

CHAPTER LI

OF all the women he had known in his long life, it was, perhaps, Poppy who perplexed John more than any other. The Victorian women had, for the most part, been comprehensible. Like the little girl in the rhyme, when they had been good, they had been very, very good; when they had been bad, they were horrid, speaking morally. The only one not true to type had been true to herself, and that was Lucy, who had gone pagan. Poppy in particular, and the modern girl in general, puzzled him.

“It is a new world,” thought John, “and I belong to the old one.”

Here was Poppy, who would bathe in the company of the other sex, in one single garment, clinging like a skin, nude of limb. The Victorian women would not have shown their ankles; as for showing their ten toes—they would have swooned at the thought! Again, the Victorians, ostrich-like, pretended that there was no such person as the courtesan, whilst fully expecting their men-folk to know her, such being the then recognised ways of men-folk. Poppy and the modern girl would discuss such things in mixed company; but it ended there! Their men friends were expected to abstain from amorous adventures, and what is wonderful, they generally did, valuing the friendship of Poppy and her like too much to risk it.

And here was Poppy showing a horror of illegitimacy, which John felt, uneasily, was a reflection on things in his own far-past.

"The evil that men do lives after them—Confound it, I wish she did not feel like that about it."

"I know it isn't *fair*, gran'pa; I simply wouldn't be unkind to anyone born that way, but, oh, to marry him—there is something revolting—and yet I know it is unfair, gran'pa."

"Come, Poppy, if the right man came along, you don't mean to say that you would not marry him, because his father had not married his mother?"

"I think I might," Poppy faltered. "It isn't being snobbish—I know that sort of thing happens in every set—look at Charles II and his ladies——"

"The Earl of Woden and his," said John, with grim humour.

"Don't joke about it, gran'pa. I wouldn't be cheeky enough to criticise you, but I wish—I wish you hadn't—you see, I like everything to be nice and orderly, and *straight*—and these other people—really I don't think I could marry a man who was a—whose people——"

"Poppy, you don't even like to express it; you who are so wholesomely frank: Don't let this grow into an obsession."

Poppy disappeared. John was more perplexed than ever. This was, to him, unreasonable, and he had never before known Poppy unreasonable. It would almost seem as though the proximity of such matters in her own family history had caused such strong feelings on the subject.

"Confound it, she must have known for years—since she was a child. She knew Diane. . . . It's this infernal Harry business which has caused her to think so. Thank goodness, he has returned to America. . . . Well, well, women are queer creatures. If I lived as long again, I might begin to understand some of them, and perhaps not."

John had something of the feelings which might be

possessed by a Martian, visiting this earth, and finding himself in a strange world. He had lived so long and all that he had known, or very nearly all, had passed away. He had found a little girl-child, who had grown up, wedded him, borne him sons, who had become old and died; his grandsons had passed away, and still he, John, first Earl of Woden and Viscount Redhall, lived on and on.

Why he was born in the reign of George the Fourth, First Gentleman in Europe and beloved of Erighton, and since then had lived through three more reigns—one the longest in history—and into a fourth. Yes, he was certainly an old man. When he saw the light, people were then grumbling about the after-effects of a Great War; they were still grumbling about the after-effects of a Great War, although it was another Great War.

Things would never be the same again; well, they never had been. And yet how like some things and matters were! At his birth the Cato Street Conspiracy was still recent, and people had talked about it; now it seemed they talked in this year of 1925 of the Secretary of the Miners' Federation, and other conspiracies, more subtle and legal and dangerous. Canning to Baldwin; quite a good innings for one man.

How the people had changed; not *en masse*. It seemed to Lord Woden that the mob was as dense, as ignorant, as vain as ever. For all their wireless and tubes and cinematographs, they knew no more how these things were and worked than their forefathers, and did but use them as educated apes in circuses use spoons and forks. The individuals seemed so different. People saved money before to have it in a bank for their sons; now they saved it to take it out of a bank to buy a motor-car.

"Of course, we must have a car. Everyone has a car."

That was the attitude, and it was not so difficult if you

did not mind not buying your furniture outright. Mr. Drage was so helpful.

No one seemed able to or professed to afford anything, and yet everyone spent so much more.

Now the women had votes, that ill-advised step having been taken at a time when the nation was drunken with victory and unfounded hopes. Pity, too, that most of those who "went in" for politics were the waspish type, the unpleasant acidulated type wont to disturb committees and make miserable the lives of country parsons.

If only they had had the sense to give women votes up to thirty, but not afterwards, instead of the other way round—

"A damned sight better way; give girls like Poppy a chance," he reflected.

Then again, even Poppy was unreasonable; look at this extraordinary idea of hers about illegitimacy. Women never could see two sides to a question; too infernally single-minded!

Well, he could still drink brandy, anyway, even at ninety-eight. That was one consolation. If a man did not know where he was with women, he might still do so with wine. Also with good brandy. He rang for Wallington.

No good worrying about things at his age; much better drink brandy.

"I think when my time comes, I'll borrow a leaf from the book of that fellow, Tutankhamen, they have just found. Have a case of the Normandin '75 put away with me as well as some of the furniture."

"You rang, my lord?"

"Yes, Wallington."

Wallington poured out a glass of the '75, without further instructions. He knew.

Poppy came into the room.

"All right, Wallington, you may go."

"Poppy, you should be out of doors this fine summer evening. Not here, talking to a decrepit old fool about his sins."

"Dear, I wish you would not say such things. You are not the teeniest bit decrepit, gran'pa, and you have no sins—at least—oh, it was frightful cheek of me to say anything, but——"

"Poppy, Poppy, I understand. But, what about the fine summer evening? This is not a night for the stuffy library at Woden. The woods, the lanes, the sea——"

"Why you are getting quite a poet, old thing! I think," she added, reflectively, "I should like a holiday. I haven't been away since Easter, and then they would have me make a four at bridge all the time. I am sorry I learned bridge; I cannot be brutal enough to refuse to make fours when they know I play it."

"I should, and see them damned," growled John. "Thanks be, no one expects a man to play bridge at ninety-eight.—Yes, go for a holiday. It's a bit late for the South of France. What about the Black Forest or Scotland? Or a run down to the Canaries?"

"No, I don't want that sort of holiday. I want an ordinary holiday. I was thinking of going to a seaside place for a fortnight, and staying in a boarding-house, and listening to pierrots, the same as if I were a little typist from an office."

John blinked at her. "Extraordinary."

"No it isn't, dear. It would be more of an adventure. I want to go as plain Miss Poppy Smith."

John chuckled. "You can never be *plain* Miss Poppy Smith," he said, looking at the short dark hair and pretty eyes. "But all right. Take whichever of the cars you like."

"I don't want a car, thanks all the same, gran'pa. I am going to have an excursion ticket."

John laughed. "Poppy, do whatever will make you

happiest, my dear. I can't understand this freak, but then I am nearly a hundred and have come to realise that I do not understand women at all. . . . As I was thinking, I am thankful there is one thing I can understand. Would you tell Wallington I require some curaçoa ? ”