

CHAPTER XVII

IT must have been about one o'clock in the morning that Angeline was wakened. After a stormy and unhappy evening she had fallen into a troubled sleep ; her pillow was damp with her tears. Her father had revealed the astounding fact that her elderly suitor had his authority to announce their engagement ; and on her defiance, had thrown himself and his desperate state on her mercy. It was an age when the duty of children to their parents was invoked to the exclusion of that of parents to their children.

So Angeline sobbed her way to bed, longing for John's companionship and his advice, and with a resolve to make desperate efforts to see him in the morning. But her father seemed to have committed her and her future irrevocably ; she did not know what even John could do for her and both of them.

John, however, did know ; therefore at one o'clock on this spring morning Angeline was wakened by a sound at the window. It was the first floor up, and she shared John's love for fresh air ; that window was opened top and bottom. Now it seemed that her love of hygiene had put her in peril of burglars. A dark form obscured the light and her heart gave a jump.

" Angeline ! Are you awake ? "

" John ? " Her eyes opened wide in wonder, " However did you get here ? "

" Gardener's ladder ! Not so loud, puss. We don't want to wake anyone. . . . Will this confounded window creak if I open it a little wider ? I'm afraid I'm rather an

outside. I'll have to chance it anyway." Quite silently, the big frame of John Woden slid on to the floor.

"Where is your candle, Angeline?"

"On my dressing table. Oh, John, if anyone finds you here——"

"I refuse to allow anyone to find me here, 'Angeline. That's better." The yellow light of the candle flickered on the walls and disclosed round-eyed Angeline sitting up in bed. "Dearest, you have been crying."

"John, a dreadful thing has happened. Papa and Mr. Higgins——"

"I know all about papa and Mr. Higgins. That is why I am here."

"I don't want to marry Mr. Higgins," said Angeline, with the suspicion of a sniff, "but it looks as if I'll have to—to save papa." Her blue eyes grew suspiciously bright and glistened in the candleglow.

John sat on the edge of the bed and put his strong arm round her, thrilling to the touch of her warm young body. "You don't suppose for a moment that I am going to let you marry a man like Higgins—that fat, gross, overfed porker—that unmelted lump of grease? Angeline, Angeline, didn't you know me better than that? Why didn't you tell me this infernal scheme was in the wind?"

"I didn't know it, dear. Mr. Higgins rushed papa, and papa rushed me. But what can be done? I can't let papa suffer."

"I won't let the fool suffer—h'm, excuse me, I mean I won't let your father suffer. But there's a more important matter to be attended to first. I have come here for you."

"For me, John?"

"More softly, Angeline. We mustn't arouse anyone."

"Dear, what a perfectly dreadful scandal if anyone found you here—in my bedroom at this hour!"

"You needn't worry about that; we are just going to clopc!"

"John, what do you mean?"

"I have a trap down the lane with the fastest horse in Redc in the shafts. There is a milk train leaving shortly after three. It carries no passengers, but the guard will let us into his van, for a consideration. And we shall be in Hull quite early, and I have telegraphed for a tug-boat which will be waiting for us."

"Are you—are you going to take me away then, John?"

"Angeline, aren't you a dense little goose?" He kissed her fondly. "Of course, I am going to take you away. You see, I want to marry you. Will you be my wife, Angeline? Wouldn't you like to be? You said you would think it over."

"John, yes. Dear, I know I love you now. But to run away with you: to elope and leave everyone—oh, it's perfectly thrilling, but won't there be dreadful trouble about it?"

"You can leave the trouble to me. I revel in trouble."

"What about the banns, John? I thought we had to be 'called' three Sundays?"

"You are a practical little girl. You see, Angeline, that is the wherefor of the tug-boat at Hull. You are under age, you know, and your father's consent is necessary to your marriage. At least, it should be, but I shall dispense with that formality. And this latest, damnable move has rushed things so there is no time for banns. We cannot be married in England, but we can be married outside the limit of territorial waters. See?"

"How deliciously romantic."

"Yes, I am rather pleased with the idea myself. I have a tame parson in the lane, weighted with my gold, ready to make us man and wife as soon as we are sufficiently far out upon the waters. So, Angeline, jump out of bed, and take off your nightie, and dress."

"John! Is that quite proper?"

"It is not in the least proper, Angeline, but very neces-

sary. I once took you with no more than a nightgown through the streets of Vienna, but then you had no other clothes. I should be perfectly willing to elope with you so clad again, or even with nothing at all on your dear beautiful self, but we must not shock the clergyman. Clergymen are so narrow minded."

"You silly!"

"And then there will be the crew of the tug-boat to say nothing of the railway guard. So I think you had better dress."

She put one bare little pink foot out of bed.

"That's fine. Now, the other. Would you like me to tie a handkerchief over my eyes?"

"If I am going to be your wife, I don't think that matters, John, but as I am not your wife yet, perhaps you had better not look too closely."

It was rather difficult to carry out such an instruction even for the phlegmatic John. The white nightdress dropped in a glimmering circle round her feet; the flickering candle made entrancing gleams and shades in and out of the curves of her slim young form. . . .

"Yes, you may help me on with my shoes. I'm quite a respectable little bride now, am I not? Oh, dear, I'm so thrilled. It's dreadfully wicked but perfectly ravishing to be eloped with like this. I do hope I don't wake up and find it's a dream."

"It is splendid reality, Angeline. What do you think of this for a brief note to your father?"

"*Dear Father-in-Law. . . .* What are you beaming at, Angeline?"

"I was only thinking of papa's face when he reads that in the morning. Go on."

"As the proposed sale of your daughter to the fat and abominable Mr. Higgins does not please me, I have decided to elope with, and marry her immediately. Please let

neither Mr. Higgins nor yourself bother to buy us a wedding present.

“Oh, John, how lovely!” exclaimed Angeline, “What more?”

“My wife and I will return sometime to-morrow night in time for the election on the following day. I shall then endeavour to help you out of your financial difficulties, conditionally on your promise of amendment.

Yours affectionately,

John Woden.

“I thought ‘affectionately’ was the right term in the circumstances,” said John. “Have you everything? Comb, hairbrush—it’s only a brief trip; you won’t want much—honeymoon comes later. That’s splendid. Now, I’ll get on the ladder, and you come after me. Hold on tight, and don’t be nervous.”

“I know all about ladders, John. I’ve climbed trees for apples with them, many a time.” She blew out the candle, and followed him to the open window. They descended into the garden. He caught her in his arms as she stepped off, and kissed her again.

“I’ve left the note on my dressing-table, John.”

“That’s right. Now for the trap.” They went swiftly up the lane.

“Light the lamps, Thomson, and we’ll be away as soon as we can.” The groom saluted. “Mr. Baddeley, this is my bride. Angeline, you know Mr. Baddeley, I think?”

“Oh, yes, I have often been to his church. It is nice of you, Mr. Baddeley, to help us like this! Thank you, so much.”

The clergyman gave her a hand to mount into the trap. “I am delighted to be of service, Miss Leslie. Mr. Higgins is not a favourite of mine. But what people will say when

they hear of my part in this business, I dare not think. It is all so irregular."

"They will love you for it," prophesied John, "Your church will be packed when you preach. The ladies will adore you and the men think you a fine fellow."

As events proved John Woden was quite right.
The trap clattered down the lane.