, you are suggesting that I do not spoil it, I shall not interfere. It is her life and mine is nearly done—but I had hoped for better things for her. . . . There, man, don't look like that. . . . If she'll have you she'll have you, and if not—well, pour me out a glass of port before you go—she is on the lawn—not like that, fool, all of a hurry! Did they never teach you to pour out port in America? Go away and leave me to sleep. . . ."