

CHAPTER VI

LONDON is a big place, quite big enough to swallow a small person ; and even in 1847 it was adequate to swallow Lizzie Bonvill and little Tom most completely and effectually. The agitated Mr. Brown went here and there on false trails and worried the authorities without result. In a less flurried and more methodical and cleverer way, John Woden also made search. He had come to the conclusion that that was his social duty, and having formed such a conclusion, went ahead with the search undeviatingly, but alike without result.

It is not to be supposed that young John Woden was altogether callous and unfeeling. He and Lizzie had had a *liaison* with an unfortunate result. It was true that the affair was at his instigation, but she was a consenting party. It takes two to make a bargain, particularly such a bargain as that. The fact that she had paid more heavily than he was not his fault ; it was a natural fact due to her sex. He had not stinted money for her and his son ; for John Woden, though highly acquisitive in matters financial, was far from miserly.

That was the way John Woden looked at the affair. What had happened was irrevocable : there was the child ; there were the circumstances. He had tried to make the best of it ; she had not tried to make the best of it. Now she had disappeared of her own volition, and against his wish. Where ? It was a question without an answer, and John did not like questions without answers. On the premises Lizzie and her son were ascertainable facts :

missing and untraced, they were unknown quantities. It annoyed his orderly mind.

He felt, however, that nothing would have satisfied her save marriage with himself, and he knew instinctively that that would have been disastrous to both of them. He knew, moreover, that she would never have seen the fact.

Months passed by.

Mentally he wrote Lizzie off the account. She might or might not return. If she did there was a home for her. In the meantime she must be treated as non-existent.

Mr. Brown could not see things in the same detached way. His nephew tried to reason with him.

"We have done all we can, uncle. We have nothing with which to reproach ourselves. It is absolutely no good worrying over what cannot be helped. She went of her own accord, and of her own accord is obviously staying away."

"I cannot look at it like that, John. I liked the girl; there was something very nice about Lizzie, until this tragedy came into her life. She was so childish, so innocent, until——"

"Don't mind me. Until I taught her otherwise, you mean. I accept full responsibility for that. If I had not taught her, however, others would. After all, what are women for?"

Mr. Brown shook his head sadly. "Not to gratify men's passions. The greatest thing in the world—motherhood."

"I gratified her in that and she was not satisfied."

"My boy, have you no heart? Cannot you not see the tremendous difference between being your wife, as she thought she should have been, and being your plaything: your discarded plaything?"

"I never loved her; I never pretended to love her. Had I given her my name, that would have been all, and she knew it. What's in a name?"

"A good deal in such matters in this world."

"I cannot accept responsibility for these silly conventions. Do not think I am not sorry for the girl. Apart from my name, was there any creature comfort I did not give her in recompense for any inconvenience to which I may have put her?"

"Well, no, but——"

"But me no buts, uncle. Had I married her, we should both have lingered in a social abyss, and you know it. Be thankful I kept my head."

"I sometimes think you have too much head and too little heart for so young a man, John. Can you think calmly of your son lost somewhere, anywhere with anything happening to him?"

"As that is the actual state of affairs I must of course think so, uncle. I am rather sorry but I cannot help it. I meant to do great things for Tom and his mother has removed those possibilities from him owing to an undue sensitiveness to ill-natured gossip. It seems rather selfish of her."

Mr. Brown looked rather miserable.

"Keep your heart up and be cheerful," advised John. "Now to business. Will you look after the shop very carefully for a few weeks? I am going to take a holiday."

"A holiday? At this time of year?"

"Business and pleasure combined, of course. I have always thought that even a holiday should show a financial profit. I want to see what people in our line are doing on the Continent; to study their methods and do better. I hope to get some agencies for their goods; pretty French and Viennese stuff and the like to beguile silly women. We must expand, uncle; you will see yourself yet with a large establishment in Piccadilly. And perhaps I am curious to cross the Channel for the first time."

"Things do not look too peaceful abroad, John."

"I know the mobs are getting restive. Let me see how

they manage their working classes. It may help me for the time when I hope to manage some of our own." He yawned. "Time to go to bed now. Where is my candle?"

"Here, my boy."

"Why are you carrying two candles, uncle?" asked John curiously.

Mr. Brown coloured and coughed apologetically. "I have put one in Lizzie's room by her window every night since she left," he said, humbly. "The light can be seen far across the leads and down the street, and I thought she might see and understand, and—come home."

John laughed. "I shall have to increase the fire insurance," he said. "We shall certainly be burnt out of our beds sooner or later."