

## CHAPTER XXVI

**R** OSES there were and the green aisles of the virgin woods, glowing and scented under the July sun. It seemed hard to think of this fair American land in the grip of fratricidal war; that not many miles away men were fighting and dying. Here were nothing but peace and beauty.

The beauty of roses and the woods and that most dangerous of all earthly beauties, the one of budding womanhood in its glory.

"Lucy, I like you," he had said that and thought of Angeline—many thousands of miles away now. He was young and strong and the surge of high summer was in his veins, and Lucy was young and lovely and unashamed.

"Convention does not go with the woods and the hills, John. I have gone pagan; I have felt the call of the old gods. I have finished with the whitewashed chapels and the black-frosted deacons as they have finished with me. I am a heathen now."

"The old gods—in America?"

"Why, John, don't you know that all the peoples who have come here have brought their fairies and their gods with them? And they live in the woods with the old Indian gods and fairies, here since time began. I lean out of my bedroom window at night, and gaze into the trees where they are fattest—and thickest—and darkest. I see little lights, John, and hear little voices, and I know I've gone a long way from Bethel, Vermont."

"Lucy, dear." The endearment slipped out almost unconsciously.

"I like to hear you call me that John. No one's ever called me 'dear' since Harry went down to Bull Run." She knelt at his side as he lay on the couch. "May I put my arms round your neck, John?"

"Surely."

"Aren't you getting Yankee, Mr. Englishman?"

"Aren't you getting affectionate, Miss Columbia?"

"I like you, John."

"I like you, Lucy—dear."

"John, I think I am going to *love* you. I got a feeling right in my waist, which tells me. Not being respectable any longer is such a help—I'm beginning to get hazy in my mind about Bethel, Vermont. I want to believe there never was such a place, really, only a scare-crow to frighten children like Hell or Tophet. . . . I only cared for it because of Harry, and when he went down at Bull Run and they called me a harlot because of his baby—why, I loathed it. John, you never fought at Bull Run, I guess?"

"No. I was in England then, you know?"

"My head must be wool. Just for a moment, I thought how horrid it would have been if you had killed Harry—you being a Confederate. He was a nice boy, John, you'll allow."

"I'm sure he was."

"The baby had just his eyes. If I shut mine, I can see now, its little lips at my breast. . . . I know it would have been a real cute kid, but it just got hated out of life, John. . . . That's right, hold me a little tighter. . . . Yes, I know those demons hated it out of life. Thoughts kill, sometimes. But they can't touch me here in Pennsylvania. Nor you, John. . . . Would you like to kiss me?"

Very gently he drew her lips to his own.

"No-one's ever kissed me since my Harry went to Bull Run."

"I ought to tell you," said John, with sudden compunction, "I am not free."

"Free?"

"I have a wife, Lucy."

"Why, John, how lovely? Do tell me all about her."

"Her name is Angeline, and she is dark—shorter than you are. Her eyes are blue, and I love her."

"Of course, you love her, John. Somehow I had an idea you had a wife. You've got such a way. I guess married men always make the best husbands. I think I'm married too."

"You *think* so?"

"Harry down by that river. I think he is my husband. That's the way I always think of Harry. I don't suppose I'll see him again, do you? They're sure not to let me into Heaven now I've gone pagan. I don't mind much except for Harry. The way they put it in Bethel, Vermont, it's all full of streets and walls, even if they are gold and jasper. Then, there's all the hymns, and they always make my head ache. I'd rather be in a country place with woods and birds and little rabbits. Besides the deacons are sure to be in Heaven, and I just couldn't meet them again, John."

"I should say not. So you don't mind my being married?"

"Why ever so? Don't I tell you I'm the same—? I'm married to Harry, I reckon, even though he had got a li'l cross over him way down at Bull Run. Besides I've gone pagan. Dear old John, when you go back home, you'll be just as good and sweet to Angeline as ever—loyal, faithful. But this is summer and we are pagans near a pagan wood, and does anything matter but love and life and nature and we two? Not a cent. I love you. I want to kiss you. I want you to kiss me, and hold me in your arms."

"Little Delilah!"

"If anyone gives me a daughter, John, that will be her name. I like it!—Say, do you hear that bird?"

It was getting towards evening. The trill of song came through the soft air.

"What sort of a bird is that?"

"I don't know his name, John, but isn't he just the finest bird ever you heard? When it gets darker I'll show you the lights in the trees and let you hear the little voices."

The call of the old gods was getting very strong.

"John, don't you think I'm rather pretty?"

"Your eyes are like forest pools, and your hair a mass of sunbeams, lady fair."

"You must see it when it's down, John. I'll show you to-night. . . . You've been here two days, and not seen my hair down? It's right below my waist. Would you like to see me undressed, John? You know my skin is creamy white, with just a tinge of pink, except my toes which are real rosebud pink like these." She held up her little fingers for his inspection, "Or these," and she patted her glowing cheeks. "And I've such nice curves. . . . You mustn't mind my praising my body: I left my maidenly modesty in Bethel, Vermont, and I'm a pure pagan who only knows that she looks quite pretty when she is naked, and doesn't mind saying it. I'm sure you'll think so."

"I am sure I shall."

"I go about all day like that sometimes, John, dressed in nothing but my hair—in the gardens and the woods too. It's such fun: so heathen."

John's thoughts were far away. He was thinking of a summer wood years ago in distant Redehall, and the wood "syrup" by the pool, who too, felt the call of nature in the same way.

"I'll get supper now, John," she said, rising. "Think I'll give you rabbit. It seems a shame to kill them, but that's what comes of being rabbits. Harry always use<sup>d</sup> to

like my stewed rabbit before he went away to Bull Run. . . . He looked quite dinky in his blue uniform. Maybe you wouldn't think so."

"Yes, I should. I am not prejudiced, Lucy."

"I think you look dinky in your grey one. . . . Well, I'll get that rabbit——"

"And so to supper."

"I wish you would take the bed to-night, Lucy. I hate to think of you sleeping on the couch."

"John, I'll consider it."

She came in, holding a candle, and she was robed in white. Momentarily, there was a little chill at John's heart. How many years was it since his uncle had died in the little shop in the Strand? Who had been the girl in white who held the candle?

However, it was but Lucy in a long white nightgown, bare of foot, and with loosened hair, like a golden cascade.

He raised his head from the pillow.

"Don't you like my nightie?"

Again John's thoughts went back across the years, when he held the little girl Angeline on his knees. He could almost hear her childish voice. "Dear, you have bought me two shoes, quite pretty ones, and ever such a nice nightie."

"It was the best in Vienna."

And here was Lucy standing before him asking him to praise hers, and Angeline, who had become his wife, was sundered from him by a wide ocean.

"I think it looks very pretty, Lucy."

She smiled, raised her hands, undid something and let it fall.

"And now?"

"Lucy, you are wonderful." His senses were swimming.

She went to the open casement and let the cool night air play on her soft skin.

"There are lights in the trees, and I'm sure I hear the little voices, John. Will o' Wisps and the old gods, and here are we two alone. If there weren't a light in this room, I could see the stars."

"That's easily remedied." He blew out the candle.