

CHAPTER V

THE little shop continued to prosper. Trade was booming in the later forties, except in Ireland the distressful, and although the storm clouds were banking up on the Continent, in those days Chancellors of the Exchequer were framing Budgets the like of which England will never see again. Power was passing from the Tory squires to the Liberal manufacturers, but the great thing was that there was much money in the country, and young John Woden meant to take, for his share, all that he could get. So the little shop continued to prosper.

There were five people now in W. Brown, shortly to be changed to Brown and Woden. The happiest one of the five was undoubtedly John. A devout worshipper of Mammon, his deity was being kind to him. He was fighting for wealth, place and power, and although these might be a very long way off the visions were constant to add strength to his active brain; and when even his iron frame tired, to renew his energies and keep him working and planning far into the night.

Mr. Brown was not completely happy. He said little, but the pace was too swift for him. The patches on his clothing had disappeared, but there were patches in his heart. The policy of making quite sure that any bread he cast on the waters would come back well buttered had never been one of his. His shop was no longer a refuge to the unfortunate and undeserving.

The two pimply young men whom John had engaged as assistants were certainly not happy. They had even

most ungratefully compared their lots unfavourably to those of slaves on the American plantations. They were not badly paid, but John saw that they gave a fair day's work in exchange, which was upsetting to them. The days when masses of the British working classes would band together to stop such infamies were not yet. The two young men were pioneers.

Lizzie Bonvill was not happy. She was graver and quieter than of old. She rarely went out, and in her scanty leisure played rather sadly with little Tom Bonvill, who crowed and pattered about and clambered round Lizzie as though he really liked her. Old Mr. Brown played with him too, and bought him sweetstuffs which were mostly productive of dire results to his infant digestion.

Occasionally the father would notice him and inquire after his health. Little Tom was decidedly healthy and much happier than his mother. Sometimes Mr. Brown saw her smile, but she never smiled when John was present.

She seemed to have become a woman, and to have jumped years of time. The good-humoured slattern of earlier days had gone. She rarely spoke of John and then only to Mr. Brown.

"'E ought to 'ave married me," she exclaimed, rather bitterly one day.

Mr. Brown fell into an embarrassed silence. He really did not know what to say.

"I know I'm not 'is sort, sir, but I'm still a woman. Tom ought to 'ave 'ad a father. 'Tisn't fair on the child."

"Well, well, we shall look after little Tom," said Mr. Brown, weakly.

"'E can't live that down, sir, and you know it. People say things already."

"What things?" demanded Mr. Brown, hotly.

"About me and what Tom is. Treat me like dirt, some of them do. And 'ow was I to know? No one ever taught me nothing. I may 'ave been dirty, but I was 'appy before

young Mr. Woden came. I looked after you, didn't I, sir, and you pottered about your shop and worried about nothink. And now 'ere's me no better nor a prostitute——"

"My dear girl, you mustn't say things like that," exclaimed Mr. Brown, aghast.

"That's what they say round 'ere, sir, and I'm sick of it. That's what Mr. Woden's made me, and 'e's made you a slave, same as them niggers, if you'll excuse me. 'E does everything and gives all the orders, and 'im just a boy. A hard man 'e's going to be, and other women will curse 'im yet, same as I've done."

"He has been very good and generous to you," reminded Mr. Brown, gently.

"Money won't do everythink, sir, though 'e thinks it. It won't prevent me flaming red when I 'ear wot the wives—the real wives round 'ere say to me."

"Do you think you would be happier somewhere else—far away where no one knows you?" asked Mr. Brown, sympathetically. "A new start, Lizzie; perhaps in the country? You like the country, don't you, Lizzie?"

Lizzie laughed bitterly. "I'd take the kid wiv me, sir, and—well, I know what was said in the country when 'e was coming, and me with no 'usband. The country's all right; I never knew there was such a place; all that land without 'ouses; didn't seem natural, some'ow. But if there weren't no people it would be better. Fact is, sir, wot's 'appened 'as 'appened, and there's nothing will wash it out. Might as well be one of them women on the streets and 'ave done wiv it. If I've got the name, I may as well 'ave the game."

There was a tone in her voice which alarmed Mr. Brown.

"My dear girl," he said, earnestly, "I beg of you to do nothing rash. Remember you have always a friend in me. I will consult with John, and see if something cannot be done to improve things for you."

He went to find his nephew and not without some con-

siderable trepidation broached the subject. John heard him out.

"What exactly do you propose?" he said at last.

"I don't know. I—I wish you could have married her, John. After all——"

"My dear uncle, please be sensible. I am much too young to marry even a presentable wife. Wives require looking after; I understand on the best authority that it is necessary to give them a certain amount of one's time. I simply do not possess that time; I am much too busy. And if I ever marry, I require a wife who will be presentable and a social asset. Can you identify Lizzie with such a description?"

"No, perhaps not, but she is a good girl and means well."

"I have observed that being good and meaning well are the small change of the unsuccessful."

"I wish you would not be so cynical, my boy. You cannot let that poor girl eat out her heart in misery."

"She is better dressed and fed than ever in her life. If people are impertinent here, we can send her somewhere else. I suppose, where she is not known, she could pose as a widow?"

"Well, I wish you would have a talk with her and be really kind to her. After all, she is the mother of your son."

"My son!" John laughed. "It sounds rather amusing, doesn't it, uncle? Well, I'll give him a good start in life—have him educated—take him away from his mother's influence and try and make a gentleman of him. I intend to be wealthy when that becomes due to be put into operation. You can tell Lizzie that I shall see her"—he pulled out his watch—"precisely at six-fifteen."

Mr. Brown sighed and went away. John went into deep calculations as to the financial standing of the business, and was pleased at the hundreds of pounds of which he was master. Soon he would have enough to realise his

secret ambition, and turn from the limited world of the chemist's shop and dabble in iron and coal and the ever-expanding industrialism of the North. In the meantime things were going well; the world seemed generally very peaceful.

It was a fine time for a young man to live, he thought. Away up North, green fields were going and trees withering, and there were pit shafts and tall chimneys in the lands where birds had sung and rabbits run in the evening hedgerows. He must have a share in all that.

The only fly in the ointment was Lizzie Bonvill.

"I must be more discreet next time," he remarked. "I observe that people are becoming increasingly more respectable, and scandal might be bad for business."

At six-fifteen he was very punctual in his appointment with Lizzie. But it became six-twenty and then six-thirty, and still no Lizzie. John frowned.

There was a timid tap at the door and his uncle looked in.

"Seen Lizzie?" asked John.

"No. She seems to have gone out without a word. It is very strange and I am a little alarmed, because—because——"

"Because what?"

"Because there is this note for you in her handwriting, and it was left on my bed! Open it quickly, my boy."

John opened it quite calmly and, having perused it, handed it to Mr. Brown, who waded in increasing agitation through the ill-spelt scrawl.

"Mr. Woden, sir, you ave made me a prostitute same as a woman of the streets, and if I ave to ave the name, Ill ave the game."

"God bless my soul, what does this mean?" exclaimed Mr. Brown.

John yawned. "An interesting document. By the way, did you teach her to read books? I neyer knew she could."

"Yes. But how——"

"How do I know? My dear uncle, the last phrase has obviously been taken from some romance. Lizzie is not naturally epigrammatic."

"Never mind that now. What are we to do? Where is she?"

"We had better look first and see if she has taken the boy too. If she has not, we have a certain problem. I am no expert in child management."

Mr. Brown almost ran to the kitchen and peered into the cradle.

"He's gone. Tommy, Tommy! Come to uncle! Where are you?"

"If he has gone, it is really quite superfluous calling for him," said John.

"We shall have to find them. How is that to be done?"

"I shall consider that matter very carefully after I have finished my accounts, and will let you know the result of my deliberations."