

CHAPTER XII

“**P**LAYING wood syrups?” inquired John, blandly, as he sat down beside her.

She dimpled and then drooped her head in shyness. “I suppose it’s really rather dreadful of me—talking to you—like this.”

“What does it matter, Angeline? Besides, don’t you remember? You are betrothed to me.”

She looked up at him then, and smiled so prettily that he took her head gently between his two hands and kissed her on the lips.

John was a young man who lost nothing by hesitation.

“I ought to have screamed and run away, John.”

“I’m glad you didn’t, Angeline.”

“I’m glad too. But it’s frightfully wicked—deliciously naughty! Here am I without a thing on me, and you—you’re a man.”

“A betrothed young man, Angeline.”

“That was years ago.”

“I helped you to undress once—by special request.”

“And that was years ago too, John, Wasn’t I a naughty little girl? And even betrothed young men don’t see their ladies quite undressed—at least they shouldn’t. Oh dear, I ought to be covered with shame and confusion, and never hold up my head again. And yet I don’t seem to mind. Aunt Maria says I’m a child of the devil, and I am beginning to think she is right.”

“I am sure she is not, although I have no doubt she knows the gentleman more intimately than either of us. If I thought Aunt Maria were on his visiting list, I should

be sorry for him if I believed in him. But what's the idea, Little Miss One-Shoe-Off-and-One-Shoe-On? Won't they give you anything to wear?"

"John, I've got lots to wear—too much in fact in this summer weather." She indicated a pile of garments lying in the grass. "But this is my very own wood. No one comes here—at least, no one should."

"That's a hit at me. I know I'm trespassing."

"So you are, John, but it doesn't matter. I was going to tell you. You know about the 'wood syrups'?" she said, laughing. "Well, I've always loved that sort of thing; I'm afraid I'm terribly babyish," she added, stretching out one little foot and stirring the cool pond water with her pink toes.

"I like you like that, Angeline."

"Well, was there any real need to kiss me again, John, 'specially as you're interrupting the story? Just once again, perhaps. And now I can go on. You see, I've read all about Diana and the nymphs and the naiads and that crowd and it struck me as a perfectly glorious idea. I mean being able to wander about through trees and the grass with nothing on at all. It's lovely to feel the leaves stroking your skin, and the grass under your bare feet. And I've taught myself to swim, and the water is so cool and fresh 'cause there's a spring running through it. And so——"

"And so you became Diana?"

"And so all during this heat wave I've come down here in the morning all the holiday time and taken off all my things and wandered about 'till lunch time, and it's been perfectly glorious and heavenly. After all angels don't wear much, so it can't be wrong, can it, John? The ones on the stained-glass windows seem to have nothing on but a pair of wings and a nightshirt."

"Yes, that's perfectly true," said John.

"I didn't want a nightshirt. I never heard of a sylph wearing a nightshirt, did you? So I went quite undressed.

I never said anything at the house. Aunt would have had a fit. I don't think she would have thought it proper to bathe in a pond at all, and if I had, I should have had to wear a bathing dress like at Scarborough last year. A dreadful thing, John, and terribly heavy when it was wet, and no one could swim in it. . . . So I said nothing, and here I am and my clothes are over there. Oh, dear!"

"What's the matter?"

"I think there must be something wrong with my conscience. I *ought* to be *sbricking*, and hiding from you, and all burning hot—specially as I haven't seen you for six years or heard from you for two. Wasn't that a shame? . . . But I'm chatting away, utterly shameless. . . . I must be an abandoned woman."

"The only thing abandoned about you is your clothing," said John, reassuringly "and I think that is an improvement. . . . You're just a dear little wood nymph Angeline, and you've gone back thousands of years to a time when it wasn't only right to see a woman's face and hands, hardly proper to see her feet and highly improper to see the rest of her. You've gone back to Mother Nature—to Pap—call it what you will. Hang convention, and Aunt Maria. You're the dear little Angeline I've always known—the same little Miss One-Shoe-Off-and-One-Shoe-On I carried through the streets of Vienna years ago."

"But I'm sixteen now, and haven't even one shoe on."

"Blow what you have on or off. Tell me about yourself," commanded John.

"Oh, there's nothing much. I've finished school, and papa is talking about getting me married and off his hands pretty soon."

John's jaw set. "Is he?"

"Yes. But I shan't marry anyone I don't love, never fear. I know daughters are supposed to obey their fathers, but I don't think I'm quite the usual sort of daughter."

"I am thankful for that. Angeline, how would you like to marry me?"

"John, it's a strange thing, but I have been thinking quite a lot about you recently. And John, I'm fond of you."

"Dearest!" He kissed her.

"That's lovely. . . . But if—mind, I'm not promising anything, John—but if you did become engaged to me, I've got to be quite sure first. And you've got to be quite sure too. You see, I've thought a lot about you, and I've let you talk to me this morning—like this—as I should never have let anyone else—any other man. But I am wondering: you see, I'm hardly grown up; for your sake, I must be quite, quite sure. And for mine, you must be. We have to know each other and see each other for a little while."

"Well, that's reasonable. I don't want to rush you."

"You'll have to ask papa if this is a proper proposal, and I warn you he will be difficult. There's Mr. Richmond Higgins at the Hall; fearfully rich and fearfully fat, and fearfully fiftyish. And I know what's in papa's mind."

"Infamous! I'll see your father to-day. I am not a poor man now, and I have the right to ask you. I have been making bullets for the war, Angeline."

"Oh, the horrid war; do you think it will soon be over?"

"On its last legs now, Angeline, now old Palmerston is at the helm."

"I hate war, but I suppose it's got to be."

"Looks like it, Angeline. I don't suppose this will be the last one."

"I seem to want a husband to look after me, don't I?"

"You can come away and marry me now if you like, Angeline."

"Oh, I had better get some clothes on first, hadn't I, John? I am sure it would be wrong to go into a church like this."

John clasped her little hand and, drawing her to him, kissed her again and again. "You little goose, you're making fun of me! Now, you get your things on and I'll wait for you, and we'll go right up to the house and ask your father now."

"John, he is out all to-day and will not be in until evening. And Mr. Higgins is coming to dinner."

"Damn! I like to get things done at once. All right, then say nothing about meeting me, and I'll call to-night and ask his consent."

She sprang to her feet and smiled down on him.

"You look like Eve in the Garden of Eden, Angeline."

"I remember as a little girl you told me that was a fairy tale."

"I like little girls to have good memories," said John. "So it is a fairy tale, and you are the fairy who now represents it. Now, have a good memory again, and not a word to your father or your terrible aunt, or they will probably badger you and whip you and lock you up on a spare diet."

"There will be trouble in any case," mused Angeline. "You see, Mr. Higgins is a landowner. His father made a lot of money during the Peninsular War out of supplies to the troops. So this Mr. Higgins is a country gentleman. He owns an enormous house and is going to try to be a Member of Parliament pretty soon."

"So shall I be one day, I hope. What are the politics of the estimable Mr. Higgins who dares to want my Angeline?"

"Oh, he's a sort of Whig. He once shook hands with Lord Aberdeen. Besides, he thinks Mr. Disraeli is a damned Jew. And then, of course, although this is nice country and quite Tory, he has to think of the town over the hills. They're dreadfully Liberal there."

"I see. Well, Lord Aberdeen has gone, so he will have to pay his best respects to old Pam. I wonder——"

“What do you wonder, John?”

Strange thoughts were flitting through John's brain. He remembered that evening ten years ago when he had looked at the new Houses of Parliament and ambitions had been born. He had made great progress since then; his wealth was far more than that of most self-made young men of twenty-eight. Pertinacity and dominance had had their reward. He was about to enter into one contest with Mr. Higgins for the possession of Angeline; was it possible, he wondered, to enter into another for the possession of the Redehall Division?

“Penny for them, John?”

“They are worth a lot more than that, little ‘wood-syrup,’ but one thing at a time. You have to be wearing my ring first, and then I'll tell you some more good ideas of mine. Do you want me to retire while you dress?”

“Yes, please, John. I don't mind your seeing me dressed, and I don't mind, though I ought to, your seeing me undressed. But half-way—no, you must wait until we are married for that, John.”

He nodded, understandingly, and retired discreetly into the tangle of the summer wood.