

THE
ABBNEY GIRLS



ELSIE J.
OXENHAM



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Title: The Abbey Girls

Date of first publication: 1920

Author: Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham) (1880-1960)

Date first posted: Nov. 7, 2020

Date last updated: Nov. 7, 2020

Faded Page eBook #20201114

This eBook was produced by: Hugh Stewart, Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

THE
BBEY
GIRLS

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THE
BBEY GIRLS

ELSIE OXENHAM



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NET

COLLINS



'The girls knew the value of having a pretty Queen.'

THE ABBEY GIRLS

ELSIE JEANETTE OXENHAM

Author of 'EXPELLED FROM SCHOOL,'
'A PRINCESS IN TATTERS,' Etc.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ARTHUR A. DIXON

First published 1920 by Collins.

TO
THE CAMP FIRE GIRLS
WHO HAVE JOINED WITH ME IN
FOLK DANCE EVENINGS,
THIS STORY
IS
AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. THE RAMBLING CLUB	7
II. THE ABBEY GIRL	15
III. JOAN	29
IV. JOY	39
V. A VISIT FROM A PRESIDENT	45
VI. THE PRESIDENT'S NEXT VISIT	53
VII. A CHANCE FOR ONE	59
VIII. THE TEST OF FRIENDSHIP	72
IX. TO TEA WITH CICELY	83
X. DARLEY'S BARN	94
XI. CICELY'S PROPOSAL	105
XII. GETTING JOY READY FOR SCHOOL	111
XIII. IN THE PLAYGROUND	120
XIV. SAINTS AND SINNERS	130
XV. THE SECOND VOTE	142
XVI. 'THE CURATE'S LULLABY'	151
XVII. CHOOSING THE QUEEN	165
XVIII. JOY'S MAID OF HONOUR	175
XIX. DUTIES AND DIFFICULTIES OF A QUEEN	182
XX. THE FOURTH QUEEN	194
XXI. A VISIT FROM SIR ANTONY	204
XXII. ON TRIAL	215
XXIII. A CALAMITY	229
XXIV. THE ADVENTURES OF JOY'S GUIDE-BOOK	235
XXV. CARRY'S ULTIMATUM	248
XXVI. A QUEEN IN DISGRACE	258
XXVII. THE ABBEY SANCTUARY	270
XXVIII. AN UNCOMFORTABLE CEREMONY	276
XXIX. FOR CICELY	285
XXX. SIR ANTONY'S MESSAGE	300
XXXI. JOAN'S ABBEY	310

CHAPTER I

THE RAMBLING CLUB

‘I don’t see why they need choose such an out-of-the-way place to ramble to!’ grumbled a fair-haired girl, toiling along in the rear.

‘What’s the matter?’ and an elder girl turned to look back at the juniors. ‘Who’s grumbling? Carry Carter again?’

‘Carry Carter as usual, you mean,’ laughed sturdy brown-faced Edna.

The elders had paused at the top of a long hill, and the juniors, toiling after, had caught them up. There were only a dozen of them to-day, for an important hockey practice had kept several members at home. Miriam and Cicely, the leaders, were among the eldest girls in the school. Miriam was eighteen, with her fair hair wound round her head in thick plaits; Cicely was a year younger, but already looking nearly grown-up, with her dark brown hair tied back and her skirts well below her knees. The rest of the party were younger, sturdy Edna and grumbling Carry being fifteen, and the others ranging between them and the seniors.

‘Carry Carter always grumbles on rambles. I don’t know why she ever joined,’ and Cicely slipped her hand through her friend’s arm and turned to go on her way.

‘*Don’t* you? I’ve a fair idea myself, and I know Marguerite thinks so too.’

‘You mean May-day?’ and Cicely frowned. ‘They’re going to run a candidate? Then we shall have trouble. What a nuisance! It’s always gone so well!’

Miriam laughed. ‘Because you’ve always had your own way. You simply ran things through last time. I think Miss Carry rather fancies herself—well, we’ll see!’

‘That kid! Then we *shall* have trouble! I hope you’re wrong. I rather thought Edna Gilks would do.’

‘So did I. She’s a favourite with our girls. But we won’t be asked to arrange it. Go on! You were telling me about Margia.’

Cicely continued her story, and the discontented juniors were forgotten. Carry and her friend, Agnes Mason, had fallen behind again, and were talking in low tones. Edna Gilks and her cousin Peggy and several others were asking riddles to pass the time on the long stretch of road.

‘I don’t suppose the silly place is worth going to, anyway,’ Carry raised her voice deliberately. ‘Nobody knows anything about it but Miriam Honor. Why couldn’t we go somewhere nearer home?’

‘Because we went to them all last year, silly,’ Edna retorted over her shoulder. ‘But this old abbey is new to us. It’s out of the way——’

‘It *is!*’ jerked Carry.

‘We never come round this way; even Mirry hasn’t been for two years. But she says it’s awfully fine, and we ought to have been before.’

‘How much farther is it?’ demanded Carry gloomily.

‘A mile and a half,’ answered Cicely unexpectedly from her place in front. ‘At it again, Carry?’

‘I wasn’t speaking to her,’ muttered Carry, secretly somewhat afraid of Cicely’s sharp tongue. ‘Well, I don’t care a scrap for old abbeys, and I’m tired. I’m not going any farther,’ and she halted at the cross roads.

‘Oh? What are you going to do? Sit there till we come back?’ asked Peggy Gilks, while Edna looked unutterable scorn.

‘Tired! You’re always tired, Carry! You’ve no right to be a member. You can’t walk ten miles. I don’t believe you could qualify, if Cicely was strict about it.’

‘I could, then! But it’s silly to tramp when we could cycle in quarter the time.’

‘All right! Sit on the mile-stone till we get back. I hope it’s a soft one.’

Carry, with a word to Agnes, turned and walked away down a lane at right angles, while Agnes joined Edna and Peggy.

‘Carry has an aunt living in Saunderton. She’ll meet us on the way home. She says if the abbey is really worth anything, Miriam and Cicely won’t come away till they’ve seen every corner of it, so it will take them some time.’

‘An aunt? I don’t believe it! She’s going to a cottage to have some tea, lazy thing! She wanted to go and see an aunt that day we went to Stoke! She can’t have aunts in every village!’

‘She has heaps of aunts and cousins!’ said Agnes indignantly.

‘They come in jolly handy, just when she wants to slack,’ and Edna sounded sceptical.

‘She isn’t a bit keen on rambles,’ Peggy remarked. ‘Well, let’s get on, or we shan’t have time to see the abbey.’

They had come from Wycombe along the Bledlow Ridge, with keen wind sweeping across from Hampden, constant glimpses of the Saunderton valley four hundred feet below, and wide views of the opposite hills, where lay the homes of many of them.

Their road swung downwards, and a great wood hid the hills. Presently they stopped with one accord at a gap in the trees to look out over the level country lying at their feet, many miles of wooded plain, with farms and fields and villages, and deep blue shadows veiling the horizon.

‘Jolly fine!’ murmured Edna Gilks.

‘Ripping!’ agreed Peggy. ‘About a thousand miles of it, I should say.’

‘It is beautiful!’ Miriam said softly. ‘I do like the way we suddenly come to the edge of the world—our world of hills and woods—and look out over a new one. It’s just the same at home, on the other hill.’

‘Above the Cross,’ Cicely added. ‘Now for the abbey!’ and they followed Miriam as she led them by footpaths through the woods and down an open hill-side. At the bottom they turned along a grassy track, between high hedges of bramble and beech, still bearing last year’s red leaves, though it was late in February. The way was rutty and wavered up and down along the uneven foot of the hills, but ran very straight across country.

‘Is there a caretaker at the abbey?’ Cicely asked. ‘Can’t we stifle him somehow? I’d heaps rather poke about by myself.’

‘A funny old chap went round with Margia and me, and told us what ’Enery the Heighth had destroyed, and so on.’

‘I’ll give him sixpence to stop outside,’ said Cicely fervently.

‘This way,’ and Miriam led them by a footpath across the ploughed fields.

The abbey stood buried in great beech-trees. A tiny gate gave entrance to a footpath, and a short beech-path, soft with ruddy leaves, led them through the wood, till they paused to gaze across a lawn at an ancient gray building with pointed roof, the walls upheld by massive stone buttresses. A magnificent beech-tree stood at one side, its great branches bending lovingly

towards the old gray stone of the walls and the green and brown and gold of the moss-covered roof.

‘This is the gatehouse,’ Miriam explained quietly, for the peacefulness of the scene hushed all their voices. ‘See the carving over the door. Here’s St Bernard. He founded the Cistercians, you know. This’—showing a much-damaged figure in a niche—‘is the Abbot Michael who founded the abbey. He’s rather dilapidated, but you can just make him out.’

‘There’s not much left of him, poor old chap!’ Cicely murmured. ‘And you say this is only the gate?’

‘There’s the real entrance, where people can drive in from the road. Our path was a short cut.’

They wandered through the wide archway, and found before them another lawn, and beyond it a long gray building, ruins and broken round arches above, a row of narrow lancet windows below.

‘But where does the old chap live?—not Michael, I mean the caretaker?’

‘This way,’ and Miriam knocked at a low door. ‘This is the back, of course. The buildings open on to a quadrangle, with another lovely lawn.’

‘Here comes the old one!’ as they heard a bolt withdrawn. ‘Can’t we bribe him to leave us alone, Mirry? I know he’ll have asthma and wheeze at us.’

‘That would seem in keeping with the old place, anyway,’ Miriam laughed. ‘I think we shall want him to explain things. I know I can’t remember all the dates and stories.’

‘Hel-lo!’ murmured Cicely, as the door opened, for it was held by a pleasant-faced little lady dressed in black.

That she was a lady no one doubted for a moment. It was written in the refinement of her face, the taste of her dress, though this was of the simplest. It was in her voice, also, as she said, ‘Will you please come in?’ and held back the heavy door.

Lively interest was in Cicely’s eyes as they met Miriam’s in a merry challenge. Where was the asthmatic old man? But the little lady was saying, ‘If you will wait just a moment some one will come. We do not have many visitors in winter.’

They went forward, looking round with eager eyes. The low stone passage had doors of old oak studded with great nails; beyond, in the pointed archway, was a glimpse of green lawn. Everything was very hushed and still. Their hostess disappeared through one of the old doorways, and the girls, longing to explore, passed on and stood in the archway.

‘Is she your old man’s daughter? But she can’t be, Mirry! She’s a lady through and through. What a pretty soft voice she has! But where is the old chap, then?’

‘He may have retired. It’s nearly two years since I was here, and he was very old and shaky.’

‘I wouldn’t mind if she’d go round with us! It would be rather jolly. I’d like to hear ancient history in that pretty voice. I wonder who or what she’ll send?’

‘I say, this is jolly decent!’ murmured Edna, her voice hushed almost to a whisper by the prevailing stillness. ‘Isn’t Carry a donkey to go and miss it?’

They faced a square green lawn. On each side were long gray buildings, richly ornamented windows, ancient doorways leading to winding stone passages or up flights of irregular steps. To the left stretched the cloisters, their roof upheld by old oak beams, long narrow windows with richly moulded arches allowing views of the green inner lawn.

A small black kitten with a square of white below his chin was prowling about, and Edna dropped on her knees and called him.

‘Puss! Kitty! Come here, then! I wonder what they call you?’

‘The Curate,’ said a laughing voice, and they turned to see their guide.

CHAPTER II

THE ABBEY GIRL

She was a slim girl of fifteen, taller for her age than Edna or Carry. She wore a dark dress and over it a big blue pinafore. Her brown eyes were wide with interest in her visitors, and looked the schoolgirls over with as much curiosity as they felt in her. Her hair was long and thick, tied back loosely with a ribbon, and very light and wavy in texture, of a colour which made Edna, gazing admiringly, whisper to Peggy, 'I say! New pennies! What a ripping colour! Talk about red!'

'Why are we just brown all over?' Peggy responded. 'Isn't she pretty?'

'If you'll come this way I will show you the abbey,' and the girl dismissed the Curate with a wave of her pinafore. 'Go away! Go and find your mother! She's sleeping on my bed. Will you come, then?'

Cicely and Miriam, much amused to be shown round by a girl two years younger than themselves, thanked her, and turned to follow as she led the way across the lawn towards a flight of steps under an old pointed arch.

'The steps are very uneven. Please be careful, or you may slip. All that east side is Early English; you see the pointed arches and the lancet windows? The other part is Norman, and still older. But this one room was added much later. The windows, you see, are of the Perpendicular period. This is the finest room in the abbey—the refectory, where the monks had their meals, of course,' she added, with a glance at the younger girls, for whom the explanation was not unnecessary.

They entered the wide doorway and looked in amazement about the great hall. No one could have guessed that so large and perfect a room was to be found inside. The surprise of the girls found vent as they wandered round, looking up at the high windows and vaulted roof.

'She has her mother's pretty voice,' Cicely murmured, as they stood before the fireplace. 'But she isn't like her to look at. The mother was short and dark. This girl is lovely.'

'If you look up the chimney'—the abbey girl began, then stood aside and laughed, as the juniors made a rush for the hearth. The elder girls laughed also at Edna's contortions as she stooped to peer upwards, and Peggy shouted that she could see the sky.

'These steps in this recess led to a pulpit, where a reader sat during meals and read aloud to the rest.'

'I wonder what he read? You don't know, I suppose?'

But the abbey girl was ready. 'Legends of the saints and martyrs, and homilies and sermons. They had twelve books in their library, so they must have been very precious.'

'I say! Twelve whole books?'

The abbey girl smiled. 'They were silent monks. They didn't talk during meals. Of course the lay brothers didn't take such strict vows.'

'I think I'd have been a lay brother!' murmured Cicely.

'What did they have for dinner?' demanded Peggy, listening wide-eyed. 'Anything queer? Or just ordinary?'

'Never any meat!' smiled the abbey girl. 'Eggs, fish, herbs, cheese, bread, vegetable soup—they grew their own herbs and vegetables in the little garden, and they had their own fishponds in the grounds. They made signs when they wanted the dishes changed—a regular

code of signals, I believe—for no one spoke but the reader; and a little bell was rung at the beginning and end of each meal. All the food that was left was given to the poor, waiting at the big gateway. Before going to bed they met again for another little meal, called the Cup of Charity, then they said their prayers and at the foot of the stairs were sprinkled with holy water, and so went up to bed.’

‘I like that! Keep out of the way, girls! I want to imagine it as it used to be,’ and Cicely surveyed the great room. ‘Long trestle tables, I suppose, and benches, and perhaps a big carved chair for the Abbot, and black-robed monks——’

‘White-robed!’ corrected their guide quickly. ‘They were Cistercians! Coarse white woollen robes, with a black head-dress!’

‘Really? Oh, that’s far more picturesque! And those paintings on the walls—what were they, do you know?’

‘The Apostles were all along that side. Here is St Peter with his keys, and St Matthew, and St John. On this side were Saints. It must have looked beautiful in those days, when the colours were still bright and the glass was still in the great windows. The glass used in those days was beautiful, of very rich colours.’

She glanced at the girls, evidently expecting a question. None came, however, and her lips twitched as she suppressed a smile. ‘You don’t know *very* much about the Cistercians, do you?’

‘Absolutely nothing! Except that they were monks, and you say they wore white, and didn’t talk at meals. But why? How did we show our ignorance?’

She laughed. ‘By not pulling me up about the stained glass. That was one of the things they were forbidden. No stained glass, no paintings on the walls, no beautiful carving, and in the church no organ, no images nor gilding, no unnecessary lights, no jewelled dishes—that was the Cistercian rule. Everything had to be severe and simple. Even their chanting had to be in unison—no harmony was allowed.’

‘I say, they were strict! But then why——’ and Cicely looked round the great refectory. ‘Surely they broke rules when they built this room?’ and she nodded towards the carved heads of saints and angels supporting the beams of the great vaulted roof.

‘That’s what I expected you to ask. But this room dates only from Perpendicular times—not earlier than 1400. They were falling away from their strict rules then, and allowing all these things. But in early days they were severely simple.’

‘I like your old monks!’ said Miriam Honor. ‘And they always built in lonely places, didn’t they?’

‘Always out of the world, never in towns; and generally in beautiful places. They liked to be in the depths of woods, as we are here, or in the heart of the moors.’

‘And did they really call it Gracedieu Abbey?’ asked Cicely. ‘It sounds too poetical for those old times!’

‘Not for Cistercians!’ the abbey girl said swiftly. ‘They always had beautiful names for their houses. You know Fountains and Beaulieu, of course. But did you know there were others called “The Vale of Flowers,” “The Hill of Victory,” “God’s Benison,” “The Vale of Roses,” and “Sweet-heart”? The names would be in French or Latin, but those were the sort of thing they meant. Ours would be “God’s Pardon,” or “The Grace of God.” Aren’t they pretty?’

‘Lovely! I had no idea they were such poets.’

‘They worked in the fields and gardens all the time. Perhaps that had something to do with it. You know their motto, “Labour is Prayer”?’

‘I do like them!’ Cicely said, with conviction.

‘Here you can see the original tiles of the floor——’

‘There are pictures on them!’ cried Edna. ‘I can see a thing with two heads—and roses—and birds——’

‘They were the coats of arms of knights who had given gifts to the abbey. Shall we go now to see the dormitory?’

‘Where they slept? Can you show us that? How ripping!’

‘But where did they have their meals before this was built?’ demanded Agnes, a critical note in her voice. ‘This can’t be so much newer! They must have had a dining-room!’

The abbey girl looked at her curiously, evidently surprised that any one so ignorant should presume to criticise. ‘There was an older refectory, which has disappeared. This room is Perpendicular, as you can see by the windows. The rest is Early English, or even Norman,’ she said, with a quiet definiteness which left no room for argument.

‘D’you feel squashed, Agnes?’ murmured Peggy in delight.

‘Not a scrap! I don’t believe she knows. She could quite well make it up. I’m sure this looks as old as all the rest.’

‘Agnes, don’t be silly!’ said Cicely sharply, ‘If you don’t know a Norman from an Early English arch you ought to. Don’t betray your ignorance, anyway.’

‘I should have thought Early English was older than Norman!’ muttered Agnes, but Cicely had followed the abbey girl up another narrow flight of steps, through a fine rounded arch.

‘This is our finest Norman doorway,’ she said quietly, in passing.

A turn in the staircase made the way dark, and Cicely murmured, ‘Now I know why this girl got the job! It’s because her hair shines in the dark, and people only have to follow. It’s like a lamp. Saves her bringing a candle!’

Miriam laughed. ‘It is a splendid colour. Margia would love it.’

‘These were the day-stairs,’ the abbey girl was explaining. ‘There were others used at night, which led down into the church. The monks rose at 2 a.m. to go to service.’

‘What, always? Hard lines! And they came up those dark steps? I wonder,’ murmured Cicely, ‘if they had red-haired girls to show them the way?’

‘It isn’t red. It’s bronze,’ Miriam responded, and followed the younger girls, to whom their guide was explaining the original condition of the dormitory.

‘Each window has a recess with a little seat, you see. Between each two was a mattress, with a bolster and coverlet, and a low partition to divide the hall into little rooms. That skew door at the north end was for watching the lights in the church. The windows are all Early English lancets,’ with a glance at Agnes, who looked up at the pointed arches and sniffed doubtfully.

‘It’s quite easy to imagine. And the windows look out on that lovely inner lawn,’ and Cicely stood in rapt silence, revelling in the hush which still seemed to linger round the old walls.

‘The cloister-garth!’ murmured the bronze-haired girl.

From the dormitory she led them to the monks’ day-room or workshop, and then to the calefactory—‘That means the room with a fire. There is the old fire-place. They used to dry parchments here, and heat the charcoal for the boys’ censers. Now you must see the chapter-house. It is very fine.’

‘You’re fond of the abbey?’ and Miriam looked down at her with interest.

‘Oh, I love it. I wish I had lived here always.’

‘You haven’t been here long? There used to be an old man.’

‘He was too old, so he went away a year ago. I loved the place from the first moment. I made him tell me all his stories.’

‘You do know all about it, don’t you?’—for no question had found her unprepared, and she had told much of legend and history for which they had been too ignorant to ask.

But the girl shook her head. ‘I’m always finding things I don’t understand. Of course one can imagine a good deal. Do you like the chapter-house? It was the most holy place after the church itself, so they always kept a light burning in it, and never spoke above a whisper.’

‘Really?’ and the girls turned from their scrutiny of the beautiful vaulted roof to gaze at her incredulously.

‘Sure you aren’t trying to—well——’

The abbey girl laughed, and her laugh was well above a whisper. ‘Oh, no! I wouldn’t do that! It’s true, really. Do you see this end part of the room, raised a step above the rest? This was the muniment room, where books and parchments were stored, and they went in there when they wanted to talk. I expect it was used a good deal!’

The girls laughed, but she went on with a quick change of tone. ‘But did you ever see anything more beautiful than those pointed arches of the door and little windows, with the garth beyond and the cloisters opposite? I love this room. There is one very fine window you must see,’ and she led them out to the garth again.

‘How dark it’s getting! What if we have a storm?’ and Cicely looked up at the darkening sky. ‘Think of Carry at the cross-roads! Serve her right if she’s well soaked!’

‘This was the sacristy. It opened into the church, and novices were trained here for officiating at Mass. The walls were painted like those in the refectory, you see, and the roof is vaulted like the chapter-house. That is the rose window—seven feet across. They think it was fourteenth century work.’

‘But where is the church? We haven’t seen that yet?’

‘That was destroyed by Henry the Eighth. I can show you where it stood,’ and she led them out by a narrow passage to the back of the great blank wall which closed the cloister garth on the north side.

‘The church was all along this side, adjoining the dormitory, and here’—and she bent—‘I can show you the original tiled floor. We keep it covered in winter to preserve it.’

She swept aside the loose soil, and showed beautiful coloured tiles set in patterns. The girls admired and exclaimed, and uncovered other spots to see how far the tiles extended; then Miriam carefully replaced the scattered soil.

‘It would be a terrible pity if it were left to suffer from the weather,’ she said, and the abbey girl eyed her with approval.

She showed them the ‘slype,’ a narrow passage-way, the ‘aumbries,’ or recesses in which the monks kept their books, the ‘tresaut,’ another passage leading to the Abbot’s garden, with a stone seat for the porter. Then, leading them to the inner lawn again, she pointed out a richly moulded arch close to the refectory staircase.

‘There was a trough below the arch, where they washed before meals. Now I think I have shown you everything. Perhaps you would like to go round again alone?’

‘You’ve done it awfully well!’ Cicely said impulsively, and the abbey girl flushed.

‘I like to show it to people who appreciate it. Americans enjoy it most, I think, but sometimes they’re very funny. Will you know your way out if I leave you to wander round?’

‘Will you trust us to wander? We’ll do no damage, and Cicely’s pining to use her camera,’ Miriam explained.

‘Of course. But you shouldn’t stay too long, for I think there’ll be a storm. It’s a long way back to Wycombe.’

‘Now how did you know we came from Wycombe?’ demanded Cicely, turning her camera on the arched door and windows of the chapter-house. ‘I say, wouldn’t you pose for me?’

But the abbey girl laughed. ‘This is a monastery. A girl would be most improper. I knew your hats. I’ve cycled into Wycombe, and I’ve seen your school. I’m glad you like the abbey! Good-afternoon!’ and she left them on the lawn and disappeared down the narrow passage.

‘*What* a jolly girl!’ said Cicely, focusing with care. ‘But I’d have liked a photo of her. Go and sit on that stone, Mirry, there’s a dear!’

‘No, I agree with her. It wouldn’t be in keeping. Come and take the refectory, Cicely. The long high windows are beautiful.’

They wandered through the ruin, discussing the holy men who had built it, with their coarse white robes, their rigid rules and austere life, till heavy raindrops sent them flying to the shelter of the cloisters.

‘A real good old thunderstorm! See that lightning! We’re stuck here for a while, that’s certain.’

‘I wonder what that silly Carry’s doing?’ cried Edna.

‘She’ll have stayed with her aunt—if there is any aunt! I wish that girl would come and talk to us! I meant to ask who keeps the lawns in such beautiful order. But I don’t like to fetch her out again. She’s told us so much already,’ and Cicely sat in one of the arched windows, and gazed out at the rain as the thunder echoed among the old walls.

In another corner Edna Gilks was taking Agnes to task for the way she had argued with the abbey girl.

‘You asked questions in the hope of catching her! It was mean!’

‘I believe she was making up three-quarters of it!’

‘Why should she? You are objectionable sometimes, Agnes!’

Agnes looked decidedly objectionable at the moment, for Carry’s desertion had left her in a bad humour. The elder girls looked across at them, and Miriam remarked,—

‘They’ll be quarrelling in a moment. Can’t we create a diversion?’

‘Yes!’ and Cicely sprang up. ‘It’s draughty with all these doors and passages. Perhaps that has got on Agnes’s nerves. She wants warming up. Girls, let’s dance! D’you remember that heavy shower at Chalfont, when we ran to a farm and danced in a cow-shed? These old cloisters make a far finer setting. Who will volunteer? Agnes, you lead the “side.” Edna, you must whistle. What shall we have?’

‘We haven’t enough handkerchiefs,’ Agnes objected. ‘We want two each.’

‘We must do without. We might have “How d’ye do, sir?” Or—oh, ripping! Good for you, Edna!’

In a corner stood a pile of garden implements, and Edna, darting forward, drew out a bundle of short green stakes and held them aloft with a shout of triumph.

‘Good! Here you are!’ and the ‘side’ seized them eagerly. ‘Now what can you whistle, Edna?’

‘“Bean-setting.” But they mustn’t make me laugh.’

‘They won’t,’ Cicely promised, and as the six girls fell into columns, led by Agnes and Peggy, Edna mounted the low stone parapet and whistled the air, ‘Once To Yourself.’ On the

last note the dance began with a jump and a clash of staves, and Cicely stood back to watch critically.

‘It’s most improper. I don’t know what the pretty girl would say,’ Miriam demurred. ‘The old monks would turn in their graves.’

‘This is only the cloister. It isn’t quite so holy as the rest, is it?’

‘Girls, suppose you try “Shooting.” There couldn’t be an easier tune, Edna.’

Edna nodded, and proceeded to oblige, and the ‘side’ took up its staves again and fell into position, watched critically by Cicely, for this was her hobby.

‘I wonder what the abbey girl would say? She might not approve, but it’s quite the best way to spend the time.’

CHAPTER III

JOAN

The abbey girl looked up from the books spread over the table. The rain was beating on the leaded panes, the thunder rattling overhead.

‘I wonder where those girls will shelter?’

‘How did you get on with them?’ her mother asked.

‘Oh, they were very jolly. Asked all kinds of questions, of course, but mostly sensible ones. There was one difficult girl, the kind who doesn’t know anything and doesn’t believe any one else does. But the rest were all right. I liked the two big ones. They enjoyed it all so much.’

‘When did they go? I didn’t see them pass.’

‘Neither did I! Perhaps they’re sheltering here. It will be rather cold,’ and she looked up anxiously. ‘The wind whistles through the cloisters and makes them dreadfully chilly. Shall I go and see, and ask them in here, mother?’

‘Yes, dear, do. It would be much pleasanter for them.’

The abbey girl laid down her pencil and went out into the passage. At the sound of lively whistling from the cloisters she paused, then hurried on and stood gazing in much interest.

Edna, perched on a low wall, was whistling a lively air. Miriam sat on the wall, and Cicely stood beside her watching the dance. The six girls forming the morris ‘side’ faced one another in two rows of three, each with her short green staff grasped firmly in her hand. Agnes and her ‘opposite’ were crouching, apparently taking aim at one another with their staves, in the movement which gave the dance its name. They gave place to the two at the other corners, and then Edna broke off suddenly at sight of the bronze-haired girl in the old doorway. The ‘side’ broke up in confusion, and Cicely laughed and came forward.

‘I hope you won’t mind. I know we ought not to have danced in here, but it won’t hurt anybody, will it? Unless *you* mind very much?’

The abbey girl laughed. ‘What would the old monks have said? Oh, I don’t mind! It was very interesting. Was it a morris dance? I know your school is famous for its morris dancing.’

‘I didn’t know we were famous! But our club dances a good deal, and Mirry teaches the little ones as well.’

‘Won’t you come in and sit down? It’s draughty here. This way,’ and she led them down the passage.

‘Won’t you tell us your name?’ Miriam asked. ‘We’ve been calling you “the abbey girl,” but that’s clumsy and doesn’t sound friendly.’

The abbey girl turned with a smile. ‘I’m Joan Shirley. Will you come in here? I’m sorry the room is untidy, but we weren’t expecting visitors. Mother!’

Mrs Shirley came forward to offer a hospitable greeting, and the girls looked curiously round the room. It was small and dark, built in the wall of the old monastery. By the narrow lancet windows stood a table covered with sheets of paper, pencils, compass, ruler, and a textbook of geometry, and while Miriam and Cicely were thanking their hostess Edna edged nearer to the table.

‘Were you doing your home-work? May I look?’

‘I don’t go to school now. But I was trying to do a little work.’ There was something in Joan’s voice which made Cicely Hobart glance at her quickly, and then come to investigate.

‘Have you left school? And do you go on working by yourself? Now that’s a thing I could never do! I work all right in a class, but I couldn’t stick at it alone. And maths, of all things! But perhaps you’re particularly keen on geometry?’

Joan laughed. ‘I’m *not!* It was history before you came, and I much prefer it.’

Edna was gazing at her wide-eyed. ‘But why d’you do it at all? Especially things you don’t like?’

‘I was sorry to leave school when we left London,’ Joan said gravely, ‘and I didn’t want to forget everything. I thought I might at least keep up things, even if I couldn’t hope to go on much further alone. But it’s rather difficult to test myself.’ She turned to Cicely. ‘I was going in for Junior Matric. when I left, and they said I would probably have passed. These are some old sets of Junior papers, and I thought by working through them I could keep up. But I’ve been all through the book now, and one can’t do them more than once. I’ve got all the arithmetic right, and solved the algebra problems, and now I feel stuck. I don’t know quite what to do.’

Cicely’s eyes were bright. Pluck and achievement always appealed to her, and she found them both here. There was a dogged persistence in this steady humdrum work alone which she knew to be lacking in her own character. She could, and did, initiate new plans and ideas, but was less ready to work on steadily at old ones.

‘You ought to have some matric. papers now, and see what you could do with them. Mirry would lend you hers, I know. She passed with Honours two years ago. I dare say I could borrow some others too. Would you like them, if I sent them to you?’

Joan’s face shone. ‘I’d like it above all things! It would be tremendously good of you. But wouldn’t it trouble you too much?’

‘It wouldn’t trouble me at all. I’ll let you have them, and you must tell me how you get on. I’m working for matric. myself. Of course I ought to have passed last June, but my father lives abroad, and he came home ill in May and had to go away for six months, and he took me with him. So matric. had to wait.’

‘My father is dead,’ Joan said, in a low voice. ‘We lived in town for about a year after he died, and then—things were different, and we came away. I was sorry, but it couldn’t be helped.’

She turned away and busied herself tidying the books and papers. Cicely had heard enough to understand. Things had evidently been ‘different’ since the father’s death. Joan had not been brought up in a dingy little room like this, and Mrs Shirley was as obviously out of place. She changed the subject abruptly.

‘What a quaint little house you have! It’s one of the real old abbey rooms, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, I’m glad we live in one of the very old parts. All this was the refectory of the lay brothers. Upstairs was their dormitory, and that was older still, but it’s all in ruins. Their refectory is divided now into a number of little rooms, opening from one another and from the cloisters, and we have the use of them. They’re small and dark, but I like them. I’d far rather live here, right in the walls, than in a cottage outside.’

‘Fancy having Early English lancet windows to your bedroom! Is that right?’

Joan laughed and nodded. ‘We go through the kitchen to get to our bedrooms. There’s no passage.’

‘How awfully quaint! I’d like to live here too.’

‘There’s not very much room, but we have the abbey. I often sit there. There are seats in odd corners, and window ledges, and walls. We don’t have many visitors in winter, so I have plenty of time.’

‘Do you always show people round?’

‘Yes. The stairs tire mother, and I’m afraid she might slip where they’re broken. And when she has climbed up to the refectory or dormitory she hasn’t any breath left to describe things. Besides, I like doing it. I’m so fond of it all.’

‘And in odd times you keep up your lessons? It’s more than I should do! And do you play? What a jolly piano!’—for one side of the tiny room was filled by a big upright Grand.

‘Not much. It’s my cousin’s piano. She lives with us, but she’s out just now.’

‘She’ll get wet. Isn’t the rain pelting down? Mirry, sing to us!—if Mrs Shirley will let me use the piano?’

‘No, Cicely, I’d rather not! Cicely, you are a bully!’ protested Miriam, but Cicely had gone to the piano, which Mrs Shirley was opening. ‘Well, then, I shall sing your version of “Early One Morning!”’

Cicely laughed. ‘All right! I made up the words,’ she explained to Joan, who had come to stand by the piano. ‘Strike up, Mirry!’ and Miriam’s clear, sweet voice filled the tiny room.

‘Thank you so much! We don’t often have singing,’ Joan said earnestly. ‘We have enjoyed it.’

‘It’s a ripping piano,’ Cicely said appreciatively. ‘Oh, there’s the Curate!’ as the kitten came racing in from the kitchen. ‘Do you call him that because of his white collar?’

‘Of course. Here’s his mother,’ as a handsome matronly cat came sedately in to look for her restless offspring. ‘She has no collar, you see. She’s black all over. They were given to me when the Curate was only a month old. We christened him at once; he wasn’t dignified enough for a Bishop or Abbot. So the only suitable name for madam seemed to be the Mother Superior, since she lives in a nunnery—monastery, at least,’ laughed Joan.

‘The Mother Superior and the Curate! How ripping! I like you, old lady! You’re so motherly and solid,’ and Cicely fondled the Mother Superior, who purred her appreciation loudly. ‘How’s the weather?’

‘Better. Shall we risk it?’

‘I think we ought to, or we shan’t get home before dark. Won’t Carry be tired of that milestone? She was a softy to miss this! I wouldn’t have missed it for anything,’ Cicely said warmly, dropping the Mother Superior neatly on top of the Curate. ‘It’s been a great treat. I’ll let you have those papers as soon as I can, Joan, and thank you very much.’

‘Thank *you* very much! It’s awfully kind of you.’ There was grateful colour in the abbey girl’s face. ‘I’m glad you came to-day.’

She followed them across the wet grass to describe the gate-house and the guest rooms it had once contained.

‘There was a motto over the door, in Latin, of course, but meaning that the door was always open to all who needed it. When a stranger arrived, tired and hungry, the brother who opened the gate would fall on his knees and thank God ‘for sending a weary traveller to rest within these gates,’ and as he came in the brother said a blessing over him. That was the Cistercian rule. I think it’s rather nice.’

‘They do seem to have been decent old chaps!’

‘Oh, they were! They were splendid, often real heroes. And they worked hard in the fields and gardens, you know. All Cistercians had to work. They didn’t just pray and meditate.’

‘Mirry, that girl’s pining to go to school!’ Cicely announced, as they walked down the path under the dripping trees.

‘Yes. She ought to have a chance, Cicely.’

‘That’s what I was thinking. We might tell Miss Macey about her. She’s jolly plucky to struggle on like that by herself. Her geometry was beautifully worked out. I’m sure she’s worth helping. But would they agree?’

‘It would have to be explained carefully, but if they understood perhaps they would.’

‘I know she’s pining to be back at school! I expect she was awfully cut up when she had to leave. I liked the way she spoke up and answered questions from the first.’

‘I liked her for being so fond of her abbey.’

‘She goes into quiet corners to work, when no visitors are about. Isn’t she pretty? I looked at her when you were singing, while she stood leaning on the piano, and she was just beautiful.’

Miriam nodded. ‘I’d like to help her too. Here comes Carry!’

‘What a time you’ve been!’ Carry, who had been sheltering in a draughty barn, sounded decidedly cross. ‘What *have* you been doing?’

‘Dancing—kissing a Curate—absorbing ancient history—and making friends with a pretty girl with hair like new pennies.’

Carry sniffed. ‘Is that the girl who shows you round the ruins? My aunt says they used to be quite ladies, and then they lost all their money. Well, what is there funny in that?’ and she glared at Cicely.

‘I was taken by surprise, that’s all. Do you really mean to imply that losing their money made them stop being ladies?’

‘You know what I mean——’

‘I know that you’re a horrid little snob, Carry. Nobody can be a lady unless she’s well off? It’s a question of money?’

‘I never said so,’ Carry said sulkily.

‘It sounded very like it, then. I say, Carry, how many aunts have you?’

‘Four,’ and Carry glared at her again. ‘What does it matter to you?’

‘Only we thought it funny you should have aunts all over the place. There was one that day we went to Stoke, just when you began to feel tired. Are you quite sure you didn’t go to a cottage for some tea?’

‘No, but I had a jolly tea with Aunty!’ and Carry turned indignantly and walked away with Agnes.

CHAPTER IV

JOY

‘Mother, isn’t Joy queer?’ and Joan began to make preparations for tea, and chased the Curate into the kitchen.

Mrs Shirley sighed. ‘I don’t know how to manage the child! Didn’t she tell you where she was going?’

‘I don’t think she knew herself. She made sandwiches and said she’d get a drink of milk somewhere, and went off quite happy.’

‘Is she cycling?’

‘No, it’s too muddy. Too much trouble to clean her bike afterwards.’

‘I’m glad of that. I always fear some accident when she goes off for those long rides alone.’

‘Yes, I think she might be reckless. But she’s walking to-day, so she’ll come home all right, only in a frightful state of mud, mother dear.’

She laughed as she set the table for three. ‘I didn’t tell you how she went off, did I? It was while you were down at the village. I thought she was hurrying up with her dusting so that she could have plenty of time to practise, for you know she wasted all her time yesterday, although she was at the piano so long—“making up things,” as she says. I think by the sound it must have been a funeral march. So I thought she’d practise in earnest to-day. But I soon found she didn’t mean to do anything of the kind. The bright morning was affecting her as usual. You know how restless she gets! She came to me and said she’d done everything, and she was pining to be out, and she was sure you wouldn’t mind. I knew it was no use saying anything, so I let her make sandwiches and go. Then I went to see if she’d put the rice pudding in the oven, as you suggested. She’d done it, but—and wasn’t this just like Joy?—she hadn’t pulled out the oven damper, and the heat was all going up the chimney! Mother, I wish Joy could go to school!’

‘Joan, *dear!*’

‘I know it’s impossible. But if she could have a long walk to school every morning, it might satisfy her wish to be out all the time, and she might settle down to work when she got there. She won’t do a thing but music left to herself.’

‘I don’t control her sufficiently, but when I mean to scold her I remember that she has no parents, and then——’

‘Then we’re both too soft with her, I know, I give in to her too. That’s another reason why school would be good for her. I wish—well, never mind!’ and she went to warm the teapot.

Mrs Shirley, glancing after her, wished many things also. As Joan returned with the tea, the outer door was thrown open, and an exclamation of relief broke from them both.

‘She has come home early! That’s good of her, for she’s done it to please you, mother. She’d stop out till sunset if she pleased herself,’ and they looked up to greet the wanderer.

She stood in the doorway, a second Joan, so exact was the likeness. They might well have been twin sisters instead of cousins. But they were the children of twin fathers who had always been mistaken for one another in boyhood, and both girls resembled them and not their mothers in any degree. Joy had the same eyes of golden brown, the same bright bronze hair, tied back in the same loose fashion as Joan’s. They were of the same height, and there was

only a month between their ages. The only difference was in expression, Joy's eyes being merrier and her cheeks flushed with exercise, but she lacked the strength of resolution, the dogged persistence, which had taken Cicely Hobart's fancy in Joan.

'Well, mother dear, haven't I been good? I remembered what you said last time I stopped out after dark, and here I am!'

'I'm glad you came back, dear,' said Mrs Shirley, well pleased with the 'mother dear' which was Joy's usual name for her. Her own mother had died when she was a small child, and her home had been with her aunt ever since. 'But where have you been all day?'

'Oh, just walking!' Joy said airily. 'I met Mr Baker, and he gave me a lift as far as Thame, so I started from there, and explored. I simply love walking on and on, finding my way by the signposts, and speaking to people if they look interesting!'

She was making a very good tea as she talked. Joan remarked, 'I don't see how you can go off by yourself for the whole day! Don't you want somebody to talk to?'

'If I do I talk to somebody! I should have been a gipsy, I suppose. I love wandering.'

'Where did you have your lunch?' Mrs Shirley asked anxiously, and Joy laughed.

'On a stile. I didn't sit on the grass, mother dear. And I had some ginger-beer at a tiny shop, and an orange.'

'We've had an interesting time here, too.'

'Oh, tourists? Americans?'

'No, schoolgirls from Wycombe. They had to shelter during the storm, so they danced a morris dance in the cloisters——'

Joy's brown eyes widened. 'How funny! I wish I'd seen the dance!'

'It was very pretty. One girl stood on a wall and whistled the tune. Then we asked them in here and one of them sang to us. She had a beautiful voice.'

'I say! You did get chummy! I wish I'd heard the singing. I met them going home. I was coming through the wood, but they didn't see me. Which was the singing girl?'

'The tallest, a fair-haired girl, very pretty, called Miriam.'

'I saw her. She was walking with another big one, who was awfully well dressed—lovely furs she had!'

'Yes, I noticed the furs. She's Cicely. She looked at my books, and she's going to lend me some more exam. papers to see how I get on with them—harder ones. Isn't it jolly of her?'

Joy made a grimace. 'Lessons again! I couldn't swot as you do, Joan.'

Joan laughed. 'Cicely approved of your piano.'

'Of course she did, if she knew anything about it. It's a darling. I'm going to practise all evening.'

'Funeral marches?'

'Don't be rude! It was a dirge——'

'I must say it sounded like it!'

'It must have been good, since you guessed what it was,' Joy said lightly. 'No, I mean really practise. It's awfully noble of me, for after a day out I always want to make up things. I'm sure I could make a country song to-night! But don't look worried, mother dear! I really mean to practise to-night.'

An hour later Joan, reading history by the kitchen fire, looked across at her mother and shook her head. Joy's scales had died away, and her fingers were wandering off into an unknown melody, born in her heart during the day's lonely tramp. Once or twice she pulled

herself up, trying sternly to banish the songs which would come. Then she gave herself up to dreams, which, though enjoyable, were unprofitable. Joan groaned.

‘Mother, Joy’s being ruined! She’d be a great composer some day, I do believe, if she studied now and was properly trained, but she ought to have lessons. Then she’d have to practise.’

‘She needs more than music lessons,’ Mrs Shirley said despondently. ‘She ought to have a good all-round education. If she would study as you do it would be better than nothing. But _____,’

‘But she says she can’t, and I really think it’s true. People are different. I really think she does her best. She did try just now, you know. But she can’t keep at it. I’m sure she has gone back in her work since we came here, and her music too. Oh, it’s a pity! If only——!’ but Mrs Shirley shook her head.

‘We’d manage it if it were possible, Joan dear.’

CHAPTER V

A VISIT FROM A PRESIDENT

Cicely, cycling round the foot of the hills, found her way to the abbey again on the following Saturday afternoon, and wheeled her cycle along the rutty track from the gate-house, revelling in the beauty of moss and lichen and old gray walls.

Mrs Shirley answered her ring and offered to call Joan, who was in the cloisters, but Cicely begged to be allowed to join her there. In the arched doorway at the end she paused in surprise at the sight which faced her.

Eight village children were gathered on the lawn, and Joan, in her big blue overall, had placed them in two lines and was drilling them. 'One—two! One—two! Be smarter, Dolly! Violet, you're always behind. Now try again.'

They were doing short wand drill, using the green sticks which the schoolgirl 'side' had adopted as morris staves. Cicely watched for a moment, admiring Joan's business-like orders and her air of command. Then she went forward, and the drill stopped abruptly, all the children staring, Joan coming across the garth with laughing eyes.

'Did they look very funny? Children, you can go for to-day. Leave your sticks—I mean wands!—in that corner.'

'How well you manage them!' Cicely said warmly, when the children had trooped away through the old gate-house. 'Do you often have them? Is it just that you enjoy it for yourself?'

'Yes, I like it too,' Joan said soberly. 'They enjoy it and are keen to come. And it's good practice for me. That's what I wanted to be, you know.'

'What—a drill teacher?'

'A games and drill mistress. I wanted to go to Bedford, and mother was willing I should try. I don't suppose it will be possible now, but I haven't quite given up hope. I thought perhaps if I kept up my ordinary work and practised drilling the babies, it might turn out to be possible, after all.'

Cicely's eyes were alight again, but she only said quietly, 'You might get a scholarship. I expect there are plenty.'

'Oh, there are. I'd have tried for one if I'd stayed at school. I'm afraid I couldn't get one now, but that's why I've been so keen to go on working, and that's why I'm so awfully glad of the papers you offered me.'

Cicely handed over a bundle of leaflets. 'I borrowed some from Miss Macey, and Mirry Honor's are there, and Georgie's, and Marguerite's. Georgie is Edna's elder sister, and editor of our school magazine. If you get in a hole, write and tell me; and if I can't get out of it either, I'll consult some one at school. It will be good for me too,' as Joan thanked her warmly. 'I can always fall back on Miriam, you know. She's about two years ahead of me. She's working for her Inter now. I want her to be a singer, because her voice is so ripping, but she won't. Of course, she's learning singing too. And teaching dancing, so she's quite busy. She doesn't always go for rambles, but she was keen to show us your abbey last week.'

'Joan!' and Mrs Shirley appeared from the little kitchen. 'Perhaps your friend would take tea with us. It is four o'clock, and you could have it ready in five minutes.'

'It's far too good of you,' Cicely protested, but Joan had flushed with pleasure, and she saw they would like her to stay. She realised that their life here was probably lonely, and was

glad she had not merely handed in the papers and hurried away.

Joan was hastily clearing sewing materials and the Curate from the table by the window. 'I was so sorry we couldn't offer you tea last week, but there were too many of you. We really wouldn't have had enough to offer you to eat.'

'Of course you wouldn't! An invasion of a dozen would have been too much of a good thing!'

'We'd have liked to do it. We spoke of it afterwards. But it really wasn't possible.'

Joan set the table and cut the bread and butter, and Cicely watched her, wondering that she was so graceful in every movement. 'That comes of her drill,' she thought. 'I know our dancing made an immense difference in Georgie and Edna. You would have to learn morris dancing if you were a drill mistress,' she said aloud.

'I'd enjoy that. I love any kind of dancing,' Joan confessed, a touch of colour in her face. 'Why is your school so keen on dancing?'

'You've asked in the right quarter. Alone I did it! Yes, really, I made them dance.'

'How?' Joan's face was full of keen interest as they all sat down to tea.

'It's a part of our club. When I went to school, three years ago, I found that a lot of the girls were kept out of the school clubs—hockey, dramatic, and so on—for certain reasons. I gathered the outsiders into a club of our own, the Hamlet Club, because we mostly lived in small villages or hamlets in the country, not in Wycombe itself. Then we wanted something to do, and I suggested morris and country dancing. I'd learnt at my old school. We danced all one winter, on Saturday nights, in a barn lit by lanterns, and had Old English dresses, and nobody knew what we were doing.'

'I say! What fun! How ripping!'

'It was, rather. I was the President, and I am still. We had a Maypole, and chose Miriam Honor for our first Queen and crowned her before the whole school. That was the night we made our secret known. I was the second Queen, last May Day, but I had to go away for some months with my father directly afterwards, so I abdicated and made them choose another. They couldn't be without a Queen all summer, so Marguerite was chosen, and she's been a very good one. We have a great time at the Coronation. So now you see why our club members always dance if they have to wait or shelter anywhere. Of course, the club has changed a good deal now. Our dancing isn't a secret, and we go in for rambling as well. But we still have dance-evenings, when we meet, and wear our dancing dresses, and the Queens preside in state and get restless because they can't dance too! But we elders are too busy for much of it, and there's a general feeling that the next Queen must be a younger girl, who'll be able to be more in the thick of things. Marguerite takes her tone from Miriam—she always did—and she has done very well. Would you like to see the next Coronation? I'll send you an invitation.'

'I'd love it! It must be very pretty.'

'I think it is. The Queens all have white robes, of course, but coloured trains and embroidered collars. And their Maids of Honour wear white frocks, with embroidery and girdles of their own Queen's colour. Mirry's the White Queen, but I chose gold, and I really think it looks handsome! Marguerite chose strawberry pink, so she's generally called the Strawberry Queen, which makes her mad. It looks quite gay when we're all dressed up.'

'You do seem to have a jolly time! I should think the school is grateful to you, if that was all your idea.'

Cicely laughed. 'Oh, it grew! But I say! May I ask you something?' for there had been a very wistful note in the abbey girl's voice.

'Why, of course! What is it?'

'How do you manage? I suppose you have to be in to show people the abbey, but you must go out sometimes?'

Joan laughed. 'The abbey is only open from twelve till sunset. People couldn't get here much before twelve, anyway. We're so far from everywhere. And we don't admit people on Sundays. So never come to see me then, for mother always sends me out for a long walk.'

'And who keeps the lawns in such beautiful order? You don't do it, surely?'

Joan laughed again. 'No, but I have mown the cloister garth occasionally when I wanted exercise. A gardener gives several days a week to keeping the place in good order. Sir Antony sends him from his own gardens. The abbey belongs to Sir Antony Abinger,' in answer to Cicely's look. 'The Hall is quite close, among the trees beyond the Abbot's garden, and the abbey has belonged to his family for three hundred years. They had it from James I. Sir Antony is very proud of it, and very particular that it shall be kept in good order. He has an expert come from town regularly to be sure it's not falling to pieces, and if any part has suffered it is very carefully restored. I've asked him a lot of questions, and he's told me heaps I didn't know before.'

'That explains it. I was wondering how it managed to be so well preserved, and I did wonder about the lawns.'

'I had trouble with the gardener at first. He wanted to keep his mowing machine and roller in the cloisters, and I couldn't bear the sight of them there——'

'I should think not! What sacrilege!'

'That's how I felt. He suggested the chapter-house, but that was even worse. I'd have appealed to Sir Antony sooner than allow that. We persuaded him to use one of the outhouses of the gate-house—the porter's lodge, probably—but he still grumbles when he puts them away, and he still piles his sticks and things in the corner of the cloisters, as you've seen.'

'And were you friends of Sir Antony's?—But I beg your pardon! I ought not to ask.'

Joan's eyes met her mother's. But Mrs Shirley showed no sign of annoyance. The question, if thoughtless, had been frank and was very natural. They were obviously out of place as caretakers of the abbey. She answered quietly,—

'We are distant relations of his family—connections by marriage, I should say.'

'Oh, I see! Thank you for telling me. I had no right to ask, but we seem so very friendly that I spoke without thinking. It was really a compliment, because you've made me feel so very much at home.'

Joan laughed, 'Mother won't tell me the exact relationship. I suppose it's so involved that she thinks she couldn't explain it. It's not much use either to him or us, for we've never seen him, though we've been here a year.'

'Does he never come to the abbey, then?'

'No, although they say he's very fond of it. But he's partly an invalid, and people say he's frightfully bad-tempered. He has to spend his winters in some mild climate, and last year he was ill, and had to stay for a good part of the summer before he could stand the journey home, so he hasn't been at the Hall much since we've been here. He's away now, of course, but he'll be home in April. Won't you have some more tea?'

'No, thanks, I've had a big one. But I feel as if I'd talked all the time. You shouldn't have set me off on the subject of the club.'

‘I’m glad we did. It was interesting, and we don’t often have new people to talk to.’

‘I am glad you were able to stay for a little while,’ Mrs Shirley said earnestly. ‘It has been a change for Joan. I know she has enjoyed your visit.’

CHAPTER VI

THE PRESIDENT'S NEXT VISIT

Cicely's next visit to the abbey was paid on Sunday afternoon a week later. Mrs Shirley admitted her in some dismay.

'I'm very sorry, but Joan is out——'

'I know. That's why I came to-day. I wanted to talk to you alone, and you'll tell Joan afterwards.'

Mrs Shirley, looking puzzled, led her into the quiet green garden with the old monastery walls on every side, which Joan called the cloister garth, and which had once been the burial place of the old monks. Three chairs stood here in the sunshine, and Mrs Shirley explained, 'We often sit out here on Sundays. Even in winter it is sheltered and warm. Joan calls it her sun parlour.'

'It's delightful! How splendid those high windows are from here! That's the refectory, isn't it? There's so much of it that I still feel muddled, although she showed it to us so thoroughly. But I came to talk business,' and she turned resolutely from the beauties of gray stone, uneven walls, and weather-beaten roofs, of Norman doorways and Early English arches, to Mrs Shirley, waiting in polite curiosity.

'I don't usually spend my Sunday afternoons visiting! But I wanted to see you alone, and Joan told me she was generally out. Do you remember what I told her about our club, Mrs Shirley? There was something I didn't tell her. When I was crowned, last May Day, my grandfather was awfully pleased. I live with my grandparents at Broadway End, while my father is in Ceylon on business, you know.'

'I have heard of the house, but I have never been so far. They say it is a beautiful place.'

'It is very jolly! Well, he was so pleased that he wanted to do something to celebrate it, and after consulting Miss Macey he offered to give a new scholarship to the school, to be given by the Hamlet Club every year to some girl who couldn't otherwise manage to go to school. Miss Macey gives a good many scholarships, but they have to be won by exams. This is the gift of the club to some girl who couldn't get a scholarship in the ordinary way for some reason—to give her a chance. She'd get a year at our school—and it's a jolly good one—and then if she did well Miss Macey would give her a school scholarship. And we have to choose a new candidate each year.'

Mrs Shirley was listening with deep interest, a touch of colour in her face as she foresaw the drift of all this.

'Our first candidate was Edna Gilks's cousin Peggy. She isn't brilliant, and would never have won a scholarship, and they couldn't afford to send her to school. But she's keen on cooking, and wants to be a cookery mistress, and she's doing awfully well in domestic work of all kinds, needlework and laundry, and so on. We have them once a week, and Peggy's first rate at that kind of thing. So she'll have a cookery scholarship at Easter, and we have to choose a new candidate. Miriam and I have talked it over with Marguerite, and we would like Joan to be our candidate for next year. The question is, could you do without her? What about the abbey?'

Mrs Shirley's eyes had brightened at thought of this great chance for Joan, but her face was very serious.

‘But why should you do such a great thing for Joan?’

‘Because we like her,’ Cicely said promptly, ‘and because it would be worth while. She’s so plucky, and she works so hard, that we’re sure she’d get on well. We liked her from the first moment, and we’ve gone on liking her more ever since. It might make it possible for her to win the scholarship to Bedford, and then she could complete her training. She’s exactly the kind of girl we want to help. She ought to have her chance.’

‘But is there no other girl you wish to help this year?’

‘Not so far as I know. You really mustn’t say no, Mrs Shirley, unless it’s because you can’t possibly spare her, for it would be such a real pleasure to us all. We have to help some girl; it’s only a question of choice. If it isn’t Joan it will be some one else, and some one in whom we don’t feel nearly so much interest. I do hope you’ll be able to agree. But I thought I must ask you privately, before mentioning it to Joan.’

‘You are more than kind, and very thoughtful,’ there was a break in Mrs Shirley’s voice. ‘I do not know why you should show us such kindness.’

‘Because you’ve got such a jolly daughter, Mrs Shirley.’

Mrs Shirley laughed at that. ‘I could spare her, though at present she relieves me of most of the work. But I could arrange that. But I should have to talk it over with her. She has seemed older than her age ever since her father’s death, and we discuss everything together.’

Cicely nodded. ‘But surely she’ll be willing? I know she’s longing to be back at school. Wasn’t she awfully cut up when she had to leave London?’

‘She felt it very much. But the abbey consoled her after a while. She loves it very deeply.’

‘I could see she did. But it would hardly make up for school. I’m sure she’d like Miss Macey’s. We do have good times! Of course she’d join the Hamlet Club, and the dancing would be valuable to her later on. She really would enjoy it.’

‘I’m sure she would. But I am wondering if we ought to accept. There seems no reason why you——’

‘Now, please, *please* don’t begin to think of that! Just think what a pleasure it will be to us! We were quite pleased to help Peggy last year, but none of us knew her. We weren’t particularly interested in her till she came to school. Then of course we were anxious she should do well, and glad when she did. But think what a pleasure it will be to choose a girl we know and like already! We shall all be simply delighted, and it’s we who will be grateful to you, Mrs Shirley, if you’ll let Joan be our next Hamlet girl. Now I must hurry home. My grandmother would be frightfully hurt if I were late for tea on Sunday. Will you talk it over with Joan? And please remember that we all want her to come most frightfully.’

‘You are so very, very kind that it would be most ungracious to refuse,’ Mrs Shirley said tremulously. ‘I do not know how to thank you for your kind thought of Joan. I will tell her of your visit to-night, and write to you immediately.’

‘And mind you write what you know I want you to say!’ laughed Cicely, as she wheeled out her cycle. ‘I’m used to having my own way! There’s one thing you might explain to her, Mrs Shirley. The school as a whole does not know about the scholarship. It’s a private arrangement between my grandfather and Miss Macey at present. Miriam, Marguerite, and I are the look-out committee, to choose our girl each year, and the Gilks girls know about it because of Peggy, but no one else knows. We thought we would see how it worked out before making it public. It has answered very well in Peggy’s case, and I’m sure it will in Joan’s. We thought, too, that the first few girls chosen might prefer it should not be known. Later, when

we can point to two or three as a proof of its success, it will be different. So perhaps you'll explain to Joan.'

'I think,' said Mrs Shirley gravely, 'that any girl who accepts your great kindness should not be too proud to have it known.'

'So do I—in theory. But we thought some girls might object, and we didn't want anyone to hesitate on that account. Of course we who know will always feel a special interest in our girls, and will want to know how they get on, even after they have left Miss Macey's. But it really doesn't concern any one but ourselves.'

'And the girls to whom you offer a chance in life! For that is what it will mean to most of them.'

'We'd like it to mean that. We'll feel it has really been some use if they do well, of course. Good-bye, then! I'll be expecting good news from you, Mrs Shirley.'

CHAPTER VII

A CHANCE FOR ONE

‘Why so solemn, mother dear?’ demanded Joy, as they rose from tea. ‘You’ve hardly said a word since we came in!’

‘Because you’ve been talking all the time! I wish you could have been with us, mother,’ and Joan glanced quickly at her mother’s sober face. ‘We had a lovely walk. It’s jolly going with Joy, for she knows all the short cuts and footpaths. Did you have a quiet afternoon?’

‘One visitor,’ Mrs Shirley said quietly.

‘Duffer!’ said Joy. ‘Did you repulse him gently? Is he coming back to-morrow?’

‘I think not. I got rid of her all right—it was a she.’

‘On a Sunday?’ Joy raised her eyebrows. ‘Careless thing!’

‘I’m always sorry for people when we have to turn them away, but of course it is their own fault,’ Joan remarked. ‘And I’m really awfully glad Sir Antony is so strict about Sundays.’

She glanced continually at her mother’s thoughtful face as they cleared the table. Then Joy took her cap from its peg.

‘Come for a walk, Joan?’

‘Joy! “Come for a walk!” We went six miles this afternoon. Don’t you call that a walk?’

‘Oh, yes! It was very jolly. But I’m ready for another now. I thought I’d walk over to Risborough, and go to church there.’

‘Four miles each way! Are you never tired, Joy?’

‘Not often! And it’s such a lovely evening. Don’t you feel tempted?’

‘No, I’ll stay with mother this time. It’s hardly fair to leave her alone again.’

‘She doesn’t mind, do you, mother dear?’

‘Not at all, if Joan would care to go——’

‘No, I’ll stay with you, and we’ll have a cosy time together. Joy’s a wandering gipsy and can’t rest indoors. She’s the Wild Cat that walked by himself through the Wet Wild Woods.’

‘Waving his wild tail and walking by his wild lone! Yes, that’s me!’ Joy laughed. ‘Good-bye, till supper!’

‘She’s never satisfied! Come and sit in the sacristy, mother. I’ll carry your chair.’

She arranged chair and footstool beside the great round window, and wrapped a shawl round her mother lest she should feel chilly.

‘You treat me as if I were an invalid, Joan,’ Mrs Shirley protested, but Joan only laughed and placed a cushion for herself on the broad window-seat.

‘Mothers must be taken care of, and they must put up with it nicely. Now what shall I read?’

‘No, I just want to talk to-night.’

‘All right! That will suit me!’ and Joan perched herself on the window-ledge, leaning against the round casement. ‘Don’t you wish the old stonework was still in this window?’

‘Joan! My visitor this afternoon was Cicely Hobart.’

‘Mother! How awfully queer! I told her I’d be out!’

‘Yes, she came to see me. She was anxious to consult me before speaking to you. It was very thoughtful.’

Joan’s eyes were wide. ‘What about? Mother, do explain!’

With her eyes fixed on her daughter's face Mrs Shirley told of Cicely's proposal. Joan's cheeks flushed with startled colour, and a great eagerness dawned in her eyes.

'How awfully kind! Oh, mother, how awfully nice of them! Oh, wouldn't it be splendid? But would it be all right? Would you like me to take so much from them? There seems no reason why they should do it!'

'Cicely's reason is that it would give them so much pleasure.'

'What a jolly way to put it! But it's really no reason, is it? It *is* awfully kind of them! What do you think?'

'I've been thinking it over. Do you wonder that I have been thoughtful? It would be a big thing for you, Joan.'

'It would be just everything. It would mean Bedford—for I'd win that scholarship or die in the attempt! Oh, mother, what do you think? Would you let me accept?'

'Yes! It means so much—everything, as you say. It would change your whole life. I could not advise you to refuse it, simply out of a feeling of pride. If they proposed to do an unusual thing for your sake it would be another matter. We could not permit it, of course. But this scholarship is a recognised one. As Cicely says, they have to choose some one. It is more than kind of them to choose you, and I think you can thank them best by accepting their kindness and trying to show yourself worthy of their choice. They would be disappointed if you did not do well. That, I think, is the right way to look at the matter.'

Joan nodded, her face very sober in spite of the suppressed eagerness in her eyes.

'I will do well! It's so awfully kind of them!' she said again, drawing a deep breath. 'And it's such a jolly school! Think of the dancing! It will be a tremendous help to know all that before I go to college. And all that May Queen business sounds ripping! I shall see the Coronation, after all, and perhaps even take part in it!'

She gazed with glowing eyes out of the rose window, seeing, not a meadow, but a big school building, with bright-faced girls crowding into the hall to dance. But suddenly the light faded from her eyes, and she turned quickly to her mother.

'But what about the abbey? Who would do the work? Oh, mother, you couldn't spare me! It wouldn't be fair!'

'Nonsense! That isn't going to stand in your way. My dear Joan, I'm as anxious as you can be that you should have this chance. I'm not so helpless as you make out. I can do the work well enough, with some help from Joy.'

'Joy!' Joan frowned. '*No* one could say Joy knows everything about the abbey! The other day she asked me what an aumbry was, and said it sounded such a funny word!'

Her mother laughed slightly. 'It is a funny word! I quite believe Joy doesn't know very much yet, but she can learn, Joan.'

'She can, but will she? Suppose a fine day comes and she gets restless and wants to go off on tramp? Are you to do all the work whenever she turns gipsy? You know how she can't sit still some days! She says the wind and trees call her, and she has to go.'

'We shall arrange it. That must not stand in your way. I'm good for a fair amount yet, Joan.'

'But even if you manage to chain Joy down, how can you teach her all she'll need to know? She always says she can't remember dates!'

'You will have to give her and me lessons together,' laughed her mother. 'You will not be going to school till May. There will be two months for us to learn.'

‘But the summer’s the busy time! And I don’t like the thought of you doing it at all, mother. I don’t believe Joy will——’ and she sat, chin on hand, looking very worried. ‘It’s Joy who ought to go to school!’ she announced at last.

‘But it isn’t Joy who has been asked!’ Mrs Shirley’s tone was sharp, as if the same thought had occurred to her and been dismissed summarily. She rose with a shiver. ‘It’s getting chilly. Joy and I will manage very well, Joan. Don’t give another thought to that. I am thankful that you should have this chance, and I know you will use it well.’

‘Oh, I will! I’ll do my very best! I’ll come in presently, mother,’ and she sat on after the sunset had faded, her face deeply thoughtful and not quite so radiant as at first.

But at last she rose, giving herself a little shake as if to dismiss some burden, and made her way in the twilight through the ruined chamber, down the uneven steps and across the cloister garth. She had often wandered in the abbey by moonlight, and even in darkness had no fear of stumbling.

Her mother glanced at her face as she entered the sitting-room, and drew a breath of relief that something she had feared to see was not there. Joan’s eyes were eager again, and as she prepared the supper she said brightly, ‘It’s a good thing I’ve kept on working, isn’t it, mother? I expect I’ll be jolly glad of it when I get back to school. You know, I do think it’s absolutely the kindest thing I ever heard of! Just fancy them thinking of me! And fancy Cicely coming all that way to arrange it! I do think she’s a jolly girl!’

‘She was certainly anxious that you should take their offer,’ Mrs Shirley said emphatically.

Joan nodded. ‘Here comes Joy! Don’t say anything about it to her, mother, please! It isn’t settled enough yet.’

‘But surely, Joan——’

‘Please don’t tell her! Well, you wandering spirit, have you been to church, or have you been wandering on the hills? You’re home early. Did you get tired of waving your wild tail through the wet wild woods by your wild lone?’

Joy laughed. ‘I met Mr Baker, and he gave me a lift.’

‘It seems to me you drive a great deal too much with Mr Baker, Miss Shirley,’ said Joan solemnly. ‘He’ll be asking you what your intentions are. I suppose you gave him no choice, but jumped up behind and said “I’m going home with you.” Now confess! Don’t you bully him frightfully?’

‘You must write to Cicely to-night, Joan,’ Mrs Shirley murmured, as Joy laughed and sat down to take off her muddy boots.

‘I know. She’ll go to bed early and sleep like a top, as she always does after tramping. I’ll write, then.’

As she expected, Joy went off directly after supper to the dark little inner room which was her domain. Joan always slept with her mother; close as were the relations between Joy and her aunt, in this one point Joan came closer still to her mother. She held firmly to her privilege, and the opportunities for intimate confidence were very precious to them both.

But to-night the time for intimate talk came earlier. Joan sat down to write, and her mother sat watching her. Each knew the thought which had been in the mind of the other, but each hoped the other had put it definitely away.

Joan wrote the address on her paper, and hesitated—wrote the date, and hesitated again—wrote ‘Dear Cicely,’ and sat biting her pen. She glanced up, and found her mother’s eyes upon her. Suddenly she threw down the pen and pushed back her chair.

‘Mother, I can’t do it! It’s not right!’

‘Joan, my dear!’

‘I’ve been trying not to think of it, and so have you. But I can’t forget it. It isn’t right, mother. Joy’—her voice broke—‘Joy needs it more than I do.’

Running to her mother, she dropped on her knees and hid her face in her lap. Mrs Shirley’s arms closed round her, and she said shakily, ‘Joan dear, we had better talk it over, since it is troubling you too. I hoped you would think no more about it——’

‘I tried not to, but it wouldn’t go away. I can’t help feeling it would be worse than mean to take this chance without trying to see if Joy couldn’t have it instead. Mother, think——’

‘But it wasn’t offered to Joy, Joan dear. It would be good for her, no doubt, and she needs it more, since she will not work at home as you do. But the offer was made to you.’

‘But perhaps if I asked them they’d take her instead. That’s what’s troubling me. I can’t take it for myself without trying, mother. If they won’t agree, there’s no more to be said. But it seems to me I ought to try my hardest to get the chance for Joy.’

She sat leaning on her mother’s knee. ‘I won’t be a baby any more. It was silly. But you know how I’ve always felt about school. But think what it means to Joy!’ she hurried on, as her voice quivered on the word ‘school.’ ‘It’s her music I’m thinking of, mother. You know how she wastes her time, because she isn’t having lessons. She practised well enough while she was learning. And those things she’s always making up, songs and marches and dances—they’re very pretty and they may be good, but they may be all wrong in theory, and she couldn’t write them down. She might write music some day, and perhaps even be a great composer. But she must be made to learn, for she’ll never do it by herself. It’s not as if I could learn and teach her. I’m not musical enough, and she’d never learn from me, anyway. But if she were taught, she might do something big some day. If she isn’t taught, she’ll go on slacking and wasting her time wandering in the woods. You said yourself she needed a good general education, and she needs a good musical one too. You know it’s true, mother.’

‘Joan dear, I know it all, of course. But this chance is only for one of you just now. Perhaps if you did well, another year you might be able to put in a word for Joy——’

‘After they’d done so much for me? How could I, mother? How could I ask for more?’

‘Well, dear, why should you not have this chance, which, after all, has only been offered to you?’

‘They don’t know Joy yet. Any one who understood would see she was more worth helping than I am. Yes, really, mother, you know it’s true. I’m only ordinary. No one will be very much the better if I go to college’—her lips quivered—‘and become a drill mistress and teach in schools all my life. It would be jolly, but that’s all. It’s only a way of earning my living, and keeping the abbey will do just as well. We can be very happy here. But Joy might do something worth while. If a person writes beautiful music, every one is the better for it. If a sunny day, or a misty wood, or a wide stretch of country makes Joy dream songs even now—and you know she always says she “finds a new one” when she’s out—she might some day write music that would make everybody glad. But she must learn how. She’s more worth helping than I am. Mother, you know it’s true.’

Mrs Shirley had no answer to the challenge. Her arms tightened round Joan, but she said nothing.

‘And then I can work alone, and she can’t. I don’t believe it’s only “won’t” with Joy. I really think she can’t keep at it alone. And she won’t let me help her. I’m getting on, slowly perhaps, but I am getting on, and with Cicely’s papers and the new books Joy will bring home I’ll get on faster still. And perhaps she’ll be able to teach me some of the dancing. Whatever

way you look at it, she needs it more than I do. And you know you need me here, mother, though you're trying to make me think you'd be able to manage. But you know you're dreading the thought of being left with only Joy to help you.'

But Mrs Shirley would not admit it. 'Nonsense, Joan! We can manage well enough.'

'I know what that means! I wouldn't feel comfortable. It's another reason! And then there's the biggest one of all, mother.'

Mrs Shirley's lips tightened. 'Joan, you think of everything. I hoped you wouldn't think of that.'

'It's a case of conscience!' Joan sighed. 'I want the one thing so much that everything joins to show me it would be wrong. But Joy's father trusted her to us, and we promised to do our best for her. If there's a big chance for one of us, she ought to have it. Joy has nobody but us. We must give her every chance we can. We have one another, but she's alone in the world and she needs all the help she can get.'

'But you, Joan? Joy's father would not wish you to suffer for her. This chance is just what you have longed for.'

'Now, mother!' and Joan rose quickly. 'You've got to make it easier for me, dear. It's hard enough. I'd simply love to go back to school, but I can't do it if there's any chance of Joy going instead. I'd feel mean all the time. So we won't talk any more about it, dear. And we'll say nothing to Joy till we know. Tell me what to write to Cicely.'

Mrs Shirley's heart ached for her, but she could not fail her after such an appeal for aid.

'I hardly know. It's not as if she had seen Joy and would understand.'

'No. I'd like to talk it over with her and explain. I wonder if I could go to see her? Where does she live?'

'At Broadway End, near Kimble. Joy would know the way.'

'Yes, I believe she knows every path and cart track round about. She never hesitates. Will you mind if I go over there one evening?'

She wrote a very short note at last, after much hesitation.

'DEAR CICELY,—I really don't know how to thank you for your kind thought. I don't know why you should be so good to us. But I can't say yes till I have had a talk with you. There is so much to explain. May I come and see you one evening? I could cycle over, if you will tell me when you get home from school.

'Yours very gratefully,

'JOAN SHIRLEY.'

Cicely's answer came promptly, in the form of a telegram next evening.

'Coming to see you Wednesday morning, half-term. Want awfully to hear all about it. You must come.'

Joan handed it to her mother with a little laugh. 'She does know what she wants! And she doesn't grudge money. Surely she could have left out "awfully!"'

'Whatever does she want to come again for?' asked Joy from the piano.

'That's her business,' said Mrs Shirley quietly. 'I shall want you to be in, Joy, to help me while Joan is busy with her friend.'

‘Then the wet wild woods will have to call for me in vain. All right, mother dear! I’ll help you, and Joan shall go off with her new chum.’

CHAPTER VIII

THE TEST OF FRIENDSHIP

‘It isn’t that I wouldn’t have been pleased to see you at home, you know!’ Cicely cried gaily, as she wheeled her cycle into the passage. ‘It’s that I love your abbey, and I wanted the ride. I can’t stay long, though, for it’s a busy day. We always have a hockey match in the afternoon, and I play goal, so they can’t do without me; and afterwards we have tea at school and the Musical Society entertains us, and I have to recite. So I must hurry home again. Good morning, Mrs Shirley! Shall I come in? Couldn’t we go into the abbey to talk?’

‘If you like.’ Joan was looking rather sober. ‘I’ll show you a jolly place to sit,’ and she led the way to the cloister garth.

They were entering the shady cloisters when Cicely caught her by the arm.

‘My *goodness* me! Am I seeing double? Are there two of you, Joan Shirley?’

Joan laughed, as Joy came out by a little door leading from her bedroom directly into the cloisters.

‘It’s Joy, my cousin. She lives with us.’

‘Your cousin! I’d have said you were twins!’

‘Our fathers were. She’s a month younger than I am.’

‘But it *was* you who showed us round the abbey that first day? If you said you’d been out and it was that other girl, I couldn’t say anything. It would be quite possible.’

‘Oh, I don’t think so. I’m sure we must speak differently and look differently. But it was I who took you round. Joy doesn’t know the abbey quite as I do.’

‘She doesn’t love it as you do, perhaps?’

‘No, she’d rather be out in the woods. She knows every wood and path for miles around. I call her the Cat that Walked—*you* know!’

Cicely laughed. ‘I do! But it is funny to have a friend and suddenly find there are two of her! What is she carrying?’ as Joy crossed the garth towards the sacristy.

Joan frowned. ‘Her zither. Her father brought it to her from Switzerland. It’s very pretty, but it isn’t real practising. It’s all very well for odd minutes, but at this time in the morning she ought to be at the piano. That’s more worth while.’

‘Is the lovely piano hers?’

‘Yes, and she loves music, but she won’t practise. But that’s part of what I want to explain. Shall we sit in the chapter-house? There are window-ledges that make quite good seats.’

They settled themselves in opposite niches of one old pointed arch, and Cicely demanded the explanation for which she had come.

‘I do hope you’re coming to school! We shall all be so pleased to have you, and I’m sure you’ll like it.’

‘I know I should. But it’s rather hard to explain,’ and Joan’s eyes wandered over the garth and up to the high windows of the refectory in search of inspiration.

‘It’s Joy!’ she said quickly at last. ‘I don’t know how to ask you. I knew it would be difficult, but it’s even harder than I thought. You’ve been so awfully kind that it seems ungracious to ask anything different, and yet I can’t, I mustn’t, let you do so much for me. I—I want you to do something different. Will you think me awfully horrid if I tell you?’

‘I’ll think you awfully exasperating if you don’t, after what you’ve said! Please tell me quickly! I don’t suppose I can do anything but the one thing I’ve proposed. What do you mean by “It’s Joy?” How can it be Joy?’

‘I don’t know how to put it properly! It will have to come just anyhow,’ Joan said desperately. ‘It *is* Joy! I want her to have the scholarship and go to school instead of me. Do you think me very horrid? Please let me tell you why! I’d love to go to school if she wasn’t here. I’m just longing to go. But she needs it more than I do,’ and she poured out an eager stream of reasons—Joy’s inability to work alone, her uselessness as custodian of the abbey and want of reliability as assistant to Mrs Shirley in the house, her musical gifts and lack of education to enable her to make the best use of them, her fatherless condition.

‘Uncle went travelling four years ago, and left her in our charge, and he never came back. So we must do our best for her, for she has nobody but us. I have mother; at least there are two of us! But Joy’s mother died when she was a baby. And now that she has no father either we feel we must do all we can for her. It would be the very thing for her if she could go to school. The long cycle ride every day would keep her from being so restless. She’s just like her father in her own way. She can’t stay indoors on fine mornings. She’d have to work at school, and she’d practise willingly if she were having lessons. Then some day she’ll be a great composer, and she’ll owe it all to you. I shall never be a great anything, whatever happens, so you see it’s far more worth while to help Joy.’

Cicely looked at her curiously. ‘But you’d like to go yourself?’

She saw the quiver of Joan’s face, though it was gone in an instant. ‘I can get on well enough without it,’ Joan said stoutly. ‘There will be new books, and your papers are a tremendous help.’

‘But it’s much easier to work at school! Much more fun, too. And we have jolly good times at Miss Macey’s.’

‘I know you do,’ there was a quick catch in Joan’s breath. ‘Joy—would enjoy it awfully.’

Cicely looked at her, then looked away quickly. ‘And she says she’ll never be a great anything!’ she remarked to the beautiful vaulted roof.

Joan flushed. ‘Please don’t! Any one can see it would be better for Joy to go. Will you—can you——?’

‘And any one can see you’re dying to go yourself.’

‘That doesn’t matter. But I can’t pretend I don’t want to go—not to you. You’ve been so awfully kind. Really and truly, I shall enjoy hearing all about it from Joy, and mother needs me here.’

‘Hearing about it is only second best. It’s jolly decent and plucky of you to think of her before yourself, but I don’t see why we should change our plans, you know. It’s you we want, not Joy. She may be all right, but we know and like you, and it’s rather much to ask us to transfer our offer to a strange girl, even if she is perhaps a musical genius.’

‘I know it is,’ Joan’s lips quivered. ‘We’ve no right to ask anything at all. But I felt I must. I couldn’t take it for myself and say nothing about her. I had to try.’

‘Well, now you’ve tried,’ and Cicely eyed her keenly, wondering as to the strength, of her resolution. ‘You’ve done your best and said all you can. But if I refuse, there’s no more to be said. And you must own that you’ll be jolly glad.’

Joan’s eyes met hers steadily, though her lips were trembling. ‘I don’t think I shall! I really want Joy to go to school. I’ve made myself want it. If I go, I shan’t be happy about it. I shall always feel uncomfortable and worried about her. Please believe me!’

‘But you do want to go yourself!’ Cicely insisted.

Joan broke down suddenly. ‘Yes—I do!’ and with a sob she hid her face in her hands. ‘But it isn’t right. You—make it difficult. I have tried——’

Cicely caught her by the shoulders. ‘Kiddy, I’m sorry! It was awfully mean of me. I do understand, and I won’t say another word to hurt you. But look here! I do want you to come to school. I’m not a bit interested in Joy—of course, since I don’t know her! But I’ve been keen to help you somehow ever since I saw how you were working by yourself and how you were pining to get back to school. I saw it that first day. You’d enjoy it so much, and you’re just the kind of girl our Hamlet scholarship is meant for. If you can’t come I shall be disappointed too. Can’t we arrange it somehow? Suppose I asked grandfather——’

‘No, no!’ Joan cried swiftly, her pride up in arms at once. ‘One of us has to be here. Mother must have help. And we could never accept that, anyway. It’s awfully, *awfully* kind of you, but you must see we could never allow that.’

‘I suppose you wouldn’t,’ Cicely said regretfully. ‘But he’ll do anything for me, you know.’

‘You mustn’t ask him to do that! But you do understand? You aren’t angry? And you’ll take Joy instead of me?’

‘I’m not angry, of course. I think it’s awfully decent of you. I understand, but I don’t want to have her in your place. Isn’t there any way to arrange it?’

Joan shook her head. ‘Mother must have one of us here. And you’ve done a great deal for me already. Those papers are a tremendous help. And Joy will work if she goes to school. You won’t be sorry you’ve helped her.’

Cicely sat gazing out into the shady cloisters. ‘You know, you’re really asking something now! They say,’ she explained, in answer to Joan’s anxious look, ‘that a thing is only worth doing as a sign of friendship if it costs you something. You may do an easy thing for anybody, whether you care for them or not. But if you’ll do a hard thing, it shows you really do care and you’re a friend worth having. Now it wasn’t going to cost me anything to propose you for the scholarship. I wanted to do it, and it was going to please me as much as you. But to give it to your cousin instead! I don’t want to do that one scrap. If I agree, it’s a sign I like you a jolly lot. I don’t like doing things I don’t want to, and I don’t very often have to do them. It will mean that I really want to be friends in earnest if I give up my own plan and adopt yours.’

Joan nodded, her lips quivering. ‘I don’t see why you should do it for me. But if you could—if you would——!’

‘Well, then, you must remember we have to be friends. Joy shall have the scholarship, if you insist on it, but just because I’ve given in and let you have your way, you must remember we’re real friends.’

‘I’ll remember! You are awfully good! I thought if Joy went to school you’d forget me and I should never see any of you again. But even if I never did, I could never forget what a big thing you’ve done for me. You know I don’t mean the scholarship.’

Cicely nodded. ‘It’s the thing that costs that counts, isn’t it? Now there’s a thing I must say, just this once. I’ve always loved plucky people. That was what first made me friendly with Mirry Honor, and Dorothy, and Georgie, and the rest. And it’s what made me like you that first day, and now I know I’ve just got to be chums with you, whether you come to school or not. See? Now we’ll say no more about it,’ for Joan was scarlet with embarrassment, ‘but don’t think I don’t understand. Does Joy know yet about the scholarship? But I suppose not ——’

‘No, we couldn’t say anything,’ Joan said swiftly.

‘No, of course not. Then it would be better not to tell her yet. I have to consult the others, and we have to arrange it with Miss Macey. I can manage Mirry and Marguerite, and Miss Macey leaves it pretty much to us. But it would be better to wait. Will Joy be willing? Is she as keen on school as you?’

‘Perhaps not quite,’ and Joan met her eyes bravely. ‘But she’ll be quite pleased to go, especially when she thinks of the music lessons. She’s really keen on music.’

‘How will she come? It’s a long way.’

‘She won’t mind that. She loves walking. But we have cycles. When our other things were sold, mother said we must keep our bikes, because we were going to live in the country, and Joy’s piano. So she can cycle in fine weather.’

‘And shall you tell her you had first chance?’

‘No!’ Joan flushed. ‘I couldn’t.’

‘I think she ought to know. It might make a difference. It would to me. It would make me work jolly hard,’ Cicely said thoughtfully. ‘We’ll think that over. Now won’t you introduce me to her? And then I really ought to go. I must be ready for the match.’

‘She’ll be in the sacristy. She likes to sit up by the rose window, just as I do,’ and Joan led the way out to the cloister garth.

Before they reached the doorway Cicely stopped her, however. ‘Listen! How pretty!’

‘It’s Joy’s zither. Yes, it is pretty,’ and Joan led her to a narrow window-slit from which they looked into the sacristy.

Joy sat perched on the stone wall beside the empty rose window, a dreamy look on her face, the sun lighting her bronze hair, her eyes bent on the zither on her knees. Her fingers were busy with the strings, the left hand playing the melody, the right the deeper, richer notes of accompaniment and bass. The music was sweet and clear, and the tone of the instrument beautiful. Cicely watched and listened with critical interest.

‘A new member for the Musical! How pretty she is!—in which you may find a compliment, Joan Shirley, for she’s the image of you! It’s like a harp, isn’t it? Those deep notes are very rich.’

‘But it isn’t as good practice as the piano. That’s more important.’

‘I suppose so. What is she playing?’

‘She generally says it’s a Styrian song, or lullaby, or dance. Heaps of her zither music seems to be from Styria. But quite likely she’s making it up. She sits and dreams for hours, and makes dozens of tunes, but she can’t write them down. Shall we go and speak to her?’

Joy’s melody had come to an end, and frowning a little she was tuning her bass strings, turning the pegs with a wooden key.

‘She’s awfully particular about them all being in tune, and there are thirty-two. If one’s a fraction wrong she’ll stop.’

Joy was looking up expectantly as they entered the little room, for the sound of their voices had preceded them. She rose, sliding the zither under her left arm and looking astonished.

‘Joy, this is Cicely.’

‘Do you know, when I saw you cross the green, I thought I must be seeing double, with one Joan in front and one behind! I hadn’t seen you before, and I wasn’t prepared for the shock.’

‘Was it a very horrid one?’ laughed Joy. ‘Two Joans! Did you feel very bad? You’ll make her shiver if you talk about “the green.” I used to do it, but it nearly made her ill. It’s the cloister garth, don’t you know!’

‘Oh, I’m sorry! I apologise!’ as Joan laughed. ‘Won’t you show me your zither? It’s very pretty. Will you play to me?’

‘Of course I will, as much as you like,’ and Joy laid the zither on her knees again.

‘I really ought to go,’ Cicely said at last. ‘Thank you for the music! It *is* funny to see two of you!’ and she paused to look at them together. ‘You ought to be twins, you know!—I say! There’s a motor horn! Will it be visitors?’

‘Americans, probably. Your job, Joan!’ and Joy fled to the cloisters and disappeared.

Joan’s eyes met Cicely’s, and they both laughed.

‘Good-bye! Remember! I shall write soon!’ cried Cicely.

‘Yes, please. And tell us what to do next. Here come the visitors, so I’m on duty. Good-bye!’

CHAPTER IX TO TEA WITH CICELY

‘I wonder when I shall hear from Cicely!’ mused Joan, standing by the open window and stroking the Mother Superior. For a fortnight she had been expecting Cicely’s letter by every post. Until it came, Joy could not be told of the plans for her future, and no preparations could be made. It came at last, however, on Saturday morning.

‘It’s all right!’ so ran Cicely’s message. ‘But if you don’t mind I’d like to tell Joy myself. Could you and she come here to tea on Saturday? I want you both particularly, so perhaps Mrs Shirley could spare you for once. I shall want you to stay all evening, so tell your mother you’ll be late home. Now mind you come!’

‘Don’t be *too* late home!’ Mrs Shirley said promptly. ‘I can spare you well enough, but I don’t like you wandering about after dark.’

‘I can see in the dark, mother dear!’ Joy assured her. ‘At first I couldn’t, but I’m used to it now.’

She read the note and pouted. ‘What is “all right?” And why does she want to tell me herself? Won’t you warn me what its going to be about?’

‘Let’s fly round and get everything done before we have to start. We can’t leave mother work to do. It will be quite bad enough for her to have to cope with the Americans!’ and Joan began to bustle about, and left no time for questions.

Joy justified the boast made for her by leading the way direct to Broadway End, although it lay several miles away in a district quite unknown to Joan. It was a great gray house, with pillared front and long rows of windows, looking upon a lawn with fine old cedars and then down a wide valley to the land below the hills.

‘What a big place!’ said Joan in surprise, as they wheeled their cycles up the rising road. ‘What a lovely place to live!’

‘Yes, no wonder she’s bossy! She does like to manage things her own way, doesn’t she?’

‘She says she’s used to getting what she wants,’ and Joan remembered how Cicely had given up her cherished plan in favour of a much less desirable one.

They were shown into a great square hall, panelled in old oak, with a wide staircase rising at one side. A fire burned on the great open hearth, and a table of old dark wood and ancient design was drawn up at one side and laid for tea. The high-backed chairs were of the same old pattern, and on a quaint oak settle, with carved back and arms, sat their hostess, busily scribbling in a notebook.

She threw it aside and came to welcome them. ‘I’m so glad you were able to come! It was good of Mrs Shirley to spare you both. Well, shall I explain?’ with a laugh at their wondering eyes. ‘You want to know why I’m dressed up, don’t you?’

She wore a cotton frock of dull Liberty red, plain in the bodice, short and full in the skirt, short sleeved and cut low at the neck, with wide white collar and cuffs, and a ribbon of the same rich red tucked into her dark curly hair.

‘It’s a dance-evening, and this is my dancing dress. I thought if I dressed before you came I shouldn’t have to keep you waiting.’

'May we see the dancing?' Joan asked eagerly.

'Do you all dress up?' queried Joy.

'Yes to both, of course. We all dress alike, in any colour we choose, but all with dresses like this, and *those!*' and she thrust out her foot, in a white stocking and low black slipper with cross-bands of black elastic. 'All the white feet look rather jolly! Now would you like to go upstairs?' as they laughed.

'Rather!' said Joy promptly. 'I want to look at those paintings on the stairs.'

Cicely laughed. 'You'll know some of the places. They're sketches by a friend who plays for our dancing—Miss Lane.'

'I've seen her pictures in a shop in Wycombe,' and Joy ran up the wide steps three at a time, and gave exclamations of delight as she recognised familiar spots.

'Radnage Church—Whiteleaf Woods in autumn—gorgeous! Oh, the Lyde at Bledlow—sweet! And Hampden Glade, and—oh, yes, Little Kimble, dear little thing! And a cherry orchard in October—what glorious colour!'

Cicely had drawn Joan to the great hearth for a word in private.

'It's all arranged. Miss Macey will be pleased to have one of you next term. She was awfully interested. I believe she'd try to take you both, but you said Mrs Shirley really must have one of you at home?'

Joan nodded. 'One of us must help her. It would be mean if we both went off and left her.'

'And you're sure it must be Joy?'' and Cicely looked away from her into the fire, lest she should seem to pry too closely into her feelings. 'Does she know anything about it?'

'No, we waited for you. She's very curious to know what the secret is. I haven't changed my mind, and I'm very, *very* much obliged to you.'

'Well, then, may I tell her about it? How you had first chance, and all that?'

Joan stood gazing down into the fire, her face deeply thoughtful. Cicely's eyes rested on her appreciatively.

'She's prettiest when she's thinking! She's like she was when she stood by the piano that first day! I wish I had hair that colour!'

Joan looked up at last, and coloured at something incomprehensible in Cicely's eyes.

'If you think it would be wise. Please do what you think best. I'll leave it to you.'

'That's nice of you! Now come to tea,' as a maid appeared with teapot and hot cakes. 'Come along, Wild Cat! How many of those wild woods have you walked through by your wild lone?'

Joy, at the top of the stairs, looked longingly at the wide banister rail, then tripped demurely down to the hall.

'I would have liked to slide! It's so beautifully polished! Don't you ever slide down?' she appealed to Cicely, who laughed.

'I have done it! I'll say no more. Run up again and come down how you like. I won't tell, and there's nobody else at home.'

'No, it wouldn't be proper! But it was tempting. I knew most of the places. They're awfully fine.'

'Have you been everywhere all over the neighbourhood? And you've only lived here for a year?'

'Yes, but I've been out exploring nearly every day! When will you tell me Joan's secret?' she demanded. '*She* won't! But she said you would.'

Cicely, seated on the settle, busied herself with the teapot. 'Please help yourselves! I'll tell you after tea. It's a secret no longer. We were only waiting till things were all arranged.'

She looked from one to the other as she handed their cups. 'It *is* funny to see two of you! I can't get used to it!'

'Then one of us must be one too many for you,' said Joy saucily. 'I suppose it's me, since you knew Joan first?'

'Your grammar requires attention, my dear Cat That Walked! What was your last long tramp?'

Joy pouted. 'By the Lower Icknield Way to Cow Common! But I don't like being called a cat. 'Tisn't pretty.'

'I've another name for you, and a much prettier one. Joan says you're always wandering, so you ought to be called Traveller's Joy.'

'Oh, I like that! The little green flower that runs all over the hedges in the autumn! That's just me altogether.'

They laughed at the odd expression, and Joy forgot the secret for the time. But when tea was over Cicely went to open a big piano which stood in the drawing-room.

'Won't you play to me, Joy? I've only heard your zither. I'd like to hear you play. Joan, you haven't seen those sketches on the staircase. And there are some more very special ones in my room. You'll find the door standing open. Miss Lane did them on purpose for me.'

Joan nodded and went off soberly to inspect the paintings, wondering how Joy would receive the news. Cicely, standing by the piano, said, 'Play me Mendelssohn's *Spring Song*, if you know it. I do love it.'

Joy had followed her eagerly. 'It's a jolly piano. You saw mine, didn't you? It's a darling,' and began the *Spring Song* without hesitation.

Her touch was light and good, and she had keen appreciation of the needs of expression. Cicely listened with pleasure and relief. Joan was right. Joy might need many more lessons, but she had a great gift. She would repay all trouble spent upon her, and might have a great future before her. Her happiness as she played was evident, and when her fingers fell from the keys after the last rippling chord she sat dreaming, her eyes downcast, her face as sweet in its deep thought as Joan's had been.

Cicely watched her for a long moment. 'Now play me something of your own! I know you make music. Haven't you a *Spring Song* too? You must have made one, after being out so much in the spring woods.'

Joy smiled up at her swiftly. 'Joan has been telling tales! Oh, I've made one, of course, but I don't suppose it's really any good. But I couldn't help it one day, when I'd been out, and the birds were all just shouting for joy and the sun was quite hot over the bare fields and I found the first violets and wind-flowers. There was music in the air, somehow.'

With heightened colour she began to play a dainty little melody, simple, but delicate and original.

'It's only a baby thing,' she said, flushing sensitively, when she paused. 'I dare say it's all wrong. I don't know the rules. I don't like playing those things to people. I'm always afraid they'll laugh, and it would hurt. Joan and Auntie don't laugh, but they say I waste my time dreaming when I ought to be studying. It's true, but I can't help it sometimes. Something takes hold of me, and I must play. It's not as if the study was any use. I don't really get on at all. I want things explained, and Joan doesn't know any more about music than I do. I'd work if I had any one to help me. But you didn't laugh, did you?'

‘No, I thought it was very sweet,’ Cicely said gently. ‘Would you like to have lessons, then?’

‘Oh, *yes!* But I try not to let them know how much, for it’s not possible, and it would only worry Auntie. I’d work like anything if I could have lessons. And I’d only dream when everything else was done.’

Cicely closed the piano. ‘Well, “Traveller’s Joy,” that’s Joan’s secret and mine. We’ve been arranging for you to go to Miss Macey’s school next term. I hope you’ll like it.’

Joy gazed up at her with startled eyes. ‘To your school? Does Auntie know?’

‘Of course. I talked it over with her first of all.’

‘But how is it possible? How can you——’

‘What have I to do with it? I’ll tell you,’ and Cicely described the Hamlet Club and its scholarship. Joy’s eyes widened still more.

‘And you’re going to give it to *me*? But how good of you! Why should you? Isn’t there somebody else you’d rather give it to?’

‘Yes!’ said Cicely frankly. ‘As a matter of fact there is, and it has been offered to her. I was very anxious that she should take it, but she won’t, so now we’ve come to you.’

‘But why? Didn’t she care about it? I should have thought that anybody would be pleased, when you’d been so kind.’

‘She did want it,’ Cicely said slowly, looking at her with deep meaning in her dark eyes. ‘She wanted it very much. I think myself she was longing to go to school. But she wouldn’t take it.’

Joy was looking bewildered. ‘But why? I don’t understand.’

‘She wanted you to have it.’

‘Me! *Was it Joan?*’ and Joy sprang to her feet in incredulous amazement.

Cicely nodded. ‘You’ll know best whether she really wanted to go——’

‘She’s dying to get back to school! She felt awfully bad when we had to leave. Please—oh, please tell me all about it!’ Her voice broke piteously, and she leaned on the piano and would not meet Cicely’s eyes.

‘It was because of your music. She felt it was a big chance for one of you, and you ought to have it. She had heaps of arguments, such good ones that I had no more to say. And she said she could work at home better than you.’

Joy’s averted cheek reddened. ‘I’ve been lazy,’ she faltered. ‘I can’t stick at things as she does. But I could have tried harder. You wanted her to have it?’

‘I hadn’t even heard of you when I first made the proposal to Mrs Shirley. We saw Joan that first day, when she showed us over the abbey, you know. You were out. Mirry Honor and I talked it over as we went home. We didn’t know you existed.’

‘And was it Joan’s idea, or Auntie’s, to give it to me?’

‘I understood it was Joan’s. I don’t think Mrs Shirley would have asked her to give up so big a thing. It means a good deal to Joan, I think.’

‘Joan would give anything to be back at school!’

‘She won’t give up your chance for her own sake.’

Joy stood with bent head and twisting fingers. Suddenly she said swiftly, ‘But I can refuse! I can do for her what she has done for me! This chance was hers first, and I can say I won’t take it from her. It’s far too good of her, but it isn’t right. You’ll talk to her and arrange it, won’t you? She wants it quite as much as I do. I’ll stop at home and help Auntie—and I will try to work and not go out so much. I suppose it is waste of time, but I do love it!’

‘I don’t think Joan will like that,’ Cicely said gently. ‘She has quite decided you ought to go to school. And what about the music lessons?’

Joy’s lips trembled. ‘Oh, why did you say that? It makes it harder. I could do without the rest, but the music—I do want that! But it isn’t fair to Joan——’

‘But she wants you to have it too! I don’t think you must say any more about it, Joy. Joan has decided it for both of you. I think you ought to do what she wants and make the most of the chance. That is what she wants, really—that you should do well at school, and some day make her proud of you.’

Joy stood with bent head again. ‘Do you really think I ought to? It seems so mean, when she wants it so much.’

‘I think you must do as she wants. She’s very keen on it. I’m sure she’d rather you did.’

Joy drew a long breath. ‘I’d like to speak to her. Where is she?’

‘Looking at my pictures. The first door on the right at the top of the stairs.’

Joy fled, and Cicely stood gazing down into the fire. She nodded with decision at last.

‘I like them both! I shall do it! I think I can manage the others!’

CHAPTER X DARLEY'S BARN

'Not take it, you silly? Of course you must take it! It's a splendid chance for you. But you'll have to stop being the Cat That Walked and come into the tent and settle down, you know.'

'But you, Joan? You want it yourself, and it was offered to you first.'

'I didn't want her to tell you that, but she would do it. But now you must forget it again,' Joan explained.

'As if I ever could! Joan, don't be silly! I'll never forget! And you do want it yourself, you know you do.'

'As to that,' said Joan grimly, 'without meaning to be unkind, Joy, dear, I really think I'll be more help to mother than you would. She must have one of us, and—well, you don't know everything about the abbey, do you?'

Joy laughed ruefully. 'I'm afraid I wouldn't be much use at first. But I'd try, Joan.'

'If you'll try at school it will be more to the point. And you must tell me all about it, you know. I'll want to hear every single thing.'

'I will! I'll tell you every scrap!' Joy vowed. 'Joan, it's awfully——'

'All right! I'm awfully glad about it, honestly, Joy. We were worried about your music. It seemed such a shame you shouldn't have a chance. And we couldn't help you in theory and harmony. Now you'll have all you need. Cicely says their Miss Bates is a good teacher and gets girls through the big exams. You've only got to go ahead. I'm honestly glad it's all fixed up. Now come and tell me where these places are,' and she turned to the sketches on the wall.

Joy said no more at the time, but her arm slipped round her cousin's waist, and her voice was unsteady as she identified some of the paintings.

Cicely's room was big and light, with white walls, woodwork, and furniture, carpet of soft deep brown like autumn leaves, and curtains and hangings of golden brown. Cushions, counterpane and couch were golden yellow, and the rows of water-colour sketches hung round the walls were framed in brown wood. A big brown jar in one corner held branches of dry beech leaves, still bright in colour, and on the table, whose cover matched the carpet, stood a yellow bowl of daffodils.

'This is Hampden Common. I'm not sure about this pool in the wood——'

'In Penn Wood,' said Cicely from the doorway, where she had been watching them. 'Now we ought to get ready. What will you do with your cycles?'

'Where are we going, then?' and they turned, looking puzzled.

'To the barn. We always dance there when we can. It's half-way to Wycombe, so we'll drive, and pick up Mirry Honor on the way. Then I thought if you drove to the station the train would take you nearly home.'

'And I'll fetch the bikes to-morrow afternoon,' said Joy.

'I couldn't cycle in these dancing things, you see,' and Cicely slipped on a big coat and cap, and took up a satchel.

At a hamlet on the ridge they took in Miriam and her little sister, both in dancing costume and big coats. Miriam greeted the girls warmly, with a laughing look from one to the other.

'It's rather startling! "Twice one are two" come to life. Don't you sometimes get mixed?'

Babs Honor, wriggling with suppressed excitement, eyed them and giggled. 'Two girls jus' ve same! How rummy!'

They laughed, and Cicely remarked, 'Babs, my child, there's no room for wrigglers. We'll have to stick you up outside on the box.'

'Jolly! I want to dance,' Babs explained. 'Ve dancing's begun a'ready in my feet, an' ve'y can't wait for ve rest of me.'

Cicely laughed, and caught the restless little white-stockinged feet and held them in her lap.

'I really can't have you kicking my knees! Keep still, wriggler!' and Babs giggled again.

'Where is the barn? And why did you choose one so far away?' Joan queried, with much interest.

'It's nearer for most of the others. It's at Darley's Bottom. Dorothy Darley was one of our original members, and her father offered us one of his barns. Now though Dorothy's at school in Paris, he still lets us have it. Here we are!'

The carriage drew up at a farm gateway. Cicely turned into a big doorway, and here they found one end of the barn shut off by a wooden partition to act as dressing-room. Coats and hats and boots thrown about told that others had arrived before them, and through an open door came sounds of laughter and talk, a violin being tuned, and a stream of soft light.

Babs was fairly jumping with anticipation. She threw off her cap and coat and danced round Miriam, wearing a short pink frock of the same style as Cicely's. The elder girls were quieter, but there was a flush of excitement on Miriam's face, and an eager light in Cicely's eyes.

Miriam, laying aside her coat, showed a dancing dress of pale lilac colour, and let her yellow hair fall in two long plaits on her shoulders. Cicely nodded approval.

'I'm sure you'll dance better with it down, Mirry, eighteen or not. And it makes you look less old and staid.'

'I'm sorry if I've been old and staid lately!' Miriam laughed. 'Come here, baby, and I'll fix your cap.'

Babs stood with difficulty while her sister laid a white linen hood on her tumbled curls. The elder girls put on similar ones, laid lightly on their hair and putting the finishing touch to their quaint costume, then led the way into the dancing hall.

The big barn would have been dim and shadowy by daylight, but now the lanterns swinging from the rafters gave plenty of light. The huge beams showed dimly overhead; the floor was of earth, trodden hard and flat; ranged round the rough walls were wooden forms and settles. The barn was full of girls, laughing and chattering, all wearing dancing frocks, with white collars of smooth linen or frilled muslin, white hoods or sun-bonnets, white stockings, and low black shoes.

'Here's the President!' shouted some one. 'Now we can begin!' and curious eyes were turned on the visitors.

'Sorry I'm late! I've brought an audience with me, and we took rather long over tea. Some of you will remember Joan Shirley. At least you'll remember the Curate and the Mother Superior!' and Joan laughed. 'This is Joy, her cousin. Margia, they've been admiring your pictures,' and she introduced them to the fair-haired girl of twenty-three who was tuning her violin.

She greeted them warmly. 'Come and sit by me and I'll tell you the names of the dances. Which of you is the abbey girl? You are really surprisingly alike!'

‘I am,’ Joan laughed. ‘This is Joy.’

‘And Joy is the wanderer? I think we must be kindred spirits, Joy. I am out in the woods whenever I can spare the time.’

‘I make time when I oughtn’t to,’ Joy acknowledged. ‘Oh, do you stand on a tub?’

‘They insist on it! They say the fiddler on the village green always stood on an upturned tub. You sit on the form. Have you seen any morris dancing?’ and she called to Cicely for orders.

Cicely had disappeared into the crowd, giving directions as she went. She called an answer, Margia began to play a country dance, and the girls took their places for ‘Pop goes the Weasel.’

‘I never knew that was a dance!’ cried Joy excitedly, as Miriam stooped and ran under the raised arms of Cicely and a tall dark girl in green. The dance was a glorious romp; then with scarcely a pause Margia led them into ‘Sellenger’s Round.’ Edna, Peggy, Carry, and the younger girls caught hands in a big ring; the elders formed another lower down the hall, and they danced round, closed and swung wide again, and set to partners, while the audience of two watched, fascinated and delighted.



F. DIXON

'The audience of two watched fascinated.'

'I'd love to join in! I can hardly sit still while you play that old music!' Joy sighed wistfully.

'You will join in, if you join the Hamlet Club,' and Margia paused to rest.

'That will be ripping! I'd like to start at once!'

Joan said nothing, and did not know that Margia was watching her. But Margia understood, and was not surprised at the shadow on the elder girl's face. It was plain that Joan enjoyed the dancing quite as much as Joy, and would have a hard time before her if Joy joined the club and she could not. But the shadow passed as she said, with a laugh which cost her an evident effort,—

'You must learn as quickly as you can, for I'm expecting you to teach me too, you know.'

'She's going to make the best of it and not grumble. I like her,' Margia decided.

'Are there any dances just for two?' Joy was asking anxiously.

'Certainly. You must see Cicely and Mirry Honor dance the minuet. There are the morris jigs, too. You could learn all those.'

'I'll try to learn them first, Joan, and we'll dance at home together!' Joy promised eagerly. 'What colour shall my dress be?'

'Well, I wouldn't advise pink!' smiled Margia, and Joan laughed.

'Pale green, I think,' Joy decided, studying the many-coloured costumes as the girls gathered round their leader, each clamouring for favourite dance.

'I think pale gray would be pretty,' said Joan, and Margia nodded approval.

Babs Honor came running up to demand '“Country Gardens,” please, Margia,' and the dancers scattered to slip bells on their ankles before forming in sets of six for morris dances.

Cicely and Miriam and the black-haired girl in green fell out, and came to sit beside the audience on the bench.

'This is Joan, and this is Joy, “Strawberry.” Girls, this is Marguerite Verity, our present esteemed and greatly loved——'

'I've heard about you both! Don't listen to Cicely when she calls me names! It's Joy who's coming to school, isn't it? Well, Joy, when you come the first day you must ask for me, and I'll introduce you and show you round.'

'Thank you awfully!' Joy said warmly. 'Joan knows some of the girls, but I've only seen Cicely so far.'

'I am sorry I didn't see your abbey that day!' and Marguerite turned to Joan. 'But I was needed at the hockey practice. Do you like our morris dances?' for Joan was watching the hand-clapping with eager eyes.

'It's awfully pretty. Don't you want to dance?'

'Cicely and I are going to dance a jig presently. And Mirry's going to sing. We never let her off. What is it to be to-night, Mirry?'

She went to look over Miriam's shoulder, and Joy said warmly, 'Isn't she jolly? How awfully nice of her to trouble about me!'

'That's part of her duties,' said Margia, pausing between the dances. 'She's the reigning Queen, “the Strawberry Queen,” because of her choice of colour. She makes a very good one.'

They looked with interest at dark-faced Marguerite. She was graceful and pretty, with an air of distinction as she moved and spoke.

'She's partly French. Can't you see it in her? She's Miriam's great friend,' Margia explained.

'Who will be the next Queen? I suppose it's nearly time to choose her now?'

'Nearly. Ah, no one knows! It's a difficult question. I believe there are two or three candidates, a thing which has never happened before. I hope one gets a good majority of votes, or Cicely won't be satisfied and we shall have trouble. The only certain point is that it will be a younger girl this time. They've decided to have no more Sixth-Formers,' and Margia began to play 'Haste to the Wedding.'

When the morris dancers dropped upon forms and floor to rest, Cicely and the Strawberry Queen stood forth to dance their jig, 'Ladies' Pleasure.'

Then Miriam sang an old folk-song, 'My Boy Billy,' and was greeted as usual with rapturous applause. Other dances followed, a minuet in couples, a country dance in two long lines, and another in sets of eight, like a quadrille. Then maids from the house brought in lemonade and home-made cake, and dancers and audience fell to with enjoyment.

'What jolly times you have!' Joy turned eagerly to Cicely. 'But I thought you said the Queens came in their robes?'

'Not always. That would cut us out of all the dancing, and we're too keen on it. We only dress up on great occasions, when we have particular visitors. Have you enjoyed it, Joan?' for Joan was very quiet.

'Oh, yes! It's very pretty, and it must be just ripping to dance like that!' Try as she would, Joan could not keep the wistful note out of her voice, and Cicely understood.

'You must come and watch again,' she said, and Joan nodded, but said nothing. It was not to watch that she wanted to come. It had been hard work to sit still. Margia Lane's fiddle had been persistently calling her to join in, and her foot had been tapping to the quaint old tunes all evening. On the whole, Joan thought she would not go to watch too often.

'It only makes it worse,' she decided.

In pursuit of her duties, Marguerite waited on them herself, and sat by them while Cicely was elsewhere. Then Margia mounted her tub again, and Georgie came to claim the Strawberry Queen as her partner in a processional morris, so Marguerite called up Edna to entertain the guests.

'You're old friends. I must go. Talk to them nicely, Edna!'

'Don't you want to dance?' asked Joy.

'I don't mind. One can't dance all the time!'

'But this is awfully pretty,' Joan was watching the dance closely.

'You're the abbey girl!' said Edna triumphantly. 'Your voices are just a scrap different. I wondered if I could guess or if I'd have to ask!' and the girls laughed.

'Who is that pretty fair girl in pink?'

'Carry Carter. The white girl with her is her chum, Agnes Mason. Do you think Carry is pretty? Some of the girls are wild about her, and Agnes is a perfect doormat. I say if you squeezed Carry in the middle she'd say "Mamma."'

'I should think she'd say more than that!' laughed Joy.

'Well, yes! She's got a temper. But she keeps it down so long as she gets her own way. Oh, Mirry's going to sing again. Now she's pretty, if you like!'

'She's more than pretty. The other girl's just pretty,' Joan decided, and Edna laughed.

'You ought to go, you know,' and Cicely sat down by Joan. 'You won't catch your train.'

‘But we’d like to see some more dances!’ protested Joy. ‘Couldn’t he drive a little quicker?’

‘Downhill in the dark? It’s rather risky, isn’t it? You really ought to go! Good-bye!’ and she cut short their thanks, and ran back into the barn.

CHAPTER XI

CICELY'S PROPOSAL

'Joy, have you any money with you?'

'Not a halfpenny,' Joy said cheerfully. 'I never supposed we'd need any. We must either walk or make love to the station-master. I'll leave him my watch in pawn if he won't trust me till to-morrow. But it's a lovely night, if you'd like to walk.'

'How far is it? And could you find the way?'

'Find the way!' mocked Joy. 'You've only got to get up on the Ridge and keep right along. I can find the way, if you're willing.'

'I'd rather do that than have bother at the station. I'm game, if you're sure you won't lose us both.'

'Get lost on Bledlow Ridge!' scoffed Joy. 'If I do, you may chain me up and never let me out again without a nursemaid. There's going to be a moon, too, but I'd have done it without.'

'Mother won't like it, but I don't see any help for it.'

'She won't have anything to worry about if she only hears of it afterwards. It really isn't far, Joan, if we go across country. And we aren't tired. It's not as if we'd been dancing.'

'Come into the station for a moment,' said Joan, as they left the carriage. 'I didn't want the man to see we were walking,' she explained. 'Cicely would be awfully cut up if she knew. Now it's all safe!' and they set off at the swinging pace beloved by Joy.

'I shall tell her sometime; perhaps to-morrow! She'd be so wild with us for not telling her.'

'You *won't*! I'll never forgive you if you do! It would be awfully mean, Joy!'

Joy laughed again. 'Isn't it a glorious evening? Oh, I am glad we aren't in the stuffy train!'

'That's one way to look at it, certainly!' said Joan, as they climbed to the Ridge, rejoicing in the clear cool air, the moon rising behind the Wycombe hills, the dark stretches of shadowy woodland, the sudden cries of owls and night birds.

The silence and beauty of the night excited Joy, and she strode along, hands in the pockets of her green knitted coat, cap in her pocket, head bare to the wind, humming the air of a morris jig. 'Wasn't the dancing pretty? And didn't the bells tinkle?'

At the top of the hill a long high road lay before them, running along the edge of the ridge, with here and there a sleeping cottage, a group of dark firs, or a stretch of woods bordering the way. Joy held out her hand.

'Come on! This is all level and then down,' and they raced along hand in hand, and soon had covered a mile. Then down the steep road was easy going, and once on the plain they went straight to Gracedieu.

Cicely brought the dancing to a close earlier than usual that night. Bidding the girls rest, and thanking Margia for her music, she mounted the tub and addressed her club members.

'Girls, I want you to do something unusual, and against our rules. But I don't see any harm in it, and I want it very badly. If you think you want time to talk it over, I'll try to wait. It's perhaps hardly fair to ask you to decide to-night. But I do want you to agree, even if we have to change our rules a little. It's to do with those two girls, Joan and Joy Shirley. I got to know them when we visited the abbey, and I went to tea with them once, when I took Joan some exam. papers to help her in her work. She wants to be a drill mistress, and I found her teaching

eight small children wand drill by way of practice. Mrs Shirley has decided to send one of the girls to Miss Macey's next term, and at first they thought it should be Joan, as she's the elder. She's awfully keen to get back to school and to work for a scholarship to Bedford, and she was wild with delight at the thought of coming to us. Then—it was her own idea, not her mother's—she decided that it would be better for Joy to have the chance. She wanted it just awfully herself, but she's needed at home to help in the abbey. She's been working by herself, too, and getting on quite well, but Joy finds it difficult, but would work all right in class. I'm rather like that myself, so I can sympathise! And she's very musical, and they want her to have every chance. So Joan decided to give up the chance of school to Joy and to stop at home herself. It was just awfully good of her, for she wanted to come dreadfully. I talked to her about it, but I simply had to stop, for I saw she'd cry in another minute. But she wouldn't change her mind, not the least scrap. And though she feels awfully bad when we talk to Joy about school, she tries not to let anybody see. She's downright plucky, and as unselfish as she can be. Didn't you notice it, Margia, when Joy talked about learning our dances? Joan didn't say anything, but she went very quiet and looked queer.'

'I saw what she was feeling. It is very hard for her, for she evidently would have enjoyed the dancing. Are you sure it wasn't a mistake to bring her to-night, Cicely?'

'I wanted you all to see her. Now, girls, I've told you the story. Joy will, of course, join our club next term. I want to know if we couldn't let Joan in too. Of course, it's irregular. All our members so far have belonged to the school. It's dangerous too, perhaps, for others might want to join, and we couldn't admit a crowd of outsiders. It would have to be understood quite clearly that this was an exception, and that we were not prepared to do it again.'

She looked round anxiously. Some were clearly unwilling for the innovation; some, seeing the possibility of creating a dangerous precedent, looked deeply thoughtful. Cicely continued with energy,—

'Girls, we want our club to help girls who are worth helping. Joan Shirley is working hard all alone, and has been doing so for a year. Think of tackling matric. papers alone! I wouldn't do it myself. She's really in earnest. When she came to tea with me to-day she brought a wretched problem about men working in a field for so many hours, and the number of men needed to finish it in a given time'—her hearers laughed in sympathy. 'She'd worked it out, and it came to 307½ men, which was obviously not right'—they laughed again—'and she wanted *my* help to get it out!'

She paused tragically, and their sympathetic laughter deepened. 'Did it come out?' asked some one.

'It did not. I'm going to set Mirry on to it on Monday,' and Miriam sighed in mock despair. 'If any one can get it out to an even number of men, it should be our future B.A.'

'Unfortunately, the B.A. is more future than anything else,' laughed Miriam. 'Any more about Joan, President?'

'One thing more. She's in dead earnest, girls, and I'd like to help her. Our dancing would really help her. She'd have to learn morris dancing at college. It's not only that I want her to have some of the fun, but that it really would be of use to her. And she'd enjoy it tremendously. She loves dancing. Don't you think we could make an exception this once?'

'There's no doubt we would all like to, Cicely,' and the Strawberry Queen spoke up quickly. 'It's just a question if it's wise. I think we'd like to think it over. It's rather an innovation to decide on suddenly.'

Cicely sighed. 'I suppose so. I wanted to write at once and tell her she might join. I know she'll feel bad when she thinks it over and realises she can't have any of the fun, and I wanted to save her as much as I could. You don't feel you could decide to-night?'

But the general feeling was obviously against an early decision. She sighed again.

'Well, think it over and talk it over, and talk to me about it, and decide as soon as you can. And remember I'm awfully keen to have her! I'll be wild if you say you won't.'

There was a general laugh, for most of them had at some time experienced the force of her indignation. She knew that her wishes would weigh heavily with them, and was content to leave the matter for the present.

'Now perhaps Margia will close the evening!' and Margia took her place on the tub as the girls sprang up and formed in two long lines for 'Sir Roger.'

CHAPTER XII

GETTING JOY READY FOR SCHOOL

‘Did you catch your train, “Traveller’s Joy?”’ asked Cicely, as Joy wheeled out the cycles on Sunday afternoon.

Joy’s eyes danced at thought of their moonlight flight along Bledlow Ridge, but she kept faith with Joan.

‘We were at the station in plenty of time,’ she said solemnly. ‘It was the jolliest evening we’ve had for a year and a half. The tunes won’t go out of my head. We were singing them all the way home.’

‘I hope you had a carriage to yourselves!’

‘Oh, I mean when we were walking!’ Joy explained hastily.

Joan had chosen to stay at home that afternoon. Like Joy, she found the morris tunes ringing in her head, and had banished them with difficulty on the way to church in the morning. When Joy had set out on her long walk to Broadway End, and Mrs Shirley was lying down, Joan retired to the sacristy to think it over,—the dancing, the songs, the welcome of the ‘Strawberry Queen,’ and her promise to make things pleasant for Joy when she went to school.

But suddenly she rose. ‘Look here, Joan Shirley, this won’t do! Joy’s going to school, and she’s going to dance, and she’ll have a ripping time, and *you want her to!* You know you do! And you can’t have any of it yourself, so it’s no use thinking about it. If you go on like this, thinking how awfully fine it would be if you could have gone instead of Joy, you’ll have a bad time presently, when she begins coming home and talking about school. It won’t do to think about it. It will be heaps safer to think about her. Is there any way I can help to get her ready, now that it’s really decided? Perhaps she’ll let me coach her a little. And—yes, I could do that!’ and she ran across the cloister garth as if fleeing from her thoughts.

Her mother was resting on the couch in the little sitting-room. Joan slipped into Joy’s room by the cloister door, and so reached her own bedroom. When Mrs Shirley entered later on, she found her kneeling by a trunk which contained summer clothing, lifting out cotton and muslin frocks and blouses, looking them over, and spreading them on the bed and chairs.

‘Well, I was thinking of spring-cleaning soon, so as to have Joy’s help before she goes to school, but I really had not meant to begin on a Sunday afternoon,’ she observed. ‘This is surely a very sudden attack, Joan dear?’

Joan looked up and laughed. ‘It isn’t spring-cleaning, mother. I caught myself thinking how jolly it would be to go to school and join in that dancing. I can’t get the tunes out of my head. So I thought I’d do something to stop myself thinking.’

‘Yes?’ her mother said gently, quite aware of how hard she must find this time. ‘But, dear _____,’

‘And the best way seemed to be to do something for Joy. So I’m going through my summer clothes to see which of them she can use. I know it’s not quite the thing to do it on Sunday, but I felt desperate. She’ll need a good many things, and we can’t get a lot of new ones, and these are quite good. There’s my gray muslin frock, and the tussore. And those cotton blouses will be just what she wants. With what she has already I should think she’ll

have enough. She'll only need a dancing dress, and that will be quite simple to make. It's a good thing we're the same height, and the same colours suit us both.'

'But Joy must not take all your dresses, Joan. What will you do without them?'

'It doesn't much matter what I wear at home, does it?' Joan said briefly. 'If I wear my big pinafore, no one need know I've an old frock underneath. It would be silly for me to have as many things as Joy, when she's at school and I'm not. You wouldn't like to say that to me, but I can see it for myself. Joy must be properly dressed to go among all those girls, and she must have plenty of changes. We can't have her looking shabby. I expect she'll keep me busy washing and ironing, but I'll see that she's respectable or know the reason why. *She'll* never stop to think if her blouse is dirty! You know she always wants looking after. We can't have Cicely ashamed of her. I'm just thankful you always refused to dress us alike, even when we asked you to. If Joy had had two of every dress and blouse, they'd soon have seen through it. I'm going to keep those faded things myself. Under my overall they won't matter. And those blue blouses are all right for home, but they'd never do for school. Joy can have all the really pretty things, and they should keep her going for a while. I'm glad I thought of it in time, for they'll all need lengthening. I'm afraid we've grown a good deal during the winter, but we keep up with one another very well. There isn't a fraction of an inch between us at present.'

'I don't like you giving all your things to Joy, Joan dear.'

'It's either that or buying new ones, isn't it? I don't mind, mother—not really. I'd far rather she had them and looked as nice as the other girls than went without and looked shabby. That really would make me shiver.'

In spite of her resolution Joan had some hard moments during the next month. Joy was very full of the new life before her, and did not at first realise that her talk of it must hurt Joan continually. She began to work more steadily, and in her anxiety 'not to look a duffer,' was grateful for the help Joan gave so eagerly. She practised more regularly, so that her music might not disappoint Miss Bates. She protested over Joan's offer of the dresses, but yielded to the pressure of necessity.

'You won't get new ones, you know,' was Joan's unanswerable argument. Joy stood impatiently for fitting and alterations, and was soon in possession of an adequate school outfit. The only necessary purchase, beyond a few extras, was of material for a green dancing dress, and at the making of this she worked eagerly.

But she quite failed to appreciate the depth of Joan's feeling in the matter. She was really grateful for the sacrifice which had given the chance of school to her, and she meant to show her gratitude by hard work, but she did not understand what the decision had cost Joan. As she worked, she chattered on about school, the girls, the barn, the dances, the songs, till it was almost more than Joan could bear. One afternoon when she was talking so, humming dance music, and wondering when her first dance-evening would be, Joan suddenly dropped the green bodice she was finishing, and fled away out into the abbey.

Joy looked up in frank surprise. 'What's the matter with her, mother dear? I didn't say anything, did I?'

'You only said too much. I don't think you quite understand, Joy, how very much Joan would have liked to go to school, and particularly to join in the dancing. You should try to talk about it less before her. It is very difficult for her to listen to you when it is out of the question for herself.'

'I didn't know!' Joy said slowly. 'I'm awfully sorry! I didn't understand!' and for a few minutes she sewed in silence. Then she threw down her work and ran out. Mrs Shirley called

her back, but Joy was already out in the cloisters.

She found her cousin only after some search, in the old monks' dormitory, curled up in one of the window seats which looked down on the cloister garth. Joy threw her arms round her before she could turn.

'Joan dear, I'm awfully sorry! It was just hateful of me not to understand! I wouldn't have done it for anything if I'd thought. I'm sorry I'm such a beast! Yes, I am! I made you cry, and you've been so awfully good! Now you'll hate me for ever, and I deserve it too,' Joy said remorsefully.

Joan turned to her bravely, the tears dashed from her eyes. 'Joy, I'm sorry! I didn't mean you to know. I'm sorry I was such a baby. I couldn't help it for a moment, but I've been wild with myself ever since. It was that evening in the barn that did the mischief. I wish I hadn't gone. But we couldn't know she'd take us there.'

'But you liked watching the dancing!' Joy insisted. 'You know what it's like now!'

'That's what's wrong. I know so well that I can't forget. I didn't like watching, really, after the first few minutes. I wanted to join in. It was awfully hard to sit still. I shan't go to watch again. I'd just love to take part and know all those dances.'

'I'll teach you those that are for only two,' Joy said eagerly. 'And we'll dance out in the garth there!'

'But without music! I want you to teach me, but it won't be the same. It's the whole thing, not only the dancing—all the jolly times they have at that club. I'd love to join. Well! It won't pay to think about it! But don't talk about it too much, Joy. I know I'm a baby, but you feel just the same about it yourself. You're just as keen. You're going, and I'm not, and you needn't rub it in.'

'There's mother—and some visitors, bother! I won't, Joan dear, and I'm awfully sorry'—but Joan had passed her and was running down the stairs.

'I can't let mother show people round! It's my job, not hers,' and she took the strangers in hand and showed them round the abbey, with the quiet dignity and assurance which had taken Cicely's fancy at their first meeting.

One evening they had a visit from Marguerite, the 'Strawberry Queen,' and Georgie Gilks, the editor of the school magazine. They cycled to the abbey, Georgie on a borrowed mount, for the family resources did not afford bicycles, and demanded to be shown over the ruins. Joan, quite unaware of Cicely's proposal and that they had come to criticise her, met them with a smile of welcome, and led them to cloisters, chapter-house, sacristy, refectory, and dormitory, and told her tale of monks and abbots, showed old tiling, frescoes, and carving, explained aumbries, slype, and muniment room, as readily and completely as she had done for the first school party.

'And where is your cousin?' Marguerite asked, as they stood chatting in the garth. 'I've a message for her. Doesn't she ever help you?'

'I'm sorry, but she's out. No, she doesn't like taking people round. She's afraid she'd make a muddle of it.'

'In fact, she doesn't know enough about it. She hasn't studied it as you have?' queried Georgie shrewdly.

'She knows more about other things than I do. She's wonderful about finding her way in the woods,' Joan said loyally.

'Cicely told us she was always out. She calls her "Traveller's Joy." Is she in the woods today? They're so wet with yesterday's rain.'

‘She doesn’t mind. She puts on a mackintosh and big boots and no hat, and then she goes anywhere. She’s been working very hard, to prepare for school, but she begged for a holiday to-day, and has been out since nine o’clock.’

‘I say! All alone? What a queer kid! How far would she go in the day?’

‘Oh—twelve—fifteen miles! She walks very quickly when she’s out on tramp, as she calls it. She’ll come home very happy after such a long day!’

‘Will you tell her, please, that school stops on Friday of next week, and that Miss Macey thinks it would be wise if Joy would come on Thursday morning to see the school and meet the girls and be introduced to her. Tell her to come about eleven and to ask for me. In the evening we’re dancing at school, so Cicely says she’s to come prepared to stay. We take lunch, so that we won’t have to go home at mid-day—it’s too far for most of us. So perhaps Joy will bring some sandwiches. And Cicely requests the pleasure of her company to tea, and of yours too, if you’d like to watch the dancing again,’ and Marguerite looked at her keenly.

But Joan’s mind was made up. She said swiftly, ‘It’s awfully good of you to be willing to have me, and please thank Cicely very much. But I’d better not come. I don’t think it’s wise. And mother needs me at home. So I think you must excuse me, but thank you very much, all the same.’

‘She won’t come because it makes her feel bad,’ said the Strawberry Queen, as they rode away. ‘We must talk the others round, Georgie! Cicely wants her, and *I* want her! It’s awfully hard on her!’

‘If Cicely wants her, and you want her, I’ve no doubt you’ll manage it between you,’ Georgie laughed. ‘President and Queen together make a fairly strong team! All right, “Strawberry!” I’ll vote for her, and I’ll help with the others too. She’s a jolly kid, and I’d like her to have some fun.’

CHAPTER XIII IN THE PLAYGROUND

‘Joan, the kitchen’s full of smoke, and I don’t know what to do!’ shrieked Joy, and looked helplessly at the smoking range.

Joan and her mother were making beds. She gave one glance at the range as she ran to the rescue.

‘Really, Joy! At your age! Or are you only seven?’

‘Please, what was wrong? I haven’t the faintest idea!’ Joy said meekly, as the atmosphere began to clear.

Joan flung the windows wide. ‘You’d got all the dampers in tight. Where did you think the smoke would go?’

‘Dampers! I never expect to understand dampers in this world! They’re always out when they should be in, and in when they should be out, and whatever I do to them is wrong. I’m used to that, but I never knew before that they’d make the range and ovens smoke. I thought only chimneys smoked.’

‘Oh, go and get ready for school!’ cried Joan, laughing and choking in the smoke. ‘You’re an absolute baby, in the way you make up your mind you don’t know and never will know things! Why don’t you try to find out? Go and clean your bike! You can’t possibly ride it in that state.’

‘I don’t intend to. I’m going to walk. Then I can take footpaths and go through the woods. It’s a glorious morning,’ and Joy went off whistling to make her preparations.

She put on strong boots and her green knitted coat, stuffed her cap into her pocket, slung a packet of sandwiches over her shoulder, and set out bareheaded and empty-handed as she loved to do.

Up the steps in the wood, and along the footpaths she went, climbing steadily to the ridge on the hills, but scarcely losing her breath and never stopping to rest. Something else stopped her, however, for the woods were thick with primroses and she could not resist them. She began to gather eagerly, the light of a sudden idea in her face, and at the first cottage went in to borrow a basket. She had long since made friends with the old woman who lived there, going in one day to admire the pillow-lace which the old fingers were weaving so deftly. She soon filled her basket, and set off briskly along the ridge, with the tower and ball of West Wycombe church presently looming ahead.

After a while she sat down, not to rest, for she seldom felt the need of that, but for, to her, a much more potent reason—to enjoy a long open stretch of country, with coloured fields and woods just touched by spring, and a lonely old church in a hollow. While she gazed, she thoughtfully made up her primroses into bunches. Then she went on her way, and presently forsook the hills with much regret, to take the road through the valley leading to Wycombe Moor and Miss Macey’s school.

Before entering the town, however, she stopped again, picked all the bits of stick and dead leaf off her skirt, brushed and buttoned her coat, untied the ribbon on her hair and tied it again more neatly, put on her cap, and, still more reluctantly, her gloves. Then, feeling very proper, she took up her basket again and whistling no longer walked demurely into the town.

The big school was very conspicuous, a large red brick building. Joy's heart sank as she entered the gates, and she thought gratefully of the Strawberry Queen's promise to welcome her. It was good to have one friend in this imposing place. Beside it, the school she and Joan had attended in London seemed insignificant. For quite a new reason Joy wished Joan could have come to school too; it would have been so much pleasanter if they could have gone together!

The big playground was deserted, but the clock still showed five minutes to eleven, so Joy slipped into a corner. Her courage failed her at thought of asking for Miss Macey or Marguerite, so there was nothing for it but to wait.

Within a minute or two, however, a babel of voices and laughter arose, and girls began to stream out from the gymnasium, a separate building at the side, all wearing blue tunics, white blouses, green girdles, and pigtails.

The first to come was a quartette, all talking heatedly, and Joy recognised the four girls of her own age she knew already—Edna and Peggy Gilks, Carry Carter, and her friend Agnes Mason. The subject of their discussion seemed to be taking all their attention, and Joy in her corner was unnoticed. The stream of girls who followed and spread over the playground were apparently discussing these four, for Joy caught the names 'Edna,' 'Carry,' 'Peggy,' over and over again. She waited, hesitating and almost shy, though she was not given to shyness. But it was a difficult moment and she hardly knew how to announce her presence.

So intent were they all that Joy was not noticed for a moment. Then Edna, whirling round in search of some one, caught sight of her, and came running across the playground.

'I heard you were coming! You want Marguerite, don't you?'

'She told me to ask for her, but I'd rather wait till she's ready, please.'

'I'm afraid you'll have to. She's with Miss Macey. That's the worst of having a senior for Queen. They have so many things on hand that you can never get hold of them when they're wanted. But she'll be down presently. Come and speak to the others.'

Carry Carter's eyes were on the basket of primroses. 'You look like a flower-girl!' she said.

There was a note in her voice which brought the colour to Joy's cheeks. Perhaps she had been silly to bring the flowers? The girls might not want primroses, and could easily get them if they did. Edna's eyes were curious also, though she had asked no questions. Joy tilted her chin and spoke up sturdily.

'Does the basket look funny? I thought they'd keep better so. There were so many that I had to pick a few. I thought somebody might like them.' She looked at Edna. 'I wanted to give some to Cicely, because she's so jolly, and to Marguerite, because she's the Queen. But if you think they won't want them——'

'They can get plenty if they do. They all come through the woods. You look as if you were trying to sell them. It does look funny!' and Carry gave a titter of amusement.

Edna's eyes flashed. 'I'm sure they'll want them. It was sweet of you to think of it. They're beautifully fresh. But you mustn't leave Mirry out. She's the White Queen, you know. Carry, you'd better take care. If Cicely hears you——'

'Rot! It does look funny to come with a basket of flowers!'

Edna turned her back on her. 'I suppose now,' she said persuasively, 'you couldn't spare me a *lot*? Not a few, that wouldn't be any good, but a *lot*? Couldn't you make your bunches smaller?'

Joy looked puzzled, but was anxious to oblige. ‘Help me, then,’ she said, and Peggy came to help. Between them they hurriedly made up smaller bunches, and still left half the flowers at Edna’s disposal.

‘Now, Peg!’ said she, and Peggy, apparently understanding, ran off with them and began to speak to girls here and there, begging each to wear two or three.

‘How does she know which are to have them?’ Joy naturally inquired, watching Peggy’s unhesitating progress.

‘Oh, there’s no doubt about it! Here come the Queens! I’ll tell “Strawberry!”’ and Edna darted away as Cicely, Miriam, and Marguerite came down the steps from the class-rooms, all talking as earnestly as the younger girls.

The playground had filled with girls by this time. They seemed to have a great deal to say, and Joy wondered if all the excitement could be connected with the coming holidays, or if anything could be the matter.

Edna had caught the three elder girls. ‘Marguerite! Cicely! Here’s Joy Shirley from Gracedieu, and she’s brought you each a buttonhole of primroses from the woods. Wasn’t it nice of her? We’ve each begged a few to wear.’

She waited anxiously. If any one of the three exclaimed, ‘Queer kid! What did she do that for?’ Carry, standing within earshot, would triumph openly, and Carry in that mood was unbearable. But they did not fail her. No one of the three would willingly have hurt a younger girl’s feelings, and Joy’s thought, if original, had obviously been kind.

‘How jolly of her!’ Cicely said warmly. ‘I love to wear some, but I hadn’t time to stop and gather any this morning,’ and all three accepted the flowers with hearty thanks.

‘Miss Macey wants you when classes begin again, Joy,’ said Marguerite. ‘I’ll take you to her. By the way, I suppose you’re really Joyce?’

‘No—just Joy.’ Joy’s face was glowing at their thanks and the chill caused by Carry’s laugh had gone. ‘If you try to say “Joyce Shirley” you’ll see it doesn’t do. My mother was called Joyce, but she called me only Joy.’

‘Then we may call you by it all the time. It’s very pretty. Did you cycle this morning?’

‘No, I walked. I wanted to come through the woods.’

‘“Wild Cat!” “Traveller’s Joy!”’ laughed Cicely. ‘Now suppose you talk to Edna and Peggy for a while, Joy. Marguerite, we really must settle this horrid business!’

‘We can’t. The girls must do that,’ Marguerite said sturdily.

‘I know, but if we could find some way out they’d jump at it.’

They paced round and round the ground, all very grave. The younger girls kept respectfully out of their way, eyeing them from a distance, for these three were the leaders in the school.

‘What’s wrong?’ Joy asked, as Edna’s worried eyes followed the seniors.

The answer came prompt and sufficient. ‘Yesterday we voted for the May Queen, and meant to dance to-night in honour of the new one. And there were two chosen—two almost equal. It’s never happened before, and we don’t know what to do.’

‘Oh! Is that what everybody’s talking about?’

‘All the Hamlet girls. The rest don’t count in this.’

‘Don’t they all belong, then?’

‘Oh, no! Only about half the school. They have to be active members. We have to limit the membership somehow,’ Edna explained. ‘It would be simply silly if everybody belonged to everything. The clubs would be too big to be workable. There’s the Musical—you’ll be keen

on that, I hear!—and the Essay, and the Dramatic; but those do most in the winter, of course. Then there's the Sports Club—hockey in winter, tennis and cricket in summer; and the swimming.'

'How much are the subscriptions?' demanded Joy, with a sudden awful fear that she might have to choose between the Musical and the Sports Club. The Hamlet, with its dancing, she could not give up, both for Joan's sake and her own.

Edna's eyes danced reminiscently. 'Nothing! They used to be heavy, but we abolished them.'

'Oh!' Joy gave a sigh of relief. 'I'm glad you did!'

Edna nodded. 'But we had to limit the membership, or we'd have had crowds of Hamlets who never came to dances or rambles, but expected to vote for the Queen, and Musical members who couldn't play, but expected to go to concerts free, and so on. So we only have active members. Hamlets must turn up for rambles and learn to dance; members of the Dramatic and Musical must help when they're asked; Sports girls must play up and go to practices. Slackers are turned out at once.'

'I see!' Joy was deeply interested. 'It sounds all right. Then all the girls aren't Hamlets?'

'No, some of them can't fag to practise the dances, and others don't care about the rambles. But about half the school belongs.'

'And who were the two who were chosen to be Queen?'

'One,' said Edna grimly, 'was Carry Carter. The other was—*me!* I, I mean!'

'Oh! I'm awfully glad!' Joy said warmly, for Edna's welcome and defence had helped her over a difficult moment. 'I think you'd make a good one,' she said, after a moment's consideration.

'Every one wants a younger girl this time. I had thirty-six votes. Carry had thirty-two.'

'Oh, then of course you're elected——'

'No, I'm not. And I don't think I shall be. It's jolly to know so many wanted me, but it isn't a big enough majority for the Queen. Everybody feels that. Carry and her lot would be hateful if I were chosen on a majority of four. I wouldn't take it, anyway. It's not good enough. I'd have trouble all the time. No, thank you, I don't see the fun of it! A Queen must be liked by everybody, or she'd have an awful time. It's never a very easy job, but if half the club didn't want me—no, thanks!'

Joy had to admit the force of this. 'What will be done? Will you vote again?'

'Yes, to-night. They'—nodding towards the elder girls—'the old Queens, hope one set will give way, but we all know it's not likely. You see, it's not merely a case of liking me or Carry best. There's a lot more in it than that! But there's the gong! Marguerite will be coming for you. I'll tell you the rest later. You're coming for dinner with me and Peggy and Georgie and Marguerite. Oh, yes! We've decided that. Cicely's bagged you for tea. Wait for me here after school,' and she fled, leaving Joy bewildered, with a dozen questions still to ask.

CHAPTER XIV

SAINTS AND SINNERS

'You're the one who's clever about cooking and silly house things, aren't you?' Joy asked of Peggy Gilks, as they walked through the town together during the dinner-hour.

She had been interviewed by the stately gray-haired head mistress, and had received good advice on the subject of her duty as holder of the Hamlet scholarship, and she had promised to do her best. For this one year, Miss Macey had reminded her, a great chance was given to her; but it would depend on herself whether the gift would be renewed when the year was over.

She had been introduced to various mistresses, and conducted by Marguerite over the school buildings, to laboratories, cookery room, gymnasium, science, and geography rooms. She had been rather overawed by all she had seen, and had made a whole budget of mental notes for Joan's benefit. Finally Marguerite had left her in the music room, and Miss Bates, intending to keep her only ten minutes, had detained her for half an hour, which had passed so quickly that both were startled when the gong rang at half-past twelve. Miss Bates dismissed her then, confident that she had found a pupil after her own heart, and Joy hurried away with a pile of new music for the holidays.

Peggy laughed, and admitted the charge. 'I love cooking.'

'Then I suppose you understand all about dampers?'

'Dampers? You only pull them out——'

'Or push them in! I never know which. Something happened at home this morning,' Joy sighed. 'The dampers always go wrong when I come near. And Joan laughed at me.'

Peggy laughed too, and most unsympathetically. 'There's nothing difficult about dampers,' she declared.

'Where are we going now?'

'To a dairy in town for milk or cocoa. Some of the girls have dinner at school, and some go home, but it's too far for most of us.'

They gathered presently round little tables in the dairy, and all opened packets of sandwiches and cake. Marguerite and Georgie Gilks at one small table were deep in discussion of the difficult position of the Hamlet Club. Edna, Peggy, and Joy at another, reverted to the same topic.

'What did you mean by saying "There's a lot more in it than that?"' demanded Joy. 'You said you'd tell me later.'

'Yes. It isn't just a question whether the girls like Carry or me best. You see, I'm a Saint and Carry's a Sinner, and that's the trouble.'

At sight of Joy's face Peggy went off into a peal of laughter, and Edna, after a startled look at her, joined in. The Strawberry Queen looked round in surprise.

'What *is* the matter over there? Peggy, are you ill? Joy looks quite scared!'

Peggy, giggling still, explained. 'Edna has just, without a word of preparation, announced that she's a Saint, and Joy looked so astonished! I don't blame her either. You don't look it, Edna. Now Carry's easier to understand, isn't she?'

Marguerite's lips twitched. 'You'd better explain, my child. It sounds a trifle odd.'

'Joy must have guessed that Ed was being sarcastic,' said Georgie, and turned to her cocoa again.

‘They’re nicknames, of course,’ Edna explained hastily. ‘You see, once when the school was in an awfully tight corner we Hamlets came to the rescue and gave up all our secrets to help them out. Miss Macey praised us up no end, and everybody knew that the rest of the school had been horrid to us. I don’t think we were conceited about it, but we couldn’t help knowing we’d come out best. And they nicknamed us the Saints. They said any one could see we thought ourselves Saints, which wasn’t true and was silly, anyway. Of course, as Georgie says, it was sarcastic. But we had to call them something too, so——’

‘You called them the Sinners?’

‘We hadn’t much choice, had we?’

‘But Carry belongs to your club. Why isn’t she a Saint too?’

‘Oh, but that’s all changed. Lots of them joined the club, and lots of us joined theirs. All the other clubs were theirs. Now you get Saints and Sinners mixed up in all the clubs. We all decided not to have separate clubs for the sake of the school. We were kept out of games, you see, and it was bad for the school. Now Marguerite’s hockey captain, Georgie’s school editor, Mirry Honor was tennis champion last summer. None of those would have been possible if the clubs hadn’t mixed. So now they want a Sinner for Queen! D’you begin to see why neither side will give way?’

Joy nodded. ‘What will happen?’

‘I don’t know! Nobody knows. It’s horribly awkward.’

‘Cicely’s terribly upset,’ said Peggy. ‘I thought she looked awfully cut up when the votes were counted.’

‘If any one can get us out of the mess, she’s the one. But I don’t see how. I wouldn’t be Queen with a majority of four.’

‘Perhaps Carry will back out?’

‘Not she! She’s keen to be Queen. And the outside Sinners, who don’t belong to the club, will back her up. They say we’ve had it our own way long enough. All the Queens so far have been Saints—it does sound odd, doesn’t it? We’re so used to it that we never think about it. But you can see how they feel.’

‘And you don’t think your side will give in?’

‘Not much!’ said Edna inelegantly.

‘Not for Carry Carter,’ said Peggy. ‘She’s really and truly and at heart a snob, and our girls loathe that. She daren’t show it, of course, but it’s there, and some day she’ll give herself away, and if Cicely hears her, she’ll either go into the stocks or out of the club.’

‘She’ll choose to go out,’ Edna prophesied.

‘Into the stocks?’ Joy was staring wide-eyed, her sandwiches forgotten.

They laughed. ‘Ask Peggy!’ Edna teased.

‘I’ve been. So apply to me for information. Cicely likes everything connected with the club to be old-fashioned,’ Peggy explained. ‘That’s why Miss Lane stands on a tub, and we meet in a barn. We ought to drink ale, but somehow we all prefer lemonade. The question came up how members who broke the rules were to be treated. I don’t mean slackers; they were turned out, of course. But I mean any who were nasty to other girls, or snobby, or who thought too much of themselves. The club was started to stop that kind of thing. So Cicely decided that any one who showed signs of going that way should be put in the stocks for one dance-evening, and she persuaded the carpenter at Darley’s to make them. They’re kept in a dark corner!’

‘And have they ever been used?’ Joy’s eyes were wide with horrified surprise. ‘I should think it would be just hateful!’

‘’Tisn’t so bad,’ said Peggy nonchalantly.

‘Do you mean that *you*——’ gasped Joy.

‘I was the first victim—the only one, for the next funk’d it,’ Peggy explained. ‘There was a kid in the cooking class, a perfect little duffer, who didn’t know anything even after a whole term. She never knew how much salt or sugar to put in things. She simply wouldn’t think,’ and Joy reddened self-consciously. ‘It riled me, and one day I laughed at her, and the silly infant began to weep, and just at that minute Cicely and Mirry came along. They called it bullying, and made a frightful fuss——’

‘Well, you did pile it on, Peg! I didn’t wonder Iris cried.’

‘She shouldn’t have come to school if she couldn’t stand being laughed at. I never meant to upset the kid.’

‘Oh, yes, you did!’ Edna insisted.

‘And what did they do?’ asked Joy, intensely interested.

‘Brought the case up before the Hamlet Club, and all voted on it,’ Peggy’s tone was more important than penitent. ‘They mostly voted “Guilty,” and Cicely said I’d better go in the stocks. Marguerite said—what was it, Ed?’

‘That if they were ever going to use them they’d better do it now,’ Edna said promptly. ‘And Mirry agreed, though she hates being nasty to people, for she said you wouldn’t really care, and it would show the rest we were in earnest. She was quite right. You didn’t care, Peg.’

Peggy grinned. ‘It was the first time, you see. The others were all so sympathetic that they fed me with sweets and apples. I had quite a good time.’

‘It wouldn’t be a good time to most girls!’ said Edna. ‘Kitty Branscombe didn’t think so, evidently.’

‘She was Number Two,’ Peggy explained to Joy. ‘She was a regular Sinner through and through, and as snobby as she could be. We all knew, but we couldn’t give her away; but one day Marguerite heard her remarks about somebody—“Quite *common* people! Not at *all* the kind of girl you’d want to know after you’d left school! Such a *mixed* lot of girls!”’ and she assumed a voice supposed to resemble Kitty’s high-bred tone of disgust. ‘That was enough for “Strawberry,” and Kitty was condemned to the stocks. But she funk’d it and never turned up, so that was the end of her, so far as the club was concerned. She knew better than to come to another dance-evening. Henceforth she’s a deadly enemy, and her elder sister too. Nell Branscombe bosses the Musical Society, and she naturally sympathised with Kitty, so they’re down on our club whenever they get the chance.’

‘I was thinking of them when I said the Outside Sinners would keep Carry up to the mark. Kitty’ll see Carry doesn’t climb down. She’d love to see her Queen, or if that’s impossible she’d like to make trouble in the club. So there you are!’

‘And what decides whether a girl’s a Saint or a Sinner? It’s not just if she joins the Hamlet Club?’

‘Oh, no! And it is possible to join the Musical and yet be a Saint, though most of the Musical are Sinners and devoted to Nell. Still, Cicely and Mirry and Marguerite all belong. It depends on which set you go in with and who are your friends.’

Joy nodded. Obviously her friends would lie among the ‘Saints,’ but she was determined to join the Musical Society at the earliest possible moment. It was good to know she could do

both. She realised the difficulty of the former position in the school, when a choice between the various clubs had been necessary.

Marguerite had risen and come to speak to the younger girls.

‘Joy, Miss Macey thinks you may as well go in to singing with Edna and Peggy this afternoon. Things are very slack to-day, of course. For the last hour Miriam Honor takes a class of kiddies in morris dancing, so perhaps you’d like to watch. It might help you to pick up the step. You’ll stay for the evening meeting, won’t you? Then you’ll hear what we decide—if we decide anything! And you can join the club formally. I’m afraid there won’t be any dancing unless something is settled. We shan’t feel like it.’

Later in the afternoon, Joy sat in the big school hall watching Miriam Honor put a dozen small children through their dances. The elder girl was tall and graceful, her fair plaits wound round her head, and her manner with the little ones was good. At the piano sat another senior, a dark-haired girl who played the dance music well. She kept glancing at the clock, however, and at last swung round on her stool.

‘Couldn’t you finish without music, Mirry? Teach them something new and let them do it slowly.’

‘How can I, the day before the holidays?’ Miriam protested. ‘Are you in a hurry, Nell?’

‘I want to go early. I don’t see why Miss Macey put me on to this job,’ Nell Branscombe grumbled.

‘I’ll try to do without you, but they don’t do half so well, and there’s still half an hour. Couldn’t you wait a few more minutes? I wanted them to go through “Constant Billy.”’

Joy had been listening. Now she came up to the piano, a touch of colour in her face.

‘I could play for you, if you’d let me.’

‘Do you know the music?’ Miriam asked eagerly, while Nell looked in surprise at the new girl.

‘No, I’ve never seen it, but I’d like to awfully. I’d never heard any quite like it till that evening in the barn. There’s something queer and old about it. May I look?’ and she took up one of the books and scanned the music curiously.

‘You don’t mean to say you think you could read it straight off—and for dancing?’ and Nell’s surprise increased.

‘I could play this, I think. If I make mistakes you’ll understand, won’t you?’ and she looked up at Miriam. ‘May I try?’

‘I wish you would. It would be a great help,’ Miriam said warmly, and Nell, looking doubtful, rose from the stool.

‘What are you looking at? “Rigs o’ Marlow?” If you think you can manage that, you can tackle “Billy” all right.’

‘I’m used to playing for Joan when she drills her children,’ Joy explained. ‘I know about keeping strict time. I won’t lose the beat, even if I play a wrong note.’

‘Take your staves, children! Thanks very much, Joy. You play the air “Once to Yourself,” you know.’

‘I noticed that in the barn. And they jump on the last beat.’

‘In this case they strike the staves, so be prepared for it,’ laughed Miriam. ‘Now let’s see how it goes!’

Nell Branscombe stood watching curiously, as Joy arranged her seat at a correct height with an air of assurance that was unmistakable. She was not showing off, she was only

anxious to help—the elder girl recognised that. But she knew what she was about, and she was sure of her power to attack the morris music.

As she played, Nell's surprise increased, and she realised that she might go home, for Joy was as capable as herself.

'I say!' she broke out, when the dance was over. 'You do read well! How old are you?'

'Fifteen. I've had a lot of practice. I've had no lessons for over a year, but we've a lot of old music and I've gone through it all because I had nothing else to do. They don't like me making up things, at least not too much. They say it isn't practising,' and Joy turned to Miriam. 'What would you like now?'

'"Laudnum Bunches," please. It's a tremendous help, if you don't mind. Thanks, Nell, then if you really want to go, Joy will play for the rest of the time, I'm sure.'

'Are you joining the school next term?' and Nell looked down at Joy curiously. 'I'll introduce you to the Musical Society. You'll be joining, of course? There's no doubt you're qualified! We'll be glad to have you. Thanks awfully for playing for me! Kitty and I wanted to get away early. You'd better explain to her about those slow movements, Miriam. She can't possibly know that,' and Nell went off, well satisfied with her new recruit, and prepared to spread among her musical members the tale of the new girl who seemed able to play anything at sight.

'You're adopted!' laughed Miriam Honor. 'She's the President of the Musical, you know. It's rather hard for juniors or new girls to get in, for they're very particular about qualifications, but you'll be received with open arms on Nell's recommendation.'

Joy flushed. 'I want to join.'

'Of course. They'll find you valuable. Now see! You must be careful to mind all the repeats, or we shall get in a fine muddle. And in these "Capers" movements you must play more slowly and very emphatically. The time's rather tricky.'

'H'm!' said Joy. 'Why can't they keep to one thing? Why do they want to change for two bars? It is queer! All right! I think I see how it goes. Are they ready?'

'Handkerchiefs, children! Yes, now we're ready, Joy!'

CHAPTER XV THE SECOND VOTE

‘Hello, you’re being kept busy!’ and Cicely went up to the piano. School was over, but Miriam’s class was still dancing, and a number of girls had stopped on their way out to watch ‘the kiddies,’ and to stare at the new girl sitting in Nell Branscombe’s place and apparently quite at home.

Joy nodded but did not speak. ‘Shepherd’s Hey’ required all her attention if she was not to lose the time and spoil the dance. But it came to a successful end at last, and Miriam dismissed the children and came up to explain.

‘I know we’re late, but they begged for that and said we hadn’t had it for a fortnight, and Joy said she didn’t mind.’

‘It was jolly! I like to hear the bells, even when I can’t see,’ and Joy sat looking through the music. ‘It is queer sometimes, isn’t it? It sounds old. I like it, though.’

‘We all like it!’ Cicely laughed. ‘But I want you and Mirry to hurry up. You’re coming into town with me for tea, and we haven’t too much time, if we’re going to get back for the meeting.’

Joy sprang up. ‘Show me the way, please! I’ll get lost!’

‘Follow me!’ laughed Miriam, and led her hurriedly away to find their hats and coats.

It was a very cosy party to which Cicely had invited her guests. Marguerite was included also, and the four gathered round a table in the innermost corner of their favourite shop, and the hostess ordered tea, hot cakes, buns, and fancy pastries.

‘I don’t think there will be any dancing to-night,’ she said, when urging Joy not to be afraid of the cakes. ‘So you needn’t hesitate! They were made to be eaten. Try this creamy jammy thing, or that green and pink concoction.’

Joy would have liked to question her on the prospects of the evening meeting, but decided that it would be cheek. Cicely’s face had clouded at the first reference to the evening.

‘We needn’t go over that again, “Strawberry!” Let’s talk of something else, and not cross our bridges till we come to them. Perhaps the girls will be more reasonable to-night.’

Joy doubted it, remembering Edna’s explanations, but thought it wiser not to worry the harassed President by saying so. She listened with interest to the talk of the three Queens, and demurely waited till she was spoken to before venturing a remark.

When her first hunger was satisfied, Cicely turned to her. ‘You’ll be joining the Hamlet Club, of course, “Traveller’s Joy?” There are some things you ought to know before you can really be a member. The club was started to oppose anything like snobbery in the school, and we all loathe a conceited girl or one who looks down on others. It’s possible, we’ve found, to be snobbish for other reasons than that one is better off in money matters; I think you’ll see what I mean. Girls can look down on other girls because they fancy they’re cleverer, or smarter, as well as because they think they’re better dressed. We won’t have that kind of thing, and we take steps to prevent it when we see it beginning.’

‘Peggy and Edna have been telling her,’ laughed Marguerite.

‘Peggy’s a wretch. She didn’t care a scrap. But it was good for the others. They saw we were in earnest. I’d heard some of them saying we’d never do it. Remember and be careful, then, Joy! One other thing! Our club motto is—“To be or not to be——“’

‘From *Hamlet!*’ cried Joy. ‘But I thought the club was named because so many of the girls come from hamlets on the hills!’

Cicely laughed. ‘But we had to take a motto out of the play! It means’—and she grew grave again—‘that if ever we have to choose between two ways, we’ll try to choose the right one. I suppose everybody has to choose once. Sometimes people have to keep on choosing. We want the remembrance of the Hamlet Club to help us always. Your cousin Joan had her choosing time when she let you come to school instead of her.’

Joy’s face grew thoughtful. ‘She’d have loved to come. She’ll find it awfully slow at home, I’m afraid. I’m to tell her all about it, but that can never be the same.’

‘I want you to give her a note from me. Now let’s go back to our problem!’ and she rose. ‘I’d give a good deal to see this business safely settled! But——’ and she shook her head gloomily.

The geography room had been set apart for the meeting of the Hamlet Club. Joy wandered round with Peggy Gilks, looking at maps, diagrams, and pictures with wondering eyes.

‘I never imagined a whole room given up to geography! What are these funny things?’ and she paused before a glass case.

‘Plasticine models. They’re huts of savages in different parts of the world. That’s a Central African beehive hut, and here’s a South African kraal. This Papuan tree-house is rather neat. Here are models of different kinds of boats and rafts and canoes. Miss Jameson makes it jolly interesting.’

‘I never was keen on geography! It always seemed all lists of towns and exports and manufactures. But if she makes it seem about real people, it may be quite passable.’

Then the bell on the governess’s desk rang imperatively, and they turned to see Cicely standing there, with Miriam and Marguerite at a small table at her side. About seventy girls were present, crowding into and onto the desks. Peggy and Joy slipped into a corner, and the President addressed the meeting.

‘Fellow-members of the Hamlet Club, I needn’t make a speech. You all understand the awkward hole our club has suddenly found itself in. I hope you are going to help it out. Last night thirty-six of you voted for Edna Gilks to be our new Queen, and thirty-two wanted Carry Carter. Edna is therefore elected by a majority, but we decided long ago that at least three-fourths of our members must vote for the Queen. The position is one which can only be filled satisfactorily by a girl who has the goodwill of the whole club; Edna feels, and I agree with her, that with a majority of four it would be impossible. We therefore ask you for a second vote, and I do beg you to let it be unanimous. If some of you feel you can only vote for your own candidate, perhaps you could bring yourselves not to vote at all. That might give the other a sufficient majority. Miriam Honor and Marguerite Verity will act as scrutineers.’

‘Whatever’s that?’ murmured Joy.

‘Give out voting papers and count them afterwards. Thanks, “Strawberry!” May Joy have one?’

Marguerite turned to Cicely. ‘What about our new member, President?’

‘Oh, yes. I’m sorry! We have a new member here for the first time, girls, but most of you have seen her already—Joy Shirley.’

‘May I vote?’ Joy asked eagerly.

‘No, I think not. It would hardly be fair, would it? You can’t possibly know——’

‘Oh, but I do! I’ve quite made up my mind!’

Those who had shared in the lunch party in the dairy laughed, and Cicely joined in but shook her head.

‘It would make one more!’ said Joy persuasively. ‘One more for——’ she paused, but looked mischievously at Edna.

‘No, it wouldn’t be right. You’ll vote next year, kiddy. I’m sorry, but it wouldn’t be fair. You haven’t had long enough to judge,’ said the President decisively. ‘Now, girls, as quickly as you can, please! It can’t be very hard to make up your minds.’

‘Easy as winking!’ murmured Peggy, scrawling an emphatic ‘Edna’ on her paper.

There was tense silence while the votes were counted. Cicely, sitting at the high desk, looked anxious, with tight-closed lips, but restrained her excitement rigidly. Miriam and Marguerite counted swiftly, and the girls looked at one another and waited.

There was a suppressed murmur when Marguerite rose and handed a slip of paper to the President. She glanced at it, then rose, her face rather white, an ominous look in her eyes.

‘Girls, you’re mean! This is simply silly. We shall never get any further at this rate. Apparently two of Edna’s friends have taken my hint and not voted, and Carry has found one more supporter. Edna—thirty-four; Carry—thirty-three——’

A hubbub of mingled cheers and hisses broke out, and then a storm of excited comment and some laughter. The President thumped on the bell, and they subsided, eager to hear what would be done.

‘There’s only one thing for it now,’ Cicely said brusquely. ‘With the consent of Miriam and Marguerite, I declare Edna and Carry disqualified. You will please choose another candidate at once. We’ll give you ten minutes to talk it over. And for goodness’ sake let it be some one you can all vote for this time!’

‘There’s one other way, Cicely,’ Marguerite ventured. ‘Would you take it yourself? You were only Queen for a month. Won’t you have another turn? It would solve the difficulty.’

There was some applause at this suggestion, but Cicely said decidedly, ‘No. Thank you, Marguerite, but I’ll hold to our decision to have a younger girl. With matric. coming I shall be out of a good many things——’

‘But that will be over in June! Then you could——’

‘I may be going out to Ceylon in the autumn,’ Cicely said quietly. ‘My father has always said he would take me when I was eighteen, and that will be in November. No, it’s quite out of the question, and besides I agree that we should try having a younger girl. All the Queens have been seniors so far. It’s an experiment, of course, but I want to see a Queen who will be more in the thick of things than a matric. and Sixth-Former can be. So please choose your candidate, girls, and let’s get it over.’

A heated discussion raged for some minutes. The three seniors went out into the hall and paced up and down, anxious and troubled, for as Cicely said, ‘If we have any more fuss it will either mean doing without a Queen altogether or breaking up the club.’

‘Marguerite might continue for another year,’ suggested Miriam.

‘No, you’re forgetting I’m leaving in the summer to go for six months to my cousins in France.’

‘There’s no way out of it that I can see except one side giving in. Come on! Let’s see what happens this time!’

The silence was even more painful as the votes were counted again. When about half-way through her task, Marguerite looked up sharply.

‘Cicely, this is simply silly!’

Cicely's lips tightened. A thing she had feared had evidently happened. 'You'd better finish,' she said gloomily, and they waited again and listened to the ticking of the clock.

The girls looked at one another, some amused, others distressed, a few nervous, for the President was apt to express herself freely. Some felt guilty, for they knew what Marguerite had meant. Joy, bewildered, did not guess what had happened.

Marguerite brought her figures once more, and Peggy murmured, '“Strawberry's” wild! Now we'll hear about it from Cicely!'

The President glanced at the paper. Then she sprang up, gripping the desk with angry excited hands, a hot flush on her cheeks.

'Girls, you're *very* mean! You're just awfully mean! I do think, if you can't agree, you might think of the club. Couldn't you put it before your own feelings for once? You've simply changed your candidates and voted as before. The figures are—Peggy Gilks—thirty-three; Agnes Mason—twenty-nine. Now listen! There's been enough of this nonsense! If you won't unite on a Queen, you shan't have one at all. The meeting is adjourned till after the holidays. Perhaps you'll come back prepared to show a little common sense. Otherwise we'll do without a Queen until you learn to be sensible. But that will be awful, for we shall have to tell everybody we couldn't agree, and you can all see how bad that will look. I should have thought you'd be willing to do anything rather than disgrace the club like that. The Coronation will, of course, have to be postponed. It can't take place on May Day this year. If we manage to choose a Queen, she will be crowned on May 10th. Now go home and think about it, and do come to your senses during the holidays!'

CHAPTER XVI

'THE CURATE'S LULLABY'

'All the same,' murmured Edna, as they went out feeling rather subdued, 'our Saint girls *won't* vote for a Sinner, and the Sinners *won't* vote for a Saint, so what are we to do? Holidays *won't* make any difference!'

'Then we shall go Queenless, for the President meant what she said,' said Peggy. 'It will be horrid, though! And, as she said, it will look awfully bad, Ed.'

'You are funny, with your Saints and Sinners! Does it matter so dreadfully much?' asked Joy Shirley, as she laced her boots.

'Matters more than much. Matters everything. And as we can never find a Queen who isn't one or t'other, we're stuck. It's checkmate, deadlock, and all the rest. For the Branscombes and other outsiders will back up Carry and Co. I suppose you're going to cycle, Joy?'

'No, I didn't bring my bike.'

'If you want to catch the train you'd better run. Mirry and Cicely will be going by it.'

'No, I'm going to walk. My basket belongs to an old woman up on Bledlow Ridge, and I want to give it back to-night.'

'Walk? It's almost dark!'

'I don't mind!' Joy laughed.

'But isn't it miles and miles?'

'About seven. I'll be home by nine.'

'Cicely, come and talk to Joy Shirley! She's quite cracked. She says she's going to walk home!'

Cicely, looking very worried still, came across the cloak-room.

'Nonsense, "Traveller's Joy!" Your aunt wouldn't like it. Tramp all you like in daylight, but not in the dark and alone. I won't allow it. It will be dark before you'd be up on the hills.'

Joy pouted. 'I know the way——'

'I've no doubt of it, but I'm quite sure Mrs Shirley doesn't let you wander about alone at night.'

Joy's eyes gleamed at thought of that other night. But she had money on this occasion, and saw that it was unwise to oppose the President, especially in her present mood.

'Oh, well, I'll go up on the Ridge to-morrow!' she agreed, and allowed them to hurry her off to the train, her primrose basket filled with the new books which had been given to her.

'Is school over now for this term?' she asked of Miriam Honor, as they waited for the train. Cicely, wrapped in gloomy thought, looked unapproachable.

'We go to-morrow morning to hear final class places read out, but you won't need to do that. I've been thinking that if you could come to see me in the holidays, I'd teach you the morris step and movements, and then you'd soon get into the dances next term. Would you care to come?'

'I'd love to come! It's awfully good of you!'

Cicely roused herself. 'If Mirry will teach you your steps I'll invite the Gilks girls, and we'll have a full "side," and go through some of the dances. But can you spare time, Mirry? I thought you and I were going to work all the holidays? I shall never keep at it unless you bully me into it.'

‘As if I ever bullied anybody, and as if anybody could ever bully you!’ Miriam laughed. ‘I’m not going to work all the time. It wouldn’t pay.’

It had seemed a long quiet day to Mrs Shirley and Joan. In spite of her resolutions, Joan could not keep her thoughts from wandering to Joy at school. She wondered if Joy was dancing—what the music mistress would say to her—what Miss Macey would be like if she would see much of Cicely and the Strawberry Queen. Knowing Joy, she wondered as the evening proceeded if she would walk home in the dark, and was relieved about eight o’clock to hear a well-known whistle from the old gateway.

‘Here she is, mother! Now come and hear all about it!’ and Joan threw the door wide in welcome. ‘Well, Wild Cat, are you tired? Have you walked home?’

‘No, Cicely wouldn’t let me. Here are books, Joan! They think I’m going to do a lot in the holidays, evidently! Well, mother dear,’ pausing to kiss Mrs Shirley, ‘I’ve had a ripping day! Don’t you want to hear everything? And I’m simply starving! Something smells awfully good. I’d forgotten I’d had no dinner. Hot supper? Oh, you *are* good!’

‘You can’t live on sandwiches. Don’t tell us anything till you’ve had something to eat.’

‘Oh, but I can’t wait, and Joan can’t wait!’ Joy laughed. ‘There’s such lots to tell! It’s a huge place, Joan, and heaps of girls. There are rooms for everything, geography, and cookery, and science, and a lovely big hall, and a jolly gym. I had lunch at a dairy with Edna and Peggy and Marguerite, and tea with Cicely and Miriam at a jolly tea-shop, with lots of hot cakes and cold cakes and cream cakes and sticky cakes and chocolate cakes—she must have stacks of money! I’m a member of the Hamlet Club, and I’m going to be a Saint because Edna and Peggy are, and they can’t choose a Queen because the Saints won’t have a Sinner and the Sinners won’t have a Saint. So Cicely’s mad, and says then they shan’t have one at all, and there’ll be no Coronation, and it will look awfully bad. It’s a great pity they can’t settle it somehow, *I* think! And Miriam’s going to teach me morris dancing in the holidays. It’s awfully good of her, for she’s teaching all the term, and she wants to work for her Inter B.A. I played for her dancing class, and the President of the Musical Society was there, and she invited me to join and said she’d propose me herself—I think because she found I could read music. And I took primroses, and Peggy gave them to all her lot to wear, so every one could see which were Saints and which were Sinners! There! Now I’ve told you all about it!’

Mrs Shirley was looking bewildered. Joan was holding her head in her hands in mock dismay.

‘My brain’s spinning! What are you talking about, with your Saints and Sinners? It sounds an awful jumble! You’ll never be a Saint, Joy, my dear, not if you try a thousand years!’

Joy gave a ringing laugh. ‘In a thousand years perhaps I might! It sounded odd to me at first too,’ and she gave more detailed explanations. ‘Oh, I forgot!’ she added. ‘There’s a letter for you from Cicely.’

‘You might have mentioned it before!’ Joan said indignantly.

‘Cicely wouldn’t tell me what it was about. Some more, please, mother dear! Being a Saint’s hungry work. It must be school that has made me so hungry. That meeting was fairly exciting.’

Joan was standing by the lamp to read her letter. Suddenly with a little cry she turned to them, her eyes wide and startled.

‘Mother! Joy! They want *me* to join their club and learn to dance! They say—oh, isn’t it good of them! Read it!’ and she thrust the letter into her mother’s hand, her lips quivering so that she could not steady them. She went and stood by the window, looking out between the

drawn curtains, while Joy put down her fork and gazed wide-eyed, and Mrs Shirley read the letter.

‘DEAR JOAN,—I am glad to tell you that you have been elected a member of the Hamlet Club. I hope Mrs Shirley will be able to let you come to dance-evenings very often, even if not regularly. Perhaps Joy could take turns with you in staying at home. You may find the dancing useful later on, and I know you will enjoy it. We all do!

‘It is not, of course, our custom to have members who do not belong to the school, and though everybody wanted you to join, a few were doubtful at first if it would be wise to break through our rule. But I pointed out that we broke it years ago when we admitted Bobs and Babs Honor and several other little ones, so that we could have a baby “side.” The others hadn’t thought of that, so they laughed and said they’d be pleased if you would come with Joy, only they hoped you’d wear different coloured dresses, so that they’d know you apart!

‘Now I’ll take no refusal this time. I’m very anxious that you should join my club.

‘With love from
‘CICELY HOBART.’

‘That’s ripping!’ said Joy fervently.

Joan, her back still turned to them, spoke brokenly. ‘It isn’t only the fun and the dancing. I’m not such a baby as that. It’s the kindness—that they should alter their rules for me! Oh, mother, aren’t they good? Whether I can join or not, the kindness is the same!’

‘You must certainly join,’ Mrs Shirley said warmly. ‘It is a very kind thought, and you must certainly accept it. I am very glad that you should have the pleasure.’

‘But can you manage?’ Joan asked doubtfully.

‘I’ll stay at home sometimes! We’ll take turns. It’s only fair,’ Joy said swiftly, though the offer cost her a pang.

‘We don’t have many evening visitors. I can manage very well, and I would much prefer that you went together. I would not like one of you coming home alone late at night. So you must see about your dress, Joan.’

‘And white stockings and special shoes! Can you manage all that for two of us, mother?’

‘I think we must,’ Mrs Shirley laughed. ‘It would be too pathetic if you had to write to Cicely “No stockings!” You must make your dress, of course, but that will be easy.’

‘I’ll have pale gray,’ murmured Joan. ‘Lilac’s pretty, but in lamplight it might look pinky, and that would be awful. Oh, *isn’t* it good of them, mother?’

The holidays held one curious incident for Joy, apart from visits to Miriam and lessons in dancing. A note arrived one day from Nell Branscombe, inviting her to tea at her home in Wycombe, and when Joy, much surprised, put on her best dress and went by train so that she should not arrive with muddy boots, the size of the imposing house on the hill took her breath away. She was shown into a big drawing-room, in which several girls were chatting and Nell was presiding over a tea table.

As Joy hesitated, rather frightened, Nell came to greet her. ‘I’m so glad you could come! I’m afraid I gave you short notice. I found mother was going out, so I decided to be “At

Home” myself and invite a few friends. I’ll bring you a cup of tea. Kitty, this is Joy. I’ve told you about her.’

The younger sister came forward, and Joy looked at her curiously, remembering Peggy’s story. She was about fifteen, good-looking in the same dark style as her sister, well dressed, and with something of condescension in her tone and manner.

‘I’ll introduce you to some of our girls. You’ve met Carry and Agnes, haven’t you? Not to speak to, perhaps, for those Gilks girls had got hold of you and stuck to you so, but you know them by sight. Here are Marion Webster—Lily Bray—and Edith Moore. I’ll bring you some cake!’

As Joy balanced her cup in her hand and a plate on her knee, she wondered why they had asked her. What did they want?—for of course there must be some reason! While she replied politely to Marion’s remarks on the weather and Lily’s questions as to how she had come, she was mentally deciding, ‘Silly swank! Why couldn’t we sit round a table and have a jolly time? I’d rather go to Cicely’s!’

The words ‘those Gilks girls’ and their tone, had jarred on her, but they were only what were to be expected of Kitty, she supposed. It was evident the young lady had a good opinion of her own importance, and Joy did not wonder that she had had to leave the Hamlet Club. The idea of Kitty submitting to the club penalty for snobbishness was unthinkable.

‘I saw you at the last Hamlet meeting,’ Carry Carter was saying, and Joy came to attention with a jerk. ‘Isn’t it a silly business? Of course, neither Agnes nor I had a majority, but it was practically a tie. It would have been ridiculous if they had allowed Edna to take it——’

‘Edna didn’t want to,’ Joy said sharply. ‘She told me so.’

Carry laughed. ‘Did she really? And do you take in everything you’re told? But you don’t know the girls very well yet, of course. Don’t be too easily taken in——’

Joy’s cheeks were burning with angry colour, but at that moment Nell came across the room to them, looking very grown-up with her long skirt and turned-up hair.

‘You’re going to join the Musical Society, aren’t you? We’ve been wondering if you would do something for us. Shall I take your cup?’ and Joy surrendered it, wishing the question had been, ‘Will you have some more tea?’

‘If they’d leave me alone with that table for five minutes!’ was her mental comment. She was not greedy, but she had a healthy appetite, and could still eye the table hungrily. She waited curiously to hear why she had been invited to join the party, and Nell sat down by her and explained.

‘You’ve heard that we have a school magazine? Georgie Gilks is the editor, and she gets essays and stories from the Essay Club, and verses from Cicely Hobart, and reports from all the other clubs. We Musicals naturally feel rather out of it, for all we can send is reports and programmes of concerts, and so on. We’ve often wished we could make a better show, but no one could think of anything to send, so we get stuck at the end with the Sports Club. But the other day I was seeing Cicely and Marguerite about the cricket next term, and they told me that you made up songs and things.’ Joy flushed, and her eyes fell shyly. ‘So we thought’—Nell said coaxingly—‘how awfully nice it would be if you gave us something original for the magazine! Don’t you think you could?’

‘I can’t write them down!’ Joy stammered. ‘I can play them, but that would be no use. I don’t know *any* theory!’

‘Perhaps I could write them down if you’d play them to me!’ Nell coaxed. ‘Won’t you try? We’d love to hear you play, anyway, and I’d soon tell you if it was beyond me. We could put

“Composed by Joy Shirley. Harmonised by Nell Branscombe.” I think that would be ripping!’

Joy had never dreamed of the glory of appearing in a magazine. She wavered, then looked up frankly.

‘It would be rather fun! But I’m afraid it would be all wrong, you know. I just play what seems to sound best, but I don’t know the rules.’

‘I’ve done a good deal of theory, but I couldn’t make anything original to save my life. Perhaps I could correct your mistakes, if there were any. If you’d just supply the melody! That’s where the real difficulty comes in,’ Nell pleaded.

Joy hesitated, then looked up once more. ‘I wouldn’t mind playing something just to you, but I couldn’t before a crowd, really. I couldn’t play a note. I’d be so much afraid some one would laugh.’

‘They wouldn’t. But I’ll send them out while we try what we can do, and they shall only hear the finished article. Will that do? Girls, please clear out! Joy and I will need quietness while we work. You shall criticise later on. Now, Joy! I have paper here all ready. But let me hear it first. Cicely said you had played her a Spring Song.’

Joy shook her head. Play that delicate melody, born of sunny fields and spring-scented winds, she could not. For Cicely, who was a friend, she had played it, but not for these girls, who only wanted it for their own ends.

‘I call this “Dance of the Leaves,”’ she said, flushing sensitively.

Nell listened carefully, surprise growing in her face. ‘But that’s awfully fine! Did you really make it? Are you sure you didn’t hear it somewhere?’

‘Only in the woods, last autumn,’ Joy laughed.

‘I’m afraid it’s too difficult for me—too clever! Try something simpler, like a song. Have you made many?’

‘Oh, several!’ and Joy’s lips twitched. She sat gazing down at the keys, then said quickly,

‘This is a lullaby. I made it for our black kitten. He goes to sleep to it, lying curled up under the piano. It’s called “The Curate’s Lullaby.” He’s the Curate, you know.’

Nell laughed, then listened with care.

‘I could write that down. It’s very sweet, and a real lullaby. May I try?’

Joy nodded, and played the air again, more slowly, Nell began to put down notes here and there.

‘Do you always play the same harmony? I mean, do you keep the chords the same every time you play it?’ she asked, looking down at Joy curiously.

‘No! I try to, but sometimes one seems better and sometimes another. I don’t know which is right.’

Nell nodded. ‘You couldn’t possibly. You want to learn harmony. You must let me help you there. But so far as I can judge it’s surprisingly right. You must have a very good ear, and a very strong sense of what’s wanted.’

For half an hour they worked, Joy repeating chords and phrases, Nell making suggestions occasionally, but amazed to find how few were the faults in composition. Joy’s ear was good and her instinct true, and these had guided her safely through many pitfalls.

‘How did you know *that*?’ Nell asked wonderingly more than once, and Joy flushed sensitively again.

‘I just felt somehow it must go like that.’

‘My goodness! I wish I could “just feel” things as you do! Miss Bates will be raving about you. And you’ll be taking Honours in the exam. Now play this!’ and Nell placed the finished score before her.

Joy read the music carefully, then turned with startled eyes. ‘It is funny to see it written down!’

Nell laughed. ‘It’s all right now, isn’t it? Then may we have it for the magazine? I’ll make a clean copy and send it to Georgie. She’ll be delighted, and we’ll be very proud.’

‘It’s awfully clever of you!’ Joy said warmly, her eyes sparkling.

‘Clever of *me*! About three notes are mine. Girls! Come and hear “The Curate’s Lullaby!” We’ll have to add a note saying who the Curate is.’

Of the delight of the girls there was no doubt. They crowded round the piano, begging to hear the lullaby once more, and then at Nell’s suggestion demanded the ‘Dance of the Leaves’ and anything else she would play them. Joy went home at last, the centre of an admiring crowd, to tell Mrs Shirley and Joan of this most unexpected demand which had been made upon her.

‘Don’t you get conceited, my dear kid!’ was Joan’s comment. ‘It’s all very nice, of course, but just remember you couldn’t have written a note of it yourself! And they’re only schoolgirls, after all. They’d think anything was good that had a tune and was pretty.’

Joy laughed. ‘I didn’t play them anything I really cared about. How could I, for that lot? There are some things I can only play to people I like. But I was glad to give them something, for I must join the Musical, and they evidently manage it between them. Can I have some more tea? I had about enough for the Curate. There was heaps on the table, but they wouldn’t offer it to me. They don’t know what a good tea means. Now Cicely Hobart knows! You should have seen the cakes she ordered in that tea-shop!’

CHAPTER XVII CHOOSING THE QUEEN

‘Well, girls, I hope you’ve come with your minds made up. I have, if you haven’t!’

Notices had been sent, calling a meeting of the Hamlet Club for the night before school opened. The girls had gathered in the barn, and had danced for an hour before pausing for refreshments. Now all were resting, and Margia had put away her fiddle, and was seated with the three Queens at a table.

Joan Shirley was there, in her new dancing frock of pale gray cotton, and Joy in her green dress. Mrs Shirley had assured them, with a mother’s reserve, that they looked ‘very nice,’ and had inwardly approved Joan’s choice of colour. Joy’s pale green was very dainty and spring-like, but the dull neutral tint of Joan’s dress, with its broad white collar and cuffs, drew instant attention to her delicate colouring and vivid bronze hair, tied back loosely as usual with a ribbon.

‘I say, aren’t they pretty?’ whispered Cicely, as she caught sight of them. ‘I must say our new members are ornamental!’

‘We won’t need to light the lanterns. You two have hair like fire,’ laughed Edna Gilks. ‘Do you wash it in liquid flame?’

They were introduced to Joy’s future class-mates, and ventured to join in some of the dances with keen enjoyment. Cicely had chosen the simpler ones which they had practised at Broadway End, and they found these not beyond their powers.

Now the time had come for the adjourned meeting, and Cicely, looking very determined, awaited the result of the voting. She shook her head in answer to Joy’s request to be allowed to vote, so she and Joan could only listen to the whispers around them.

‘Edna!’ ‘Peggy!’ ‘Carry!’ ‘It’s no use, you silly!’ ‘What will she say, d’you think?’

They were not surprised, nor it seemed was Cicely, when the voting showed Edna and Carry nearly equal again. This time Cicely took the situation more quietly.

‘Well, girls, we’re still in the same hole. I did hope you’d have thought better of it. Of course, I quite understand it’s your silly Saint and Sinner business that is making all the trouble. I’ve always said it was a mistake to have parties in the school, and now you can see for yourselves what comes of it. We can’t have any Queen this year, which will look very bad, unless you’ll adopt a suggestion I’m going to make. It’s queer, I’ll admit, and unusual. But I can think of nothing better—unless you’d like to draw lots for the Queen, and leave it to chance?’

There was a murmur of disapproval. ‘No fear!’ ‘Too chancy!’ ‘Why, it might be anybody!’

‘Your other idea is better, President,’ said Miriam Honor.

‘I think so, myself. But it’s not the way to choose a Queen. Still, we might try it. Girls, if you really can’t agree on anybody, I propose that we elect our newest member and newest girl in the school, who can’t be either Saint or Sinner yet, and so may be expected not to take sides—Joy Shirley,’ and she looked round, curious to see how they would take the strange suggestion.

‘*Me?*’ cried one astounded voice.

‘What a *weird* idea! Not bad, though!’

‘Anything would be better than having one of those Gilks girls!’ Carry’s real feelings conquered her caution in the excitement of the moment.

Joy had started up, flushed with excitement and surprise. Joan, with startled eyes, gazed at Cicely incredulously, and slipped an arm round her cousin. A hubbub of comment and discussion had arisen; the President let it have its way for a few moments, while Joan drew Joy down on the bench and whispered earnestly. Joy nodded, then looked up quickly as Cicely rapped on the table for silence.

‘Girls, I know it’s a queer idea, and not the right way to choose our Queen. She ought to be the girl we care for most and wish to honour. But if we can’t agree on any girl, the only way is to choose some one who may be acceptable to everybody, even if she has not had time to become a favourite yet. Or else we must do without a Queen. How many of you would be prepared to accept Joy as Queen, sooner than have none at all? It isn’t much of a compliment, I’m afraid,’ and she smiled at the cousins, ‘but you’ll understand. Edna, would you agree? You were really chosen Queen.’

‘Yes!’ said Edna promptly. ‘Anything to get the club out of this mess and have a Coronation. It would be awful to have to tell people we couldn’t fix on a Queen.’

‘I feel that too. It would be very ignominious. Carry, what do you say?’

The fruits of Joy’s visit, to Nell Branscombe were seen now, for Carry, keeping her first emphatic comment for her particular friends, said indifferently,—

‘It’s not a bad plan. Yes, I’ll agree, if you decide on her. Of course, not knowing the girls, she can’t do much. She can’t be a real Queen. But it will be better than having nobody, and outsiders won’t know she’s only for show.’

Cicely flushed with annoyance, and looked at her friends at the table, who were looking at one another, and at Joy. Joy started up again as if to speak, but Cicely stopped her by addressing the meeting herself.

Carry’s words had angered her deeply. She had only spoken out what Cicely herself would have admitted in private talk, that a Queen so chosen could probably be no more than a figurehead, though in this case a very pretty one. But no one else would have uttered the thought so bluntly. The words could hardly fail to hurt the Queen-elect in that moment of excitement and delight, Joy’s startled face showed that she had been wounded, and Cicely hastily prevented her from speaking.

‘I congratulate you, Carry,’ she said sarcastically. ‘You’re one of those who “rush in where angels fear to tread.” If you look up the quotation you’ll find my opinion of you. A more ungracious way of welcoming a Queen you could hardly have found. I congratulate those members who preferred to risk having no Queen rather than give the honour to you,’ and Carry, scarlet and angry, glared at her, and muttered her comments to Agnes.

‘Girls, we’ll vote on my suggestion! The question is, will you have Joy Shirley for Queen, or will you do without?’

‘It’s just as I said, it’s her or nobody! I wouldn’t care for it myself!’ Carry’s whisper was as unkind as ungrammatical, but was purposely loud enough for Joy to hear.

She flushed sensitively again, and while the voting was in progress crossed the room and spoke to Cicely. Cicely’s eyes softened.

‘It’s all right, kiddy. She’s a cat. Everybody knows it. I was an idiot to ask her. If I’d thought, I wouldn’t have given her the chance. Don’t worry, “Traveller’s Joy!” You’ll get on all right. We’ll help you through. No, don’t say any more about it. You aren’t chosen yet, you know.’

Joy slipped into her seat again, with a whispered word to Joan. Cicely rose to announce the result of the voting.

‘For having no Queen at all—none. For Joy Shirley—sixty-three. A few have evidently not voted. Then——’ but Edna rose to the occasion.

‘Three cheers for Queen Joy!’ she shouted, and led them heartily.

The storm of applause was half relief that the crisis was over. Joy’s sensitive lips trembled, and she hid suddenly behind Joan. Joan gripped her hand, and Joy whispered brokenly,—

‘I didn’t think they’d clap! They don’t really want me!’

Edna heard the words. ‘That’s that little beast Carry. But if you knew her as we do, you wouldn’t care. Congratulations, old girl! We’ll all help.’

‘You *are* jolly nice!’ Joy’s eyes were moist, and as Edna said later, ‘twice their usual size, which is saying a good deal in Joy Shirley.’ ‘It’s awfully good of you, Edna! For it ought to be you, you know.’

‘Oh, no! Only half of them wanted me. The Carry lot don’t like me. I’m quite aware of it, and I’m rather glad. It’s a compliment. Here comes “Strawberry!” She wants you.’

Queen Marguerite had come to greet her successor. She welcomed the younger girl with a kiss. ‘Joy, dear, I’m very glad. We’ll all help. It’s quite the best way out of the hole we were in.’

Joy looked up, flushed and wide-eyed. ‘I don’t think I ought to take it, please, Marguerite. I can’t make a speech, but won’t you tell Cicely for me? They don’t really want me. And how can I do it properly? I don’t know the girls.’

‘You’ll soon know them. Oh, you must take it! You’re properly elected, and by an almost unanimous vote. Oh, well, if you really feel doubtful about it, come and speak to Cicely.’

Joy shyly repeated her suggestion. ‘I can’t do it properly, and——’

‘Nonsense!’ said the President, with kindly firmness. ‘Everybody will help you, except a few real rotters. You’ll have an easier time than Edna or Carry, because no one will expect so much from you. And you’d like to help the club out of a hole, Joy! We don’t want to have to confess our quarrels to everybody. Even if you can only look the part, as Carry so kindly suggested, that will help us and you’ll do it very nicely. It is difficult for you, I can quite see that,’ she added gently. ‘It isn’t so jolly as if you’d been in the school for years and everybody wanted you for Queen because they liked you. But even if we’re asking something rather hard, instead of something awfully jolly, as it ought to be, you’ll do it for the sake of the club, won’t you?’

Joy stood with bent head. ‘May I think it over till to-morrow? I’d like to talk to Joan.’

‘Perhaps that’s only fair. We took you by surprise. But we don’t want you to say no, you know. I’ll expect you to come to-morrow prepared to be Queen. But talk it over with Joan, by all means. And decide what colour your train shall be, and what flower you’ll choose, and who shall be your Maid of Honour—“chief bridesmaid,” she’s often called! The Coronation will take place at school on May 10th, and the evening before at Broadway End. We’ll need a few days to get your dress ready. Now, girls, we can dance again! The difficulty is solved! Margia, may we have “The Triumph?” That always goes with a swing! Mirry, I’ll lead the dance with you! In honour of Queen Joy, girls!’

Joy, flushed and shy, stood by the table. Joan came up to her, and Marguerite, sitting on the table, proceeded to answer questions.

‘This is my last night in office! After this, it will be up to you to look out for new girls and make them feel at home, and for shy girls and bring them into things, and for stupid girls and

explain everything to them! It will keep you quite busy. But I'll help, you know. Now what will you need to know? We'll see to the Coronation. You needn't worry over anything, only tell us what colour you'd like for your train; Miss Lane always paints flowers on the border. Mine were daisies; Cicely chose autumn leaves; Mirry's were forget-me-nots, to match her eyes.'

'What a pretty idea!' Joan said warmly. 'Primroses, Joy?'

'No, please!' and Joy flushed and laughed. 'If I do it at all I'd like this pale green colour for the train——'

'Then primroses would look jolly, Joy.'

'I thought I'd like wild clematis—the little creamy stars that come all over the hedges in the autumn. I'm so fond of them!'

'“Old Man's Beard!”' laughed Marguerite.

But Joan had understood. 'No, that's only when the flower is over. We call it “Traveller's Joy,”' she explained.

'Why, so it is! Of course, you couldn't have anything else! You must choose a Maid of Honour to carry your train.'

'May I have Joan?'

'No, better not!' Joan said swiftly. 'It should be some one in the school, Joy.'

'I think so too,' Marguerite agreed. 'You'll find her a help, Joy. Don't choose Edna!'

'How did you know I was thinking of her? And why not?' demanded Joy, in great surprise.

'It was fairly obvious. Because Edna's my maid. She'd have had to leave me to be Queen, but I don't think she would for anything else. Cicely chose Peggy, because she was the first Hamlet scholarship girl, and she thought she'd give her a place in the procession. It's rather a coveted honour, you know.'

'But you make it very difficult!' Joy protested. 'Who is Miriam's bridesmaid?'

'I was. So last year she had to choose a new one, and we let her have little Babs——'

'Then why can't I have Joan?'

'I was expecting that,' Marguerite admitted. 'Because Mirry's reign was over and it didn't matter. Her maid only had to help her dress and arrange her train and so on. You want some one in the school, who can back you up, and help you all round.'

'I don't know any one!' said Joy promptly.

'Do you want us any more to-night?' Joan asked. 'If we're late, Joy won't get to school in the morning.'

'She must come early and tell us it's all right. Just wait and watch another dance, and then you can slip away.'

The girls had divided into groups, and in sets of eight were dancing 'Oranges and Lemons' and 'Chelsea Reach,' two square dances like quadrilles. Then, as Carry and Agnes, both good dancers, began a morris jig, 'Jockie to the Fair,' Joan and Joy slipped out and hurried off to catch their train.

'Mother! Mother dear!' and Joy threw herself upon her aunt as they reached home. 'We've been choosing the Queen, and— isn't it weird?—they've chosen *me*!'

CHAPTER XVIII

JOY'S MAID OF HONOUR

Joy arrived at school early next morning, and wheeling her cycle into the shed went in search of the President, feeling self-conscious and shy. The news of the Hamlet Club's doings had evidently spread, for girls she did not know looked at her curiously, and gathered in groups to whisper when she had passed.

Cicely and Miriam had arrived, and were talking in the big school hall. Cicely greeted her gaily.

'Is it all right, "Traveller's Joy?" Did you and Joan talk all night?'

'I expect Joan's pleased. She's very fond of you, Joy.'

Joy gave Miriam a quick look of understanding. 'Joan's *nice*! I thought she mightn't be quite pleased, because it really ought to have been her. But she is, she's really glad.'

'She's too generous for that. I like big-minded people, and Joan's one,' said Cicely. 'Did she give you heaps of good advice?'

Joy nodded. 'I couldn't help feeling I ought not to be Queen, because nobody really knows me, so they couldn't possibly pretend to want me. I know it's only because I'm better than nobody, and it's nothing to feel very pleased about, though it was awfully kind of *you* to think of it. But I was inclined to say no, until Joan talked to me. She said it was better for the club I should do it, and the girls did want it really very much—not for me, of course, but for the club. She said it would be awful to have to say the club couldn't decide on any one. And she said if I was a member and the club asked me to do anything, I ought to do it, no matter how I felt myself.'

She looked up at Cicely, whose eyes had kindled.

'Bravo, Joan! She is a brick! I say, if you stick to her advice you'll get through all right!'

'I always do,' Joy said simply. 'The first thing she told me to do was to ask you, or one of you three, what I must do now and how I must do it.'

They laughed. 'Oh, Marguerite must godmother you! What about your Maid of Honour?'

'I thought I'd ask Carry. If you think she would?'

'Carry!' cried Miriam, in surprise. 'The very last girl I'd have expected!'

Cicely's eyes gleamed. 'Now, "Traveller's Joy," explain yourself! Is that Joan's doing too?'

Joy's sensitive colour had risen, and she struggled to make them understand.

'No, Joan wouldn't help me there. She said I'd been to school and must know some of the girls, and I'd better choose my own bridesmaid. Marguerite had told me I couldn't have Edna or Peggy, and I really don't know many of the others yet. And I thought—well, it's going to be jolly difficult not to take sides! I meant to be a Saint, like Edna, but now I suppose I mustn't. And all the Queens and bridesmaids so far have been Saints. It seems only fair to ask one of the others. And'—she hesitated—'I *wanted* Edna! I'm really friends with her. So I thought I ought to ask Carry. Do you understand?'

'It's a funny reason,' Cicely laughed. 'You mean you don't want to take sides, but you know you're more inclined towards Edna and the Saints, so you want to balance matters by choosing Carry as Maid of Honour?'

'That's it exactly!' Joy was much relieved. 'But Joan told me to ask you first.'

‘Did Joan approve?’ Miriam asked, much amused.

‘I think so. She said if I could put up with Carry, it would be quite a good plan.’

They laughed again. ‘And can you?’

‘I’ll try. I shan’t ask her advice much, for I don’t like the things she says. But I can ask Edna, or come to you, and there’s always Joan at home.’

‘And Joan at home may be quite useful!’ Cicely nodded. ‘Very well! You’re elected, Queen Joy! Now you must have your badge, so that the girls will know. I’ll lend you mine till you get your own. Don’t lose it!’ and she took off the silver medal which hung round her neck on a chain and hung it on Joy’s breast. ‘You’ll have your own when you’re crowned at Broadway End. It’s my grandfather’s gift to the Queen. Now go and wait for Marguerite. And ask Carry to be your maid. I hope she will.’

Joy paused in the passage to examine the medal, with its inscription, ‘Queen Cicely was crowned by the Hamlet Club as its Second Queen’—and the place and date. Then she went to wait rather shyly for her ‘godmother.’

Edna and Peggy were just coming in arm in arm. At sight of Joy Edna came flying across the playground. Then she gave a shout as she saw the medal.

‘Good for you! *That’s* all right! I’m awfully glad, old girl! I say, do you want to begin work at once?’

Joy looked startled. ‘How?’

‘There are two new kids coming along, looking simply scared. We told them nobody would eat them, but they didn’t look much happier. I thought I’d send “Strawberry” back to them.’

‘She hasn’t come yet. I don’t quite like to,’ Joy faltered. ‘Do you think I ought to?’

‘Just as you like, of course. But they’re only kids, and they looked desperately frightened.’

‘I felt bad myself that day last term! I was jolly glad I knew you and Marguerite. It seemed such a huge place. You said they were only kiddies?’ and her sympathy conquered her hesitation. She hurried to the big gates and saw the children, looking very small and scared, staring at the girls who passed laughing and talking and taking no notice of them.

‘You’re new girls, aren’t you? I’m new myself, but not quite so new as you. We’ll ask where you’d better go. *I* don’t know, but I know somebody to ask. I’ll look after you, anyway!’

They turned eagerly to the girl with the ruddy hair and brown eyes, whose soft voice had such a protecting note. It was some time before the school decided what it was that had helped Joy Shirley in her difficult position as unknown May Queen. Some said it was because she was pretty that the girls had accepted her, others that it was the influence of her forerunners in her favour. But Edna held stoutly to the opinion that it was her friendly voice which had helped her, especially with new girls. These first two lost their shyness at once, gave their names as May and Ethel Irwin, and she led them in triumphantly, one by each hand. From the hall window Cicely saw and called Miriam to look.

‘What do we do now?’ Joy demanded of Edna.

‘Oh, take them to the lower school dressing-room. Peggy’ll show you. Give them to Miss Anskell.’

Her protégées disposed of, Joy returned to wait for Marguerite. But Carry Carter came first, and Joy accosted her, feeling the difficulty had better be faced at once.

‘I say, Carry, will you be my bridesmaid—I mean, Maid of Honour? I’ll be awfully glad if you will.’

‘*Well!*’ murmured Edna, and nearly dropped her satchel. ‘Of all the funny things——! To choose that——’

‘We have chosen a rummy Queen! I wonder if Cicely told her to?’ pondered Peggy.

Carry had stopped in surprise, and to tell the truth in relief. On all sides she had found her ungenerous words of the night before condemned, by some as unkind, by others as bad form. Even Nell Branscombe, who had insisted on knowing the result of the voting at once, had said coldly, ‘That was rather bad taste, Caroline! It was silly, too. Joy’s far better than a Saint girl. She’s musical, and clever, and exceedingly pretty. She’ll make a very jolly Queen to look at, but you needn’t have said it so bluntly. Some girls have *no* sense!’

So Carry felt she had made a mistake, and probably earned the lasting dislike of the new Queen and of those who would rally round her. Nell’s parting remark had been, ‘I just hope Carry’s silliness doesn’t send her completely over to the Saints. I had hoped we might get hold of her, because of her music. It would make them wild if the Queen decided to be a Sinner. She’ll naturally turn to them now, thanks to Carry.’ And Carry, knowing she had never had any real chance of being Queen and very little of being chosen for one of the coveted places in the procession, felt also that she had put herself quite into the background so far as the Hamlet Club was concerned. She was quite prepared to say she ‘wouldn’t take part for anything,’ but was conscious of a sense of disappointment, for she liked to be prominent. So Joy’s invitation came as a surprise and a shock to her conscience.

But she recovered quickly. ‘Rather! I’ll be very pleased,’ she said heartily, and then she heard Peggy’s remark. As Peggy said afterwards, ‘Why should Carry Carter expect people to lower their voices when they speak about her? *She* doesn’t!’

‘Did Cicely Hobart tell you to ask me?’ she demanded swiftly. ‘For if she did I won’t. I’m not going where I’m not wanted.’

Joy’s eyes met hers, frank and fearless. ‘That’s how *I* felt last night!’ and Carry’s eyes fell. ‘No, she didn’t. But I asked her if I might ask you, for I feel awfully awkward being so new, and she said she hoped you would.’

‘I’ll be very pleased to “bridesmaid” you,’ Carry said graciously. ‘I’ve been to two Coronations, so I can give you lots of points. Tell me what your colour and flower are to be, and I’ll see about my dress,’ and she walked off with Joy.

‘Quite as if she was conferring a favour!’ grumbled Peggy.

‘I wonder why Joy did that? Carry means to be quite chummy! I thought you and I were going to be Joy’s friends!’ Edna pondered. ‘Here comes old “Strawberry!” Let’s tell her!’ and they raced to the gate to meet the ex-Queen.

CHAPTER XIX

DUTIES AND DIFFICULTIES OF A QUEEN

'I say, Joy——'

'I wish you'd come to tea with me on Saturday, Joy,' Carry interrupted.

'I was just going to ask her!' Edna cried wrathfully. 'I began first, and you interrupted. Joy, you'll come to me, won't you?'

Kitty Branscombe entered the cloak-room, where they were dressing to go home. 'Is Joy Shirley here? Joy, my sister's having a musical evening on Saturday, and she'd be awfully pleased to see you. Shall I tell her you'll come?'

There was a shout of laughter, as poor Joy stood bewildered. Kitty looked round indignantly.

'You are a silly set! What's funny in that?'

'Only that Joy's going to have more teas on Saturday than will be good for her. You'll have to choose, Your Majesty.'

'It's embarrassing, isn't it, "Traveller's Joy"?' laughed Marguerite. 'I know. I've been through it. You'd better adopt some system. You'll find you'll be kept busy.'

It was obviously awkward to choose between Edna and Carry. Kitty's invitation, in the circumstances, could not be accepted. Joy said slowly, 'I'm not sure yet that I can go anywhere on Saturday. I may be needed at home. Thank you both very much, and I'll tell you to-morrow,' and went off to find her cycle, stopping as she went to ask the little Irwins if Miss Anskell had been good to them.

Then she noticed a small girl in a corner weeping bitterly. Joy hesitated, but this certainly seemed to concern her. She left her cycle and went to inquire into the trouble. Presently she gathered that 'Dorothy had been horrid, and I said she was mean, and she said I was a baby, and ran away, and she's always been my *friend!*' At this pathetic conclusion there came another burst of tears, so Joy promised to try to mend the quarrel to-morrow if Minnie would bring Dorothy to speak to her. Minnie glanced up, saw the silver medal, and smiled tearfully.

'Oh, are you the new one? Then if you speak to her it's sure to be all right!'

Joy laughed. 'I'll do what I can, anyway. Now you must make friends again, and not cry any more.' Being Queen had its pleasant as well as its difficult side, she decided.

Joan alone at home expected a difficult day when she had seen Joy off to school. It was hard not to sit and dream of the interesting time she must be having, hard not to long for things unattainable. Joan took her books into the sacristy and tried to work, sitting perched up by the rose window, but she could not forget what might have been. It was so very uninteresting to work alone like this, when in a class——At that she opened her book quickly, indignant with herself. That kind of thing was merely silly! Problems of men in fields, or running taps, would be much more to the purpose. But presently she went off into a dream of Joy as Queen, and her book slipped to the ground. She was honestly glad that Joy should have the pleasure in store for her, and was ready to help her in every way she could, but she could not but feel the honour might have been her own. And how she would have enjoyed it!

'It's as well I didn't know!' she murmured.

Then the clang of the big door bell echoed among the ruined walls and arches, and she sprang up, frowning in annoyance.

‘Whoever—whatever—it isn’t twelve o’clock yet!’

Her mother was out, so the intruder had to wait while Joan ran down the old passage and across the garth and cloisters. She looked severe as she opened the door, then broke into eager welcome, for Margia Lane, the painter and fiddler, stood there, folding-easel and paint-box in hand.

‘Forgive me for coming so early! But I have Sir Antony’s permission to paint here, and I’d so much rather work while it’s quiet. Will you let me in?’

Joan threw the door wide. ‘Do you want to paint the abbey?’

‘I want you to help me choose my subject. I want to make a sketch for Joy,’ Margia followed her out to the sunny cloister garth. ‘You know we all give gifts to the Queen? Didn’t you? I always give something of my own work. Mirry had a sketch of Hampden Woods; Cicely a view of her beloved Whiteleaf Cross; Marguerite the pool in Penn Wood. I thought Joy would like an abbey scene.’

‘I’m sure she’d love it. It is good of you to think of it. What will you choose? You know the abbey, don’t you?’

‘I have painted here before your time. Has she any particularly favourite spot?’

‘We both love the rose window in the sacristy. But I think this is really finer,’ and Joan led her into the chapter-house. ‘There, looking back at the garth through those three arches. They’re so beautiful.’

‘I like your choice. Will you talk to me while I work?’

‘I’d love to! Can I fetch you anything? A chair? Or water? It is water-colour, isn’t it?’

‘I’d be glad of both, thank you. You’ll enjoy the Coronation,’ she said, as she set to work.

‘I shan’t be there.’

‘Not?’ Margia looked up in quick surprise. Was it that Joan felt it would make her envious to watch Joy’s triumph?

But Joan said quickly, ‘Mother must go. We can’t both leave the abbey, for the evenings are light now and visitors might come. It’s held at the school, isn’t it? She can go by train quite easily, and I do want her to see it.’

Margia thoughtfully drew in the outlines of the pointed arches and said nothing till she was satisfied with their proportions. Then she said quietly, ‘That will be very nice. But the first ceremony at Broadway End—you’ll come to that and dance in Joy’s honour?’

‘Oh, are there two?’ Joan’s face lit up in rapturous delight. ‘Oh, I didn’t know that!’

‘The second is for the school, outsiders as well as Hamlets, and friends and parents. The first is a kind of rehearsal and is semi-private, in the great hall at Broadway End, for Cicely’s grandparents, who have been very good to the club. Mrs Broadway is a dear old lady, but delicate. She could never get so far as Wycombe, but she enjoys the dancing and the crowning. The ceremonies are exactly the same, except that the second has the advantage of the larger audience and is rather more exciting, and the first has the presentation of gifts and is quieter. So you can come to one and your mother to the other.’

‘That’s ripping! I was determined mother should see it, but I hardly knew how much I wanted to go myself. I was trying not to think about it,’ Joan confessed. ‘Oh, I shall be glad to see it! What can I give her? I like your idea of giving your own work. But I’m afraid I can’t do anything. I *know*!’ she cried in delight. ‘I’ll go to that old woman who makes lace, and get a little collar of a real Bucks pattern. Joy loves them, but she’s never been able to afford one. But they aren’t very dear, and I’ve more money than she has. I don’t spend mine on apples and lemonade, as she does when she’s out walking. Would that do?’

‘You couldn’t do better. I’m sure she’ll be delighted.’

‘She’ll love to know it came from her old woman, too,’ Joan said happily. ‘I am glad you warned me!’

Joy arrived home flushed with the pleasure of her ride across the hills. It was a steep way, up long hills, along the ridge, and down a long steep road, but keep to the level ways round the foot of the hills she would not. The fascination of the bracing air of eight hundred feet always drew her from the tamer way in the valley. As usual, she had much to tell.

‘It’s all settled, mother dear! And I’ve been “queening,” as Peggy calls it—looking after new girls, and asking kids why they’re crying, and promising to put things right to-morrow! See Cicely’s medal, Joan! I’m to get my own at Broadway End.’

‘And what about your bridesmaid?’

‘Oh, Carry was willing. I think she was rather pleased. Miriam thought it was an awfully funny idea, and Cicely asked if you’d put me up to it! She thinks a lot of you. I could tell by her voice.’

‘Nonsense!’ said Joan brusquely.

‘’Tisn’t, then! She does. And I’ve *three* invitations for Saturday! And Peggy and several others said they were going to ask me too. It’s just what you said would happen, Joan.’

Joan nodded. ‘Of course. They’ll all want to make sure of being friends with you. Are you going to be strong-minded and do as I told you?’

‘I told them I’d see by to-morrow, as I wasn’t sure if I could be spared from home. That meant I wanted to consult you.’

Joan laughed. ‘That was brainy! But that’s only saved you for this time. You’ll have to decide what you’re going to do. And remember you’ll want *some* time to work, Joy!’

‘Yes!’ said Joy mournfully. ‘I wish I was you! Oh, *how* I’ve wished that to-day! I felt simply awful, Joan! I suppose I’ll have to confess. Miss Macey had to put me down! She’d put me with Edna, but it wasn’t a scrap of use. I couldn’t do the maths., or the French, or the German, or anything, in fact! So she sent me down *two forms*, and now I’m with Peggy and Carry! And me the Queen! I felt absolutely rotten!’

Joan was laughing in spite of her dismay. ‘You poor kid! And is it so awful to be with Peggy and Carry?’

‘Oh, well, Carry doesn’t work! She plays rather well, they say, but otherwise she’s slack. And everybody says Peggy’s not up to much except at cookery. But she knows all about that. She even says dampers aren’t difficult! So I shall look a duffer even beside her. And all the rest are younger, about thirteen! I hated to be put down with them, Joan.’

‘Poor kid! But you’ll pick up as soon as you’re used to the work, Joy. And none of them can touch you in music.’

‘That’s jolly nice of you! I thought you’d say it was my own fault. But I really do mean to work, and it won’t leave much time for going out to tea. And—oh, Joan, I’ve had such a good idea!’

‘I say, really?’

‘I’m going to put down all the advice anybody gives me. I’ve no idea how to be Queen, and they’re all trying to tell me. So I’m going to make a guide-book,’ and when her homework was done she began to scribble in a notebook.

The first entries and comments of her own ran as follows:—

‘CICELY HOBART.—(1) People won’t expect too much. (2) Take Joan’s advice about everything. (3) Don’t have any favourites!

‘JOY.—(1) Not so sure about that! (2) Of course! I don’t need telling! (3) Got them already. But I’ll try to keep it dark!

‘EDNA GILES.—(1) Don’t have too much to do with Carry Carter. She ought to be called Catty, not Carry. (2) Stick to Mirry and Marguerite. They’re the kind of Queens we like.

‘JOY.—(1) I know; I don’t love her myself. (2) All right, old girl! I know!

‘MARGUERITE VERITY.—(1) Don’t have any favourites! (2) Never quarrel with any one; if you do, you won’t be able to stop other quarrels. (3) Always be early at school. Some of the kiddies are sure to be waiting about for you.

‘JOY.—(1) Everybody tells me this, and I knew it already. (2) Very good! I’ll remember. (3) Ditto! Thank you, “Strawberry!”

‘MIRIAM HONOR.—(1) Never let a new girl feel shy for five minutes. (2) Never refuse a kiddy who wants you, no matter how busy you are. (3) When in doubt, say you’ll let them know to-morrow!

‘JOY.—(1), (2), (3) Very good, especially the last! Shall practise it regularly. I’ve got Joan at home, you see!

‘CARRY CARTER.—(1) Don’t be too chummy with those Gilks girls. You’ll be sorry later on. They aren’t the kind you’ll want to know when you leave school. (2) But the Branscombes are really worth knowing!

‘JOY.—And so is Carry Carter, I suppose! Sometimes I just loathe you, Carry! I’ll try not to show it, but it may come out in time.’

She tossed the book across to Joan. ‘I’m getting on. Don’t you think it will be useful?’

Joan read and laughed. ‘Rather! But you mustn’t lose this book. If any of them got hold of it——’

‘Oh, I’ll never dare to take it to school! Wouldn’t it be awful? Carry for one would never forgive me!’

She went next day with her mind made up on one point.

‘Edna, about Saturday, thank you very much! Carry, I’m very much obliged. But I hope you won’t be offended, but I’ve decided not to go out to tea with anybody, at least for this term. Please don’t be cross!’ as they stared at her blankly. ‘I’ve such a long way to go home, and it takes so much time, and I simply must have time to work. You don’t know how bad I felt yesterday when Miss Macey put me down! I’ve been slacking for a year, and I must pull up now. Besides’—she hesitated—‘I think it’s better. It might be awkward sometimes.’

‘Now what do you mean by that?’ demanded Agnes.

‘Just that other people may ask me, and I’ll either have to go to every one or explain why I can’t. It won’t do to be always going somewhere. I must work in evenings. And if I refuse some and not others, I shall only offend people. I’ve been out to tea twice, once to Cicely’s and once to the Branscombes’. That will have to do for this term. I couldn’t pick and choose, so I think I won’t accept any invitations at all. Please don’t be offended, anybody! And I couldn’t return your invitations, for our rooms are very tiny. I thought perhaps we could ask a lot of you at a time, and have tea on the garth, but aunty says it isn’t ours to use that way. So we couldn’t have tea-parties or musical evenings. So I hope you’ll understand.’

‘Our Queen’s first speech!’ laughed Carry, and Joy flushed. ‘Well, perhaps you’re right. As you say, you’d have had to go everywhere, and you might not want to!’

‘That’s quite possible,’ said a dangerously quiet voice, and Carry jumped guiltily. ‘I can believe there are places Joy might not want to go—certainly not more than once! The question is, am I thinking of the same places as you?’ and Cicely came in, swinging her strap of books. ‘Shall we discuss the matter, Carry? Better not, perhaps. Some of us might find ourselves in the stocks. That was a very “canny” speech, “Traveller’s Joy,” and I congratulate you on your decision, though it’s unusual. I know Marguerite had a busy time last summer. Now what exactly is your reason for refusing invitations?’ she demanded in a low tone, as she sat down to change her shoes.

Joy hesitated. ‘I thought it might be awkward. Both Saints and Sinners might ask me, and they’d watch to see which I went to most, and I’d have to try to keep it even, don’t you see?’

‘I see very well! And I think you’re wise. It would have been awkward. The difficulty hasn’t troubled any one else, for we’ve all been Saints and we just went to our friends in turn. But I quite see your point. Joan, I suppose?’

‘She suggested it. She’s very useful!’

‘Invaluable, I should say! You’re jolly lucky to have her.’

‘I know. I don’t need telling. Will they be offended?’

‘I don’t see why they should. It’s the same for them all. Carry felt pretty bad just now! She didn’t mean me to hear that. She implied that you wouldn’t care to go to some of the poorer girls’ homes, where there wouldn’t be a footman to hand round the hot cakes. That’s Carry all over.’

Joy gave an expressive snort as she hung up her coat, and Cicely laughed. ‘You’ve been properly brought up, I’m glad to see.’

‘I ought to go. I have to lecture some one called Dorothy, whom I don’t know even by sight, for quarrelling with some one called Minnie. I promised last night, and when Minnie saw I was “the new one,” she seemed sure it would be all right.’

‘I say, you are going it strong! But Minnie Britton’s always in tears over something. Don’t be too soft with her. I expect it was half her fault.’

Joy nodded, and went off to search in the younger girls’ dressing-room for the culprits, conscious that Cicely was pleased to find she was trying already to be more than a mere figurehead of a Queen.

CHAPTER XX

THE FOURTH QUEEN

Joan, quieter than most of the girls but inwardly more excited than any, changed her shoes, put on her white cap, and joined the crowd in dancing frocks in the great hall at Broadway End.

She had come with Joy, but had not been allowed to help to dress her. That was Carry's privilege. So, beyond the fact that Joy had been requested to bring white slippers, gloves, and long white petticoat, Joan knew nothing of the preparations, and the ceremony had all the excitement of novelty.

The big hall was cleared for dancing. In the middle stood the Maypole, with ribbons of white, gold, strawberry pink, and pale green. Four high-backed chairs decorated with spring flowers stood at one end; Mr and Mrs Broadway sat one on each side of the hearth and Joan had been presented to them as the new Queen's cousin. Margia stood near the piano, and at her first note the dancers sprang to their places in two long lines, and joined merrily in 'My Lady Cullen.' But as the leaders reached the top again, some one raised a shout, 'The Queen! The Queen!' and the long lines of girls dropped on one knee, a wide space between. The folding doors were thrown open, and two small girls in white came along, scattering primroses.

As Marguerite appeared, applause broke out, for she had been a favourite, and the girls clapped and shouted as she came slowly up the room, bowing to right and left, wearing a long white robe and wreath of faded flowers, and hanging from her shoulders the train of deep strawberry pink, bordered by white daisies, from which her nickname had been taken. It was carried by Edna, dressed in a white frock with pink girdle and touches of embroidery to show she was the pink Queen's maid. She was followed by a girl carrying a white cushion on which lay a wreath of forget-me-nots; and then came Cicely, her train of old gold decorated with hand-painted autumn leaves and carried by Peggy in a gold-embroidered dress. Miriam, the White Queen, all in white with a dainty border of forget-me-nots to her train, and attended by Babs, excited but striving to be demure, ended the procession. Cicely's crown and bouquet were of yellow daffodils, Miriam's of sweet-scented white jonquils; the faded flowers were for the abdicating Queen alone.

When all had taken their seats, and their attendants had spread out their trains to the best of their power and taken their places behind their chairs, Marguerite rose, and the girls sprang to their feet and cheered again. But silence fell as she waited, flushed and nervous, and they listened eagerly as she thanked them briefly for her happy time as Queen, and wished the club a long and successful life. Then, while they cheered again, Cicely came forward, removed the dying crown, and replaced it with the coronet of deep blue forget-me-nots, and with a hearty kiss welcomed her to the company of ex-Queens. She took her seat again, and Marguerite, forget-me-nots in her hands, came down the hall to fetch the new Queen, followed by Edna and the crown-bearer with her empty cushion.

Then, as the members knelt again, she came back, but now a crown of white narcissus lay on the cushion, and following the first procession came Joy, her brown eyes wide with excitement and a touch of shrinking nervousness, bareheaded, her bright green train with its border of creamy stars carried by Carry Carter, a great shower bouquet of lilies in her hands,

her ruddy-bronze hair loosened and hanging on her shoulders. Mingling with the cheers there ran a murmur of admiration, for the girls knew the value of having a pretty Queen, and if Joy was to be chiefly 'for show,' she could fulfil her duties in that direction better than most.

She caught Joan's eye as she came slowly along, bowing to each side, and her colour deepened and she smiled faintly in answer to Joan's radiant smile and redoubled outburst of applause. Then they all crowded towards the thrones to see the crowning.

Joy, shy but flushed with pleasure in their welcome, stood before her throne. Marguerite took the starry crown and laid it on her hair, welcomed her with a kiss, and withdrew to her own seat. Carry knelt and presented a sceptre twined with flowers. Joy, who had refused point-blank to make a speech, bowed again in response to the cheers, made a little curtsy towards the old lady sitting by the hearth, and sat down, much relieved that it was all over, so far as she knew. Margia struck up 'Come, lasses and lads,' and the sixteen girls chosen for the Maypole dance ran to take the ribbons, while the rest, Joan among them, stood at one side to sing.

Morris dances followed, with waving handkerchiefs or clashing staves, ending with 'Brighton Camp,' when each set closed round its leader at the end and threw her up into the air. Then came a break, and Joy's eyes widened in surprise, for the dancers disappeared into their dressing-room and returned laden with gifts. Mr Broadway presented the silver medal with its inscription—'Queen Joy was crowned by the Hamlet Club as its Fourth Queen at Broadway End'—and the date; and on Mrs Broadway's behalf brought a book of poems. Margia offered her sketch of the abbey; Miriam, being in Margia's secret, presented a frame for the picture made of fir-cones from the woods; Cicely brought a tiny camera, Marguerite a book; and their maids also left their posts to kneel and offer presents. Babs Honor brought a moss-lined basket containing new-laid eggs from her own pet hen; Peggy a cake which she had made herself; Edna a basket of primrose roots which were planted next day below the abbey windows. Flowers and sweets were brought in quantity; also small gifts of needlework and crochet worked by the girls themselves. Agnes gave a dainty little brooch, and Carry, feeling a special responsibility in her relation to the Queen, an Indian bracelet.

Joan waited till nearly the end, watching as Joy, quite overcome by the unexpectedness of it, tried to thank them and nearly broke down. Then she came forward, knelt as the others had done, and presented her little collar of real Bucks lace.

'It came from your old woman up on Bledlow Ridge,' she added.

'Oh, Joan! Oh, how lovely! But why did you trouble?'

'I wanted to. Oh, I couldn't be left out, Your Majesty!' and Joan laughed and withdrew.

Refreshments followed the presentation, and the Queens were released from their prominent position, and walked about the hall, their trains still borne by their proud Maids of Honour. The girls crowded round Joy offering congratulations, and round Marguerite assuring her that she did not need her forget-me-nots, as she had been too good a queen to be forgotten. Then they gathered round the thrones to examine the gifts, and Joy went to thank them individually and to be introduced to Mr and Mrs Broadway.

Before the dancing began again, the ex-Queens led their new comrade to the wall on which hung three big framed photographs of themselves in their robes and crowns.

'You must go on Saturday and be taken,' Cicely explained. 'It's one of grandfather's gifts to the club. Carry will take you and see that you have everything you need. Then you'll have one for Mrs Shirley, and there'll be one for us and one for the school. You must have seen them hanging in the big hall. Do you think we've changed? Only Mirry, I suppose. Having her

hair up makes a difference, but she would do it. I wanted her to put it down again for to-night.'

'I'm nearly nineteen!' Miriam protested. 'One must grow up some time, Cicely! You'll have to put yours up next year, too.'

'If you're a good Queen, "Traveller's Joy," *you* shall have forget-me-nots next May-day!' Cicely promised. 'They're only for queens we don't want to forget, you know. If a girl proved a bad one, or put on side, I don't suppose she'd get them. She'd have to put up with her faded crown, and that would be rather awful, wouldn't it?'

'The girls all bring forget-me-nots for the old Queen's wreath,' Miriam explained. 'It isn't supplied by us, like the train and crown for the new Queen. The forget-me-nots are the gift of the girls themselves, and they all help to make the wreath. So if only a few liked the old Queen, I suppose her crown would be very thin.'

'It's a tribute to her popularity and success. Yes, "Strawberry's" is nice and thick, isn't it? I see you looking at it. I believe they had to throw some away even after they'd finished her bouquet, and they had so many for Mirry that she couldn't carry them!'

'They seem to have been satisfied so far,' Miriam laughed. 'I'm sure you'll earn a good crown too, Joy.'

'It's a pretty idea,' and Joy looked sober. It would be terrible to be the first Queen who did not earn her crown!

'You'll get on all right, "Traveller's Joy!'" said Marguerite, reading her thought. 'There's the music beginning. Come back to your throne!'

Country dances followed—'The Merry Conceit,' danced by two couples in the middle of the hall, 'Confess' by six girls, and the pretty 'Nonesuch' by eight. Then Miriam rose in her place to sing, for even on state occasions she could not be spared. She sang the quaint Staines Morris with its joyful refrain, 'Then to the Maypole haste away, For 'tis now a holiday!' and then, in answer to insistent demands from the audience for 'a new song by Cicely!' turned to the gold-clad President.

'I don't exactly expect to be made Poet Laureate for the present attempt,' the bard of the Hamlet Club said modestly, taking a slip of paper from her Maid of Honour. 'But I knew they'd ask for something, and I didn't want to disappoint them. The music is "Green Garters," but the words are a May song. It's called "A Welcome to Joy."'

'How simply lovely of you!' and Joy flushed.

'You never wrote me a welcome! I feel quite envious, "Traveller's Joy,"' said the Strawberry Queen.

'Oh, you come into this one!' and Cicely's eyes danced.

Miriam turned to the eager crowd and announced the title,—'May Song. A Welcome to Joy.' There was a murmur of approval and then a ripple of surprise, as Margia's accompaniment heralded 'Green Garters.'

'Now all must be loyal, for this day is royal,
The day of our crowning, our May-day!
All work is forgotten, and everything rotten,
Our troubles all drowning on May-day!
Dancing and singing on May-day!
Flowers we are flinging on May-day!
See every one cheering and nobody jeering,
And nobody frowning on May-day!

'Queen Joy is our lady, she'll do nothing shady,
So greet her with singing this May-day!
She'll be a successor to Marguerite, bless her!
So cheers are all ringing this May-day!
Green is the colour she's wearing;
Stars on her train she is bearing;
So give her a greeting at this our glad meeting,
While gifts we are bringing this May-day!

'Now flowers are all springing and birds are all singing,
And evening is falling on May-day!
We'll banish all terrors and every one's errors,
There's nothing appalling on May-day!
Every one's merry on May-day!
Happy day, very, is May-day!
For this is our holiday, this is our jolly day—
Every one's calling—it's May-day!'

The song was greeted with a cheer; then as Margia played the air more quickly they began to dance. Joy leaned across to Cicely.

'Thank you just awfully! I can't think how you do it!'

'We might change a word or two, and make it a regular part of the Coronation programme—"A Welcome from the First Queen to the New Queen." What comes next? Oh, the Helston Furry Dance! That's new,' and they watched with interest as the morris dancers fell into couples to dance in procession round the hall.

Cicely spoke a word to Joy under cover of the music.

'There's another verse to that song, "Traveller's Joy," but it's strictly private, for you and nobody else. Would you like to see it?'

'Oh, *please!*' Joy looked very curious, and Cicely handed her the paper.

'You come from the abbey, where nothing is flabby,
And no one is shabby or mean, Joy,
So don't get conceited though warmly you're greeted,
And high you are seated as queen, Joy!
Living with Joan and her mother,
Tenderly loving each other.
Your home is so holy, you ought to be lowly;
Be wise, and go slowly as queen, Joy!'

‘I didn’t think you’d want it sung,’ Cicely explained.

‘Thank you very much! I’ll remember. I’d like to copy it, if I may?’ and Joy’s eyes were thoughtful.

‘If you think it’s worth while.’

‘I’ll stick it up in my bedroom and read it every day,’ said Joy soberly.

A jig and a minuet followed the Furry Dance; then the Derbyshire Processional brought the evening to a close. Margia struck up ‘Auld Lang Syne,’ and Queens, audience, and dancers all joined in. And then it was time to cycle home, with the prospect of another evening’s jollity on the morrow.

CHAPTER XXI

A VISIT FROM SIR ANTONY

Joy's choice of Carry Carter as 'chief bridesmaid' had been diplomatic, and proved in some ways a wise one. It brought about more friendly relations between the two parties in the school, whereas the choice of any 'Saint' would have deepened the cleavage, and caused the new Queen to be regarded by every one as a member of the Sainthood. Carry was very friendly towards her Queen, and had much enjoyed her share in the ceremonies, but Joy's friendship with Edna and Peggy Gilks continued, and Carry had perforce to extend the favour of her society to them also, tolerating them less obviously than formerly.

The reason for Carry's dislike of these two and others soon became apparent to Joy. They were not of her own class; their relations—parents Edna had none—were not well off, and had found the utmost difficulty in sending them to school; Peggy, indeed, could never have come without the help of the Hamlet Club. Her widowed mother lived in a cottage near Bradenham; Edna came from a small farm, where her brother was struggling to make both ends meet and yet to keep his little sister at school. The elder girl, Georgie, had been awarded a school scholarship, and was no longer putting him to expense for her education, and Edna was longing for the day when she would be able to relieve him also. They, and Peggy, knew the necessity for hard work, and had no time to spare for music or extras, and little for games. They were therefore not much in favour with the Musical and Sports Clubs. Moreover, Carry and others less in earnest found themselves left behind by Edna, who was very quick and thorough in her work. They did not think much of her, and to be passed by her in school was very galling. They dared not express their feelings too openly, for fear of the Hamlet Club's penalty; Carry would never have submitted to the punishment and yet dared not risk being expelled, now that she had gained the coveted place in the royal procession. So she had to curb her disdain and pretend a measure of friendship, but every one knew just how much her goodwill was worth.

Both sets assumed at first that the new Queen belonged to them. Edna and Peggy naturally thought Joy meant to throw in her lot with them, as she had intended to do until her election. But Carry and Agnes were equally certain that Nell's influence would draw her into their midst, and there was some disappointment when it was found Queen Joy meant to steer a middle course.

'But at least it's better than if she was an out-and-out Saint,' Carry decided, and Edna agreed, with a difference.

Joy promptly joined the Musical Society and never missed a meeting. She played willingly at musical evenings, and her readiness and skill gained her a high reputation in the club, even before the appearance of the magazine containing 'The Curate's Lullaby.' This was received with acclamation by the Musicals, to the delight of the editor. The Hamlet Club was proud of its Queen, and Joy was in high favour all round.

She regretfully declined to join the Sports Club at present. 'I'd love it, especially the cricket, but I can't do everything. I must have the dancing and the music, and that's enough.'

'You must play something!' urged the captain of the cricket club.

'I'd love to!' Joy said longingly. 'But Miss Macey wants me to take junior next year, and I'll have to work or I can't do it.'

'You ought to play tennis for exercise!' suggested Kitty Branscombe, but Joy laughed.

'I walk or cycle seven miles twice a day! I don't think I'm likely to get fat for want of exercise. Perhaps by the autumn I'll be able to go in for hockey.'

Many were the attempts of the rival Saints and Sinners to draw her into their ranks, but Joy held steadily to her lonely way, though it exiled her from the Saints' picnic in Hampden Woods, and the Sinners' dance, given by Nell, both of which were strictly private. Her rule to accept no invitations helped her to keep neutral, and she was glad many a time that she had decided so at the beginning. Both parties would have competed for her society, and not only would she often have found herself in awkward positions but her work must have suffered.

For Joy was working in earnest. She was still at heart the wanderer, and the rambles of the Hamlet Club, where she was soon adopted as guide, gave her as keen delight as did their dancing. She led them to Thame to see the Prebendal ruins, where an abbey like Joan's had once stood, and over Bledlow Ridge to the ancient church of Radnage. But these and dance-evenings were only interludes in strenuous days, when her long ride morning and evening satisfied her craving to be out on the hills, and the rest of the day was given to work in earnest.

Miss Macey's decision in putting her down two forms had been a severe shock to Joy. She was ashamed that she, the Queen, must be with younger girls, and saw before her an awful day when it might be announced that the Queen had failed in junior while perhaps even Peggy Gilks had passed. The thought of being looked upon as a useless Queen, whose only talent was music, who could look pretty but was no student, stung her, and she worked as she had never done before. Joan saw it, but wisely made no comment. She helped her in the evenings, and Joy began to cherish hopes of a remove after the summer term.

After the first few exciting days, she found little expected of her as Queen. Among her contemporaries she could not do much; to try to settle disputes among girls who knew one another far better than she knew them would have been merely inviting disaster. All that Joy could do was to put in a word now and then to try to avert a quarrel, and give help wherever she saw it needed.

But Muriel Bayne, who came to school as a new girl three weeks late, was deeply grateful for the welcome of the bronze-haired girl, who saw at once that she was a stranger, and piloted her through the first difficult days. Joy introduced her to Edna and Carry, so that she might choose her companions for herself—a point on which she was rigidly careful; found her a place in the dressing-room and cycle shed, and seemed to be always at hand when she wanted help. When Muriel discovered the explanation of the friendliness of this one particular girl, and the reason for the silver medal she wore, she declared the custom a good one for the school, and the post of Queen well filled.

Among the little ones Joy could and did do much. She was a prime favourite, and her efforts to keep peace and order were well received. Most of the juniors learned to go to her when in trouble, and Joy decided it was as well she had declined to play cricket, since she was so constantly in demand.

But Saints and Sinners alike were disappointed that the Queen could not be present at their private gatherings. These were held occasionally, the Saints meeting in the woods, to eat sweets and fruit and talk over their rivals, the Sinners, at the house of one of their members in town, for nearly all came from Wycombe or its near neighbourhood. To go to these unofficial gatherings would have been to confess herself a member of one of the rival camps, and she steadily refused all invitations. But Edna found a way out of the difficulty, and at Midsummer Joy received a formal invitation to be present, and to bring Joan, to the summer meeting of the

Saints on Whiteleaf Hill. She was not invited as a Saint, Edna explained, because everybody knew she wasn't one; but as the reigning Queen she was asked to honour the meeting with her presence. Joy laughed and agreed to go, and immediately received a similar request from the Sinners that she would join in their picnic in July, when Carry's father had promised to charter a launch and take them on the river. This had to be accepted also, and both sides were satisfied.

It was while the girls were away, picnicking with the Saints above the Whiteleaf Cross, that Mrs Shirley had an unusual visitor. She had wished Joan to go with Joy, and had insisted that she was able to do all that was necessary at home. She had had no visitors, and was sitting quietly knitting by the window, to be ready in case of a call, when the sound of a shuffling footstep and the tapping of a stick in the cloisters startled her. There were only two entrances to the abbey grounds, that by which she sat and the private gateway from Abinger Hall, which was never used, so she hurried to the door, bewildered and rather nervous. How could the intruder have entered? Was the outer door by any chance unbarred?

An old bent man came hobbling in from the cloisters, leaning on his stick. She knew him at once, though she had never seen him before. But she had heard of him, and no one else had any right to be there. She was no longer afraid, but was not without a touch of nervousness, for his temper and rude manners were proverbial in the village. His only son had left the country years before because he could no longer endure his home and his father, and had not been heard of since. The Hall was a strange, lonely place now, said the village gossips.

'Are you looking for me, Sir Antony? Won't you come in and sit down?'

A grunt was the only answer, but the invitation was accepted. He hobbled to a seat and glared at her. In their year at the abbey he had never come before.

'I hear you've sent your girl to school?' he began roughly.

Mrs Shirley raised her eyebrows in much surprise. But she knew one must take anything from Sir Antony.

'Not my girl. It is Joy who goes to school,' she said quietly.

'Where is she, eh?'

'They are both out this afternoon. Some of her school friends are having a picnic.'

'How have you managed it? That's what I want to know?'

'Managed it?' Mrs Shirley looked bewildered. 'I'm afraid I don't quite——'

'To send the girl to school. Told me you couldn't afford it.'

Mrs Shirley flushed slightly. 'We could not. But some friends very kindly offered her a scholarship.'

'Why didn't you take it for your own girl? Didn't she want to go to school? Is she lazy?'—the questions came like pistol shots.

To clear Joan's character Mrs Shirley quickly told the story of Joan's refusal. 'She wanted to go very badly,' she added. 'But we both felt it was more necessary for Joy.'

'Because she wouldn't work, eh?'

'She found it more difficult. And she is musically very gifted. We wished to give her the best training we could. Also, we feel a certain responsibility for her.'

He grunted again, his eyes roving round the room. Apparently he had hardly heard the story, since he made no comment.

'Why is she dressed up like that? Which of them is it?' he demanded, pointing at the big portrait of the Queen in her robes, holding flowers and standing by her throne.

'That is Joy. She was chosen to be May Queen by her school-fellows.'

‘Silly business! Is it like her?’

‘Very,’ said Mrs Shirley briefly.

He turned on her again. ‘Then it’s your girl who takes people over the abbey? Ridiculous! A child can’t possibly——’

‘Joan has been doing it for a year. She knows as much about the abbey as I do. Her love for it has caused her to make a thorough study of it. I believe she loves every arch and stone. She certainly knows every date and story connected with it.’

‘I shall come to see for myself,’ he growled. ‘Don’t tell her I’m coming! I don’t believe a child can do it properly.’

‘I hope you will come, then,’ Mrs Shirley said, with spirit. ‘I am sure you will be satisfied. I shall not warn Joan, and she will tell you just what she tells everybody. If you show interest in the ruins she will tell you more. She is afraid of boring people who do not care for history and architecture, so she only tells her full story to those who seem interested.’

‘Humph!’ He turned to go, then turned back in the doorway. ‘Who taught them to dance?’

‘To dance?’ Mrs Shirley was bewildered once more.

‘Saw them this morning, on the cloister garth. Was coming to see you, but thought I’d better wait till they’d finished. Minuet—very fine! Who taught them?’

Mrs Shirley, slightly dazed, managed to reply, ‘There is a dancing club at Joy’s school, to which they both belong. They were practising in the garth this morning. They say the minuet needs a great deal of practice.’

‘Quite right! Very difficult thing to dance well! Very pretty when it’s properly done!’ He hobbled away, leaning heavily on his stick, and Mrs Shirley dropped into her chair to think of the picture conjured up—the sunny cloister garth, the ruined arches all around, the fierce old man, ill-tempered and lonely, peering in through the doorway of the tresaunt, and two bronze-haired girls dancing a graceful minuet in the sunshine.



The fierce old man was peering through the doorway.

‘Oh! Oh, how simply awful!’ wailed Joan, when she heard of it at night. ‘What would he think? We had no right to be dancing there! What made him come *this* morning?’

‘And we hadn’t on our dancing frocks!’ groaned Joy. ‘You had on your old blue pinafore, and I had on my green one! What sights we must have looked! It’s your fault, Joan, for suggesting it! Why did you make me dance in the middle of my home-work?’

‘The garth looked so sunny, and the grass was newly cut and rolled. It was so inviting! I was tired of dusting, and I thought a dance would be a jolly change. Oh, he is a mean old thing! Why couldn’t he say he was coming? Do you think he minded, mother? One ought not to dance in cloister garths!’

‘Mother dear, just exactly what relation are we to him? Even if it’s very far removed, I’m sure we could understand it now!’ pleaded Joy, but Mrs Shirley shook her head.

‘He said your dance was very pretty when it was properly done,’ she laughed. ‘You can make what you like of that.’

‘Ours wasn’t, I suppose!’ Joan said gloomily.

‘Old pig!’ said Joy.

‘Joy, my dear! That doesn’t sound very nice.’

‘Well, mother dear, he is! I’m glad the relationship is so far removed! I shouldn’t like to think there was any danger of us being at all like him!’

Her aunt looked thoughtful, but said nothing. Joy went to the piano. ‘We had such a jolly picnic, mother dear! We sat on the open hill above the Cross, and talked and had tea; then we went into the woods behind, and all those who are Hamlets danced. Such glorious woods!—wide green paths, and shady glades, and a great dip in the hills filled with treetops! We found a wide space, and Edna whistled, and we danced “Country Gardens” and “Green Garters,” and then the Furry Dance all in and out among the trees. Then we went back to the hill, and Mirry Honor stood in the middle of the white Cross and sang to us. Oh, we had a jolly time!’

CHAPTER XXII ON TRIAL

Joy, busy with her home-work, pushed her books aside and began to scribble in her 'guide-book.'

'Miss Bates has given me a heap of extra theory. She was talking to-day about the exams in the autumn; I'll have to go in for something, I suppose. I've been getting more advice. See what you think, Joan! I don't always agree with them, you know,' and Joan took the book and read the new entries.

'MISS MACEY.—Be a very good little girl, and always remember the responsibility of your position.

'JOY.—Rot! I'm going to have a good time as well as anybody else.'

'Did she really put it just that way, Joy?'

'Perhaps not just in those words,' Joy admitted. 'But that's what she meant. She wants me to be awfully prim and proper, as if I was twenty-five! You should have seen her face the other day when there was rather more row than usual after the gong had gone, and she came in and found I was one of those who was talking. She lectured us all, but I got a double dose. Being Queen's not all a joke. I can't be stiff and starchy!'

'She will expect a good example from you,' said Mrs Shirley.

'Fraid she'll be disappointed. Oh, I do try, mother dear! Don't look like that! But I can't be proper *all* the time. You've no idea how good I am sometimes!'

'Few and far between, I guess!' Joan laughed, and read on.

'CARRY CARTER.—(1) Be more bossy. You don't manage the girls enough. (2) Don't waste so much time on the juniors. (3) Always wait for *me* after school! *Nobody* else is worth while. Always walk with *me*!'

'Joy! She didn't—she couldn't——'

'Not in so many words, perhaps. But her way of speaking always seems to say, "I'm your bridesmaid. Never mind the rest of the world! I, and I only, am worthy of your notice!" She may not mean it, but it sounds like that.'

Joan read the pointed comments and laughed, relieved that Joy did not appear to be adopting her 'bridesmaid's' attitude so far.

'JOY.—(1) Shan't. Don't want to boss! And it would be silly, considering how new I am! (2) Shall if I like. Some of them are jolly kids (3) !!!'

'You certainly mustn't lose this book! Carry will have you up for libel if she ever sees it.'

'EDNA GILKS.—(1) Squash the kiddies occasionally. They like it, and it's good for them. (2) Get Marguerite to give you all the points you can, for she's going to France next term.

‘JOY.—(1) I don’t believe it. Nobody likes to be squashed. You don’t! (2) I know, I’m doing it. Very good advice, thanks!

‘CICELY HOBART.—(1) Don’t plague me too much till matric.’s over. I’m going gray as it is. (2) Jump on Carry Carter sometimes. She needs it. (3) Don’t let the lower school impose on you. They’ll make up troubles for the sake of getting hold of you. They like to have the Queen fussing round. You must try to learn when it’s real and when it’s humbug.

‘JOY.—(1) All right! Sorry! I didn’t mean to be a nuisance! (2) H’m. I know she does, but ‘tishn’t so easy. (3) Doesn’t sound likely, President! Are you sure you’re right? Even Presidents might make mistakes, you know—especially when they’re always positive they’re right!’

‘You’ve a good cheek, Joy, criticising Cicely and Miss Macey! If any of them ever see this you’ll lose friends all round. Cicely wouldn’t enjoy your remarks about her.’

‘Oh, they won’t see it! I’ll take good care of that! It’s strictly private, and for home consumption only.’ She scrawled a big ‘Advice to a Queen. Very Strictly Private. By Order, Queen Joy,’ on the cover. ‘There! Any one who reads that will be disgustingly dishonourable,’ and Joy turned to her books again, refreshed by the interval for conversation.

Joan was at work at her own books next day when the hooting of a motor horn gave warning of visitors. She laid down her pencil and went to the outer door. A very old man, leaning heavily on his stick, was hobbling in from the gate-house.

‘Do you want to see the abbey?’ Joan looked at him curiously, but he was so muffled in wraps that she could see little.

His voice was not muffled, however. ‘That’s what I’ve come for. Did you think I’d come to see you?’

Joan stared, taken by surprise. Then she laughed. ‘It was a silly question! The abbey’s certainly more worth seeing! Will you come in? Shall I take you first to the refectory? That is the largest and latest room in the abbey——’

‘No. Describe the general plan first, and then go into particulars. What is that?’ pointing with his stick.

Joan humoured his whim. ‘That’s the way I prefer myself, but I found people only got impatient when I tried to tell them where each building lay, so that they could imagine the abbey as it used to be. They prefer things they can see for themselves, so I generally take them to see some of the rooms first. Then, if they’re interested, I tell them how it used to look.’

They stood in the cloister garth, and she pointed in each direction. ‘The abbey church stood there, but it has disappeared, thanks to Henry the Eighth. Even the foundations were torn up, and that blank wall fills up the space. They say it was very fine, with beautiful Early English windows. The garth must have been still finer when they looked down upon it from the north side, though of course they would be filled with plain glass, not coloured.’

‘Why “of course?”’ demanded the visitor harshly.

Joan smiled, remembering the school-girls who had failed to ask a similar question. ‘Because it was a Cistercian church, and they were not allowed to use stained glass. On the east side are the sacristy, and the fine Early English chapter-house, where the monks held their solemn meetings. Above is the dormitory, and that doorway is the day-staircase leading to it. Here on the south the upper story is the refectory, with those beautiful wide windows——’

‘Can’t you describe them better than that?’ snapped her guest.

Joan paused in surprise. ‘Certainly! But I was leaving that till we went up. The whole refectory is Perpendicular work. Below the refectory are the calefactory rooms, looking out on the abbot’s garden behind, and the tresaunt, or passage leading to the garden. On this side are all that is left of the cloisters, which once went right round the garth, of course; and up there was the dormitory of the lay brothers. Where would you like to go first?’

‘This will do!’ and he made for the arched doorway of the refectory stairs.

Joan described the great hall as it had once been, enlarged upon its beautiful proportions, pointed out frescoes and tiles, and accounted for the presence of carving and colours. He listened critically, putting a pointed question now and then. As she paused, he said sharply, ‘You’ve said nothing about the roof!’

She looked at him in astonishment. Was this an examination? But she was used to manners of all kinds, and though she mentally set his down as bad, she answered quietly, ‘I was coming to that. It is unusually fine. You will see it is built on the hammer-beam principle. See the beautifully carved angel corbels from which the beams spring! The wood is Spanish walnut.’

‘Why did they use that wood?’ growled he. ‘Why not oak?’

‘Because Spanish walnut never becomes worm-eaten,’ Joan explained quietly.

He gave a grunt, whether of approval or not she did not know. She pointed out the fireplace, wide open chimney, and recess for pulpit stairs, and told him legends of the pictured saints. Then she led him to the solar, or abbot’s lodge, standing over the buttery and kitchen, and then in by the old Norman doorway and up the winding stair to the dormitory.

Here it was the same. He listened critically, and jerked out questions till she began to think he must be one of those difficult clients who seemed to take a pleasure in trying to bewilder her. She had grown used to the experience, and was prepared for any poser he was likely to put, but she did not enjoy the sensation. He questioned her about the lancet windows and the preparation of the curious tiles, and she explained their manufacture so far as she could, then said frankly that she knew no more.

She showed him the monks’ day-room, which had been used as laboratory, workshop, and studio; and pointed out the site of the old infirmary, where once had stood a long hall filled with beds, and opening into a little chapel.

‘Sick folk were nursed here. It was a kind of alms-house, too, for old people, who lived here in peace, and were never allowed to work nor to hear any bad news or talk of any painful subject; that was the rule! Don’t you think it was very thoughtful?’

In the sacristy she pointed out the beautiful rose window and the barrel-vaulted roof, the signs of painting on the walls, the aumbries, with their grooves for shelves, the piscinæ, into which water was emptied after the holy dishes had been washed.

‘There are two, you see. In one the priest washed his hands; the other was for the dishes. Now I will show you the foundations of the church, just out here.’

She traced the shape of the ancient church, showed the bases of the great pillars which had upheld the arches of the nave, and the position of the transepts and chapels. He listened and looked and grunted, and asked more questions, she thought, than any one had ever asked before.

‘Where was the Lady Chapel?’ he demanded.

‘There wasn’t one,’ and she wondered if he could be trying to trip her up. ‘The abbey was dedicated to the Virgin Mary—“Our Lady of Gracedieu,” you know. Cistercian abbeys were nearly always dedicated to her, and so they rarely had eastern chapels.’

He seemed satisfied with the explanation, and followed her back to the cloister garth; then bade her leave him, but remain within call in case he wanted her again.

Joan wandered away, deeply puzzled by his manner. He was not mad, she decided. His questions had been perfectly rational, though more obscure than those to which she was accustomed. But he certainly seemed eccentric. He had some knowledge of Cistercian abbeys, that was evident from his questions and comments. Otherwise he could not have known, for instance, that the present refectory ought to have been at right angles to the cloisters. He had seemed quite relieved to find her prepared for his remark and able to show the ruins of the original refectory in the more usual position. Perhaps he knew Fountains Abbey, or Beaulieu in Hampshire. She wondered if she would dare to ask him about them.

It was useless to return to work till he had gone. Joan felt it would be impossible to think of problems with the consciousness of him sitting there in the chair she had brought for him to the garth, 'glowering at nothing,' as she said to herself. So she went through the tresaunt into the abbot's garden, a tiny place, but now as gay with roses and lilies as the gardener's care could make it, and probably in much the same state as when the white-robed monks looked out from their labours in calefactory, garde-robe, or day-room—unless, indeed, their strict ideals had led them to banish flowers and grow chiefly herbs, which she thought possible. Perhaps, however, their well-known love for nature had led them to be broad-minded in this respect. Joan busied herself cutting off faded pansies and tying up sweet peas, till the rasping voice called her, and she saw him in the entrance.

'Why don't you wear a hat? You'll get sunstroke, child!'—for the sun on her vivid bronze hair was dazzlingly bright.

She laughed. 'I can't be bothered with a hat.'

'And why are you working there? Doesn't the man do his duty?'

'Oh, yes! He works all the time. But he had to go to Thame to-day on an errand for Sir Antony I can always find something to do, and I love this little garden, as I love the whole place.'

'You do, eh?' and he looked at her critically.

'Oh, yes! It's so beautiful. And I like the quietness. Nothing seems to worry once you're in the abbey. Perhaps that's silly, but it's how I always feel. I suppose it's the age and the stillness. I wondered if you'd tell me something,' she said doubtfully. 'Is it as fine as other abbeys—Fountains, for instance? I'm sure you must know them. You know so much about it.'

'Many of them have some portion of their church remaining, which adds greatly to their beauty.'

'Oh, wouldn't you like to get hold of Henry the Eighth just for a few minutes? It's not as if he did it for any good reason—just greed!' breathed Joan fervently.

He laughed grimly. 'But this is a very fair specimen, especially in the conventual buildings. You can see more of the life of the monks here than in some of the Yorkshire abbeys. And it's in good repair.'

'Oh, it's been very carefully restored! I'm awfully grateful to Sir Antony. He saved it, you know. *Did* you know?'

'Saved it, did he?'—the old man's eyes gleamed.

'He inherited it years ago—nearly fifty years, I believe. The people who had had it before hadn't cared about it, and it was in a dreadful state. I can hardly bear to think of it.'

'Describe it!' he commanded, in the tone in which he had said, 'Describe the original church!'

‘It was used as farm buildings, and the place was thick with dirt, and sheds, and things. There was a wall across the cloister garth, and fruit and hay were stored in the rooms, just as if they’d been barns. Think of the day-room used for straw, and the chapter-house for keeping apples! It seems sacrilege to me.’

‘Nevertheless, its use in that way may have helped to preserve the buildings to some extent,’ said he didactically.

‘Do you think so?’ and Joan sounded doubtful. ‘It seems to me too horrible to be true, almost, I don’t see how people *could!*’

‘So you’re grateful to Sir Antony?’

‘Just awfully! I’ve never seen him, and people say he’s rather queer, but I always remember that he saved the abbey. He cleaned it all up, and made it as much as possible as it used to be, and now he takes the very greatest care of it. He has an expert come down from London regularly to be sure it’s all right.’

He grunted again and turned to go. She followed him to the old gate-house and added a few words of description of the carved figures and of the uses to which it had been put.

‘This little cell was the porter’s lodge. That was the almonry, where poor people came every day for food. Upstairs there was a guest-house, and the old gate stood here.’

She called up the motor and opened the door. When he had seated himself and arranged his wraps he held out half-a-crown.

‘Tell your mother I found you an efficient curator.’

Joan shrank away. She always dreaded lest this should happen. Many people, like Cicely Hobart, realised that they must not offer her money, but others persisted, and she always fled.

‘No, thank you. Please, we never take money. We’re here to show you round, and we like doing it. I couldn’t, really,’ as he looked at her keenly, his shaggy brows drawn down.

‘Ridiculous! Do you mean to say you always refuse? What about pocket-money?’

Joan laughed. ‘I don’t need much, and anyway that is mother’s business. No, thank you, I really could not take it.’

‘Take this, then,’ he handed her a card, and to her amazement she heard him chuckle.

She glanced at his name, then with a sharp cry looked up at him.

‘Not really? Oh, I *say*, you might have told me! Oh, that was awfully mean!’—then she checked herself swiftly. ‘I don’t intend to be rude, but—*oh!* And you know far more about it than I do!’

Her outburst had sounded so very natural that a grim smile had flickered over his face. He had been wondering what she would say.

‘It was mean! I admit it. But I have quite enjoyed myself. I’ll confess you know more than I expected. Give your mother my message. And you won’t take this, eh?’

Joan faced him bravely. ‘We decided from the first we wouldn’t. Mother thought it was better not, and I much prefer it. And you’re giving us a great deal already. We’re much obliged to you for letting us come here. Please don’t ask me any more.’

‘And you’re grateful to Sir Antony for saving the abbey from the farmers?’ and incredible as it seemed Joan thought his eyes twinkled.

She grew very red. ‘Did you mind? I hope I didn’t say anything very awful. I am grateful!’

‘Will you do something for me—you and the other girl?’ he demanded gruffly.

‘If we can. We’d like to.’

‘Bring her to the Hall some evening, and let me see that minuet again. Bring a friend to play for you. Good-day!’ and he bade his man drive on, and left Joan staring bewildered after

him.

‘Mother!’ she ran indoors at last. ‘Did you know? Did you see? Oh, wasn’t it awful? I never had such a shock in my life! Don’t you think it was mean?’

‘Did you manage to satisfy him?’ Mrs Shirley asked anxiously.

‘I think so. He told me to tell you I was efficient. I couldn’t think why he asked so many questions! It was a regular exam! What will Joy say? Mother, the weirdest thing! He wants us to go and dance to him! He wants to see the minuet again! It will feel awfully odd dancing to him!’

‘Then he can’t have thought it was all wrong that morning!’ was Joy’s comment, when her first surprise was over. ‘Queer old thing! I say, Joan, I wish I’d seen your face!’

‘I told him to *his* face I thought it was mean!’ Joan said gloomily. ‘I do, too! I think he ought to have told me.’

‘I wish I’d seen his!’ laughed Joy.

CHAPTER XXIII A CALAMITY

‘You’d better put that away. Miss Lane may be here any minute,’ Joan said warningly. ‘I rather thought of showing it to her. She wouldn’t tell,’ and Joy laughed and scribbled away in her ‘guide-book.’

‘MISS MACEY.—Playing “touch” over the desks is not setting a good example. Try to be more dignified, and remember the juniors look up to you.

‘JOY.—Wish they wouldn’t! And you ought to know better than to expect Queens of fifteen to be dignified!’

‘Here’s Miss Lane! You make the tea, Joan!’

It was a strange experience to dance to Sir Antony. Margia had heard the story, and had willingly agreed to give up a Saturday afternoon to gratify a lonely old man. After an early tea the girls led her through the cloisters, and by the private gate which they had never yet passed into the grounds of the Hall.

The house, a fine modern mansion, with great windows looking out on a lawn as smooth and well kept as the cloister garth, had a hall almost as large as the great hall at Broadway End. Its walls were hung with paintings, chiefly Lely portraits of famous beauties of his day, and here the girls danced on the polished wood floor, the evening sun streaming in through the long windows. Their host sat huddled up in a big chair; Margia stood by the piano to fiddle; and the cleared space gave ample room for dancing.

By Mrs Shirley’s advice and in accordance with their own wish, the girls wore their dancing frocks, white stockings, and low black shoes, with cross-bands of black elastic. Joy’s green dress had a white lace fichu knotted on the breast and lace frills at the short sleeves, and her mob cap was of white frilled muslin; the wide collar and cuffs of Joan’s gray gown were severely Puritanical and her hood was smooth and plain. They danced their minuet to Margia’s stately music, while Sir Antony watched in critical silence. But every movement was careful and very graceful, and he seemed satisfied, for though he said no word of praise he asked for ‘something else.’

When Margia suggested that it was time to rest, he curtly motioned them to seats near him. They took opposite corners of a wide window-sill, and he scanned the two faces so much alike as he questioned them on the subject of ‘the dancing club’ and its choice of Joy as Queen. Much surprised at his interest, they tried to satisfy him, and Margia came to tell of the earlier history of the club, and her own connection with it.

‘They chiefly dance morris and country dances. The girls might let you see a morris jig, if they think they can manage it.’

By her suggestion they had brought their bells and handkerchiefs, and though a little doubtful of their powers, managed to accomplish ‘Princess Royal.’ The old man watched curiously, and at the end remarked, a shade more genially than usual,—

‘Very pretty! New to me! Could you do it again?’

They repeated the dance, Joy’s lips twitching and Joan’s eyes full of laughter. As they dropped on the window-seat to rest, Margia suggested,—

'You should come one day when they are dancing at school. You could easily motor to Wycombe, and Miss Macey would be delighted.'

'I wish you would!' Joan said warmly. 'The others know far more dances than we do; you need six for the real morris dances, and for country dances any number. Shall we tell you next time there's a dance? You'd see what a nice Queen Joy makes too!'

Joy looked startled, for it was well known in the village that Sir Antony never went anywhere, or if he did he quarrelled with everybody. He grunted in a way which might have meant anything, but gave no definite answer.

'Isn't he a queer old thing?' cried Joy, as they walked back to Gracedieu together. 'He really seemed quite keen, and he almost forgot to be cross!'

'Don't go yet, Miss Lane! Come in and stay with us for a while! You've plenty of time!' Joan begged.

'I want to show you something!' and Joy caught up her 'guide-book.' 'Tell me what you think of it!'

'I think,' said Margia, when she had read the entries, 'that it's very useful and very dangerous. If you should ever lose that book at school, Miss Joy,'—

Joy giggled. 'Wouldn't it be awful? I'd emigrate!'

'You'd better add an entry from me. My advice would be—"Burn this book at once. Or give it to Joan to keep for you."'

'No, I'm adding to it all the time. I shan't lose it, really, Miss Lane. But don't you think it's a good idea?' and she thrust the notebook out of sight among her lesson books.

On Monday evening Joan had just dismissed the squad of small children she had been drilling on the cloister garth, when Joy arrived home from school, rather earlier than usual. She sprang from her cycle, looking hot and worried.

'Joan! I want you! Have you got my guide-book?'

'Got your guide-book? Joy, what do you mean?'

'I thought perhaps you'd taken it to tease me. I must have left it at home this morning. You *must* have seen it, Joan!'

'Joy, what are you talking about? You always leave it at home!'

Joy was feverishly turning over piles of books and looking below the table. 'I—I thought—Joan, tell me you know where it is!' she wailed.

'It's nowhere in here. I've turned out this room this morning. Isn't it in your bedroom?'

Joy ran into the inner room and made a hurried search. Joan, bewildered, went to help her.

'You don't think you've lost it? When did you have it last?'

Joy dropped on her bed. 'On Saturday night, when Miss Lane was here, and I slipped it in among my books. This morning I saw it when I packed my satchel, and thought I put it out of the way. But on the way to school I found I was too early, so I stopped and took out my Scripture notes to look over them. And I've an awful feeling that my guide-book was there, between my arithmetic and my "Otto." You know our rough notebooks are the same colour, and I never thought of the guide-book till arithmetic time, when I found my scribbling book at the bottom of my desk! I hadn't had it at home at all. It must have been the guide-book in my bag!'

'But surely it was still there?' cried Joan, wellnigh as much dismayed as herself.

'I hunted everywhere, but I haven't found it. So I came home as quickly as I could to see if it was here, after all. But all the time I knew I'd seen it in my satchel. I've felt awful all day! It's lost, just as you said—and all those awful things written in it! Oh, Joan, what shall I do?'

‘Search for it again. It may be here all the time,’ said Joan briefly, and set to work.

‘I saw it in my bag!’ and Joy broke down and sobbed. ‘I’ve been trying to think I didn’t, but I’ve known all the time it was really there.’

‘But no one would take it out of your bag!’ and Joan paused.

Joy’s sobs increased. ‘I pulled all my books out in the cloak-room. Peggy asked me to lend her the history questions. She was in a frantic hurry, so I pulled out all my books to see which one I’d slipped the paper into. I must have dropped the guide-book then. There were crowds of girls about. *Any one* may have found it!’ and she sobbed again.

Joan dropped helplessly into a chair.

‘Joy! You have got yourself into a fine mess!’ Then she ran to comfort her. ‘Don’t cry like that, dear! Surely they’ll know it was only meant for a joke!’

‘It depends—who finds it!’ wailed Joy. ‘Carry wouldn’t think it was a joke! Neither would Miss Macey! Oh, I wish I hadn’t written it! I’ll never dare to go to school again!’

CHAPTER XXIV

THE ADVENTURES OF JOY'S GUIDE-BOOK

Joy, nervous and pale, started for school early next morning. She had not slept till after midnight. Her first thought on waking had been to reach school and search once more for the fateful book. Could it have slipped inside another and so escaped her notice? In her heart she knew it was impossible. Her frightened search when she first missed it had been too thorough. But it was the one hope left, and she could hardly eat her breakfast, so eager was she to be off.

If the book was not there, what then?

Some mistress might have found it, and, honourably heeding the injunction on the cover, might either return it unread, or give it to Miss Anskell, when Joy would be informed that it would be returned on payment of the usual fine. That was almost too easy a solution to hope for. And even so, would Miss Anskell consider it her duty to examine the book? Would she report its contents to Miss Macey? Joy was keenly conscious that she did not want Miss Macey to read certain entries.

Or some girl might have found it who was not required by her position to hand it to a mistress. What then? Would she read it? Would her curiosity overcome her sense of honour? Joy feared it greatly. If so, what would be the result?

Teasing she could endure, if only she could recover the book before any of its victims had seen it. Surely no girl would be so wanting in good feeling as to show it to those who were so obviously not meant to see it! Cicely—Miss Macey—Carry—must not read those entries! It would be better that even Edna and the other Queens should not. The thought of some of her comments being made public and quoted freely in the school made Joy cold with horror, and she coasted downhill at dangerous speed in her eagerness to reach school. Yet in her heart she knew it to be useless. The book would not be there. She had searched too well.

As she raced along towards the big gates she almost ran over a girl running in from the opposite direction, evidently in haste equal to her own. They came to a stop at the same moment.

'Hello, Carry, you're early to-day!' Joy did not wish her own eagerness to be too apparent. Carry would have required full explanations, which would have been difficult to give. So Joy curbed her impatience, and strove to appear natural.

'You're in an awful hurry, Joy! You nearly ran me down!' Carry had hesitated before answering, and her tone was almost more resentful than the incident seemed to warrant. Joy was too much troubled to notice it, however.

'I didn't do it on purpose! I—I want to look for one of my books. I meant to take it home yesterday, but I arrived without it, and I'm wondering if I've lost it.'

'Oh? What is it? I'll lend you mine.' Carry spoke without looking up, brushing the dust from Joy's wheel off her skirt.

'One of my notebooks. Thanks, but perhaps I'll find my own,' and Joy wheeled her cycle to the shed.

When she reached the dressing-room Carry was changing her shoes with every appearance of haste. Joy, surprised that any one should be in an equal hurry with herself on this particular morning, exclaimed again as she hastened to her own peg,—

'You're awfully early to-day. What's the hurry?'

‘Haven’t learnt my French idioms.’ Carry was tugging at her shoe-lace, which her haste had knotted. ‘Hateful things! I left my book at school last night.’

‘Hard lines! You’ll need all your time. French comes first, too. You should practise forgetting afternoon subjects, if you must forget any,’ Joy said, trying to speak lightly.

Carry sprang to her feet without replying. But as she hurried upstairs Joy heard Miss Anskell’s voice. ‘Carry! I want you in the music-room,’ and Carry, with a groan of disgust, had to go.

‘Hard lines!’ Joy murmured again. ‘She’ll hear about it from Mademoiselle. Wonder how long Ansky’ll keep her? Some people can be awfully inconsiderate! Fines, I suppose. Carry does leave her things about,’ and she went upstairs, her eagerness suddenly vanished.

The book would not be there. Her last hope would be gone. And then the despair she had been holding at bay would settle down upon her. Joy, in her dread of that moment, almost crawled upstairs.

It was very early, and no girls had yet arrived. With heavy heart she crossed the empty schoolroom and opened her desk.

Then, with a wild gasp of amazement, she dropped into her seat. For her ‘guide-book’ lay there, on the very top, apparently waiting to set her mind at rest.

In her intense relief a sob broke from her as she caught up the book and hugged it rapturously.

‘You dear! Oh, how nice of you to be here! But how could I miss you like that? Why didn’t I see you yesterday?’ and doubt began to creep in. She dropped the book and sat frowning.

How could it possibly have been there last night? Her search had been so thorough. And here it lay on the very top! No one opening the desk could fail to see it at once. How was it possible?

Slowly the conviction grew, fight it as she might, that the book had not been there when she left school the day before. In her heart she had known it was not there. Its presence now did not alter that fact.

The solution was obvious. Some one had found it on the cloak-room floor, and had placed it in her desk after she had gone home. Her name was written there plainly. She had left school early in her haste to search at home. Any one could have slipped it into her desk. It was, of course, forbidden to touch another girl’s desk, but any one wishing to do her a kindness by saving her a fine would not hesitate on that account.

Joy began to breathe more freely again, after a moment’s keen anxiety. Some one had found the book and had kindly returned it to her. Why had the unknown friend not handed it to herself? But perhaps it was a girl from some other form, who had not been able to find her before her hasty departure.

But behind her relief there lurked a little doubt. Had her unknown helper read the entries? Was her secret known to somebody? People were so different. Was it some one who could be trusted?

In any case it was one of the girls. No mistress would have returned it without insisting on the necessary fine. And surely if Miriam or Marguerite or Cicely had found the book they would have returned it unread. She could not imagine any one of them prying into a private diary, and this was much the same. But probably in any case they would have returned it to her in person. She did not think a senior would have troubled to go to her desk.

With her elbows on the edge of the open desk and her head dropped on her hands, she came to an ominous conclusion.

‘It’s some one who doesn’t mean me to know she’s had it! Or she’d have given it to me, which would have been the easiest way. And at once! Why should she keep it all day? For it must have been found in the morning. It couldn’t possibly lie about all day and not be seen. Why didn’t she give it back at once? She had it all yesterday, but she means to keep it dark. I’m not to know who she was. That’s why she put it in my desk! Unless, of course, she comes and tells me she did it. But I don’t believe she will. Then—then she did read it! There’s no other reason. If she didn’t, why shouldn’t I know who she was? I’d be awfully grateful to her for finding it, and she’d know that. No, she doesn’t want me to know who she is, because she’d read my book!’

With a sudden idea she caught up the notebook. As yet she had not opened it. The mere sight of its cover had satisfied her. But perhaps there was some note or word of explanation inside.

Then she stifled a cry of utter amazement, for the door was just opening to admit Carry, Peggy, and several others. Each entry was marked with a big cross in red ink. The book had been read, and by some one who meant her to know it, but intended to remain unknown herself.

‘Joy, what’s the matter? Are you ill?’ cried Peggy, catching a glimpse of her white face.

Carry glanced at her curiously. ‘What’s up? A mouse in your desk?’

Joy thrust the book out of sight. ‘Nothing—not a mouse—I like them. No, I’m all right, Peg,’ she stammered incoherently. ‘Please leave me alone!’

They were looking at her doubtfully. ‘You don’t look well,’ Peggy insisted. ‘Would you like some water?’

‘She’s all chalky,’ and Carry went to her own desk. ‘Was it a spider, Joy?’

‘You needn’t be so unsympathetic! She looked awfully bad for a minute!’ Peggy said indignantly.

Joy’s colour was coming back. ‘You’d better do your idioms, Carry. You’ve only five minutes. Could I help anyhow?’ Anything would be better than thought at this moment.

‘No, thanks,’ and Carry buried herself in her desk. ‘Have you found your notes?’

‘Yes,’ said Joy briefly, and spread out her books and apparently began to work hard.

Who had drawn those red crosses on her book? It had been done to frighten her, and it had certainly succeeded. One girl at least had read those notes and comments. What use would she make of her knowledge? It was horrible to know that some one shared her secret, and yet not to know who.

She was so quiet all day that several girls asked if she did not feel well, and Peggy was convinced she had turned faint before morning school and was still feeling the effects. She confessed to a headache, to satisfy them and to explain her failure in her work, for she did badly in each subject, and did not even enjoy her music. All through the dinner-hour she was silent and worried, to the distress of her friends. Peggy was so persistent in her sympathy as to be almost a nuisance, and Joy felt grateful to Carry, who hardly came near her all day.

She escaped at the earliest moment and hastened home, followed by advice from Peggy to go to bed early and ask to have her homework excused. Walking in on Joan and Mrs Shirley before they were expecting her, she threw the ‘guide-book’ on the table.

‘There’s the wretched thing! No, wait a moment!’ at Joan’s cry of relief. ‘It was in my desk. Some one had picked it up and put it there. She’d had it all yesterday. And she’d read it

—look!’ and she showed the red-marked pages.

‘And now I’m going to burn the horrid thing, so that it can’t do any more harm,’ she concluded, when they had examined and exclaimed.

She went towards the fire, but Joan sprang up to stop her. ‘No, Joy, don’t do that!’

‘Why not? I never want to see it again. It’s made mischief enough!’

‘Yes, but it may be useful yet,’ Joan said swiftly. ‘You must keep it. I’ll lock it up for you. Don’t you see? Suppose some one has read it, and suppose she makes use of it somehow—tells Cicely or Carry——’

Joy nodded gloomily. ‘She probably copied it before she gave it back. There are only a few pages written, and she had it all yesterday.’

‘She had no right to read it. It was awfully mean!’

‘Oh, disgusting! Considering how plainly I’d marked the cover.’

‘That’s why I want you to keep it. If she tries to use what she knows, you can at least prove she was very dishonourable. She can’t say she didn’t know, if you can produce the book.’

Joy nodded thoughtfully. ‘That’s something. But she could say I’d written it on afterwards.’

‘Miss Lane saw it last week, before you lost it,’ Joan reminded her quickly, and Joy nodded again.

‘That’s worth remembering. I’ll keep it, then.’

‘And I think you ought to have it, to show just what you did write. She might hint, without saying exactly, and make it out far worse than it was. It’s not so very dreadful, Joy. You must keep it to show it’s no worse.’

Joy threw the book to her. ‘Take it, then! I never want to see the wretched thing again!’

‘What do you think she’ll do?’

‘How can I tell? Depends on who it is.’

‘I don’t think it could be any one referred to in the book, or surely you would have seen some sign of it. She put the book back yesterday, you say? You’re sure she didn’t have it all night?’

‘No. I was too early this morning.’

‘Then she must have read it, and marked it, and perhaps copied it, during yesterday.’

‘There was the dinner-hour. Lots of the girls go home.’

‘Well, if it was Carry, or Edna, or Cicely, you’d think they’d have shown some sign—have been cross or snappy to you.’

‘Carry would. She’d be awfully mad. But I didn’t see her yesterday afternoon. They were running off the heats for the sports, so Miss Bates took me for extra music and theory. And they were still at it when I left.’

‘Then any one could easily have gone to your desk. And you noticed nothing to-day that would help you to guess?’

‘No. Carry was sulky all morning, but she hadn’t prepared her homework properly, so she was expecting returned lessons all round. It was queer! She’d forgotten her idioms, and came in an awful hurry to learn them, and yet the one thing she did know well was French! I don’t believe she missed. And she only had five minutes, because of Miss Anskell—she couldn’t learn them in five minutes! I wonder if it was true? I say!’ and she broke off suddenly, a queer note in her voice.

‘What’s the matter?’

'I was just thinking how silly it was of the girl to put back my book! Why didn't she keep it?'

'Because she knew you'd feel worse to think some one had read it than to be doubtful about it. But what has that to do with Carry's French?'

'I'm not sure yet. After she'd put it back—during the night—she might realise how silly it had been. If she'd kept it she could say she didn't know it was private. She might have thought it was an ordinary school notebook, and I couldn't have proved it wasn't.'

Joan nodded. 'It was very silly——'

'But she might only think of that after the book was in my desk!' Joy's eyes were excited. 'Then what would she do, Joan?'

'Come to school early and try to take it back again, I suppose.'

'And if she met me she'd say she was in a hurry, as she'd forgotten her books! And Carry *knew her French!*'

'Do you think it was Carry? Joy, there couldn't be any one worse! Think of the things you've said about her!'

'I'm beginning to think if it wasn't Carry then she'd been shown the book by whoever had found it. Agnes would go straight to Carry, of course. It's so queer about Carry and her French! But if what she really wanted was to get at my desk, I can understand it.'

'I should have thought if Carry had read what you've said about her, you'd have seen some sign of it in the way she behaved.'

'She hardly spoke to me. I thought it was because she knew I wanted to be left alone, but she might be avoiding me on purpose. She spoke to me sometimes, but not very much.'

'But when she did?'

Joy knit her brows. 'I wasn't looking out for anything unusual. She was queer and abrupt, but I put that down to worry about her French. I couldn't tell from her manner, Joan. She certainly left me alone a good deal.'

'I hope it isn't Carry!' Joan sighed. 'There's no saying what she'd do. Any of the others would be better.'

'I don't know! They might take it as a joke, of course, and then it wouldn't matter. If it's Carry she'll be awfully wild, whether she shows it or not. But suppose it had been Cicely or Marguerite, and they hadn't taken it as a joke! Suppose it had hurt their feelings, after they've been so jolly to us! That would be worse than making Carry mad. I don't care about her feelings, you see.'

'There's something in that. What shall you do? There's nothing you can do, is there?'

'Wait and see if any one is nasty. And keep an eye on Carry! It gets more and more likely. She spoke queerly when I first saw her this morning—short and sharp, though there was nothing particular in what she said. And it's awfully queer about that French. I believe she told a fib.'

'And if she shows you she's the one?'

'I'll *talk* to her!' Joy said grimly. 'I'll let everybody know what I think of her for reading my private book. I'm jolly glad I didn't burn it. And that was thanks to your advice!'

'I'll give you some more. If you should find out for certain that it was Carry, and if you think she means to tell the others, go straight to Cicely and the other Queens and tell them all about it.'

'*Tell* them, Joan?'

‘It would be better for you to tell them than any one else. You’d get in ahead of her, any way. I think you should offer to show them the book. Then they won’t listen to her, and they’ll probably tell her what they think of her for having read it. She can’t give you away without putting herself in a hole.’

‘I see that, and I’ll make her see it too, once I know who she is. But I’m not so keen on telling the others. It would be an awful pity, if there were no need. I’ll try not to have any fuss just now, anyway, for matric. is next week, and Cicely doesn’t want to be worried till it’s over. But I shall do my best to find out who had my book! And particularly I shall keep an eye on Carry.’

‘If it was Carry, she’ll make some use of it.’

Joy nodded gloomily. ‘She’ll be awfully mad, and she won’t be able to hide it altogether. I’ll soon find out if it’s Carry!’

CHAPTER XXV

CARRY'S ULTIMATUM

'Why are you looking at me like that, Joy?' demanded Carry.

'Sorry. I was only thinking,' and Joy turned away to hang up her cap. 'You're so snappy nowadays. Aren't you well?'

'I'm all right,' and Carry left the cloak-room.

'She is snappy!' said Edna. 'I don't know what's the matter with Carry. She's been queer for days.'

'I thought perhaps she was only snappy to me. I was wondering how I'd offended her.'

'Oh, you're not the only victim! We've all noticed it. She bites my head off if I speak to her.'

Joy nodded thoughtfully. She believed she held the clue to Carry's sudden outburst of ill-temper. But others understood it also, of that she was convinced. Agnes across the room was listening, ready to report the remarks to her friend. Agnes knew all about it, and perhaps others also. Carry and Agnes had been whispering with Kitty Branscombe more than usual lately.

'Carry's even snappy to Marguerite and Cicely,' said Peggy. 'She seems to have a grudge against everybody.'

'Except the Sinners!' laughed Edna. 'Did you see her with Kitty yesterday? I expect she's got a worse attack than usual of Sinnerism and Saintitis, that's all. She'll get over it.'

Joy felt guilty as she went upstairs soberly enough to satisfy even Miss Macey. She thought she could explain Carry's sudden grudge against certain of her school-fellows. But, after all, it was Carry's own fault. She need not have read those private entries. In making the 'guide-book,' Joy's intention had been good. She knew she had gone too far in her comments, but she felt little sympathy for Carry, considering how they had come to her knowledge.

Miss Macey sent for her during the morning. 'I have a request which concerns you, Joy, as reigning Queen. Perhaps you will make it known to the members of the Hamlet Club. I would consult Cicely, but you know how hard she is working this week. Each autumn we have given an entertainment in aid of some charity, and this year we are asked to help the Hospital Fund. Last year we gave a garden-party, and a display of drill, with part-songs. I have been especially asked if this year you could show your dances, with some musical items. So I am going to ask the Hamlets and the Musical Society to undertake the programme. You should consult Marguerite, and Cicely when she has time, and make your plans in conjunction with Nell Branscombe. Of course we shall wish the Queens to attend in state, but I know you girls like an excuse for dressing up. The date will fall in the first week of next term, for Cicely and Marguerite may be going abroad in the autumn, but your girls are always ready with their dances, so you will not need much preparation. There is no need to attempt anything new or elaborate, you know. So consult the others and let me have a draft programme as soon as you can.'

Joy, her arrangements made with Nell and Marguerite, went home to tell Joan.

She was watching Carry carefully for something to confirm her suspicions. Carry's bad temper was suggestive, but not enough to act upon. For several days this and her constant

whispering with Agnes and Kitty were the only signs of anything strange, and Joy had to be patient and watch her as unnoticeably as she could.

Then one morning she found a note awaiting her in her desk.

‘Meet me here at two o’clock. I’ve something to say to you.—Carry.’

Joy tore the paper into shreds and dropped it into the waste-paper basket. Its peremptory tone angered her, but she would go. Carry evidently wanted to see her alone. The matter would be better settled.

The class-rooms were always deserted in fine weather till nearly half-past two, though the playground might be noisy with girls. No objection was raised to any one going inside if she wished to make up arrears in preparation for the afternoon, but the privilege was seldom used, and the room was empty when Joy hurried back from lunch to keep her appointment. She had ignored Carry entirely during the morning, resenting the tone of her note, but she thought she would turn up, and was not disappointed. Carry was late, having been home for lunch, but arrived at last, and Agnes and Kitty were with her.

Joy promptly took the initiative. ‘Oh, so it’s to be three to one! You didn’t invite me to bring Edna and Peggy. That would have been only fair, Carry.’

Carry came to the point at once. ‘Look here! You’ve got to join the Sinners’ League, and let everybody know you’ve done it.’

‘Oh? Indeed? Well, that’s awfully interesting, but before I join I’d just like to know the reason why I’ve “got to,” as you put it.’

They eyed one another, each aware of the other’s knowledge, neither able to accuse the other without betraying herself. Joy realised with relief that Carry must be the one to speak.

Carry had not decided on the interview without making up her mind to that. She took the plunge defiantly. ‘You know perfectly well. Because if you refuse I can tell Cicely and Marguerite and Miss Macey what you wrote about them in that book.’

‘So you did read it! I guessed it, but I was waiting for you to tell me so,’ and Joy’s pent-up wrath flamed out. ‘Now we know where we are! And now I can say what I think, Carry! I won’t join anything that you want me to. I’d rather not belong to the same things as you. You can tell anybody you like, but if you do *I* shall tell them my book was private, and they’ll know how abominably dishonest you were to read it.’

‘You can’t prove Carry knew it was private!’ jerked Agnes.

‘It’s written on the cover. No one could help seeing it——’

‘When did you write it on?’ jeered Kitty. ‘That’s feeble, Joy! You may have written anything on it since.’

‘I haven’t, then. It’s just as it was.’

‘You can’t prove that!’

‘It didn’t say “private” when I saw it,’ Carry asserted boldly.

Joy’s eyes blazed with wrath. ‘You know that’s untrue! I can prove it, as it happens. Not only my aunt and cousin had seen it’—Agnes gave a sneering laugh, and Carry a snort of contempt—‘but Miss Lane saw it a week before you *stole* it! And we can prove the date, for we went to Sir Antony’s, at the Hall, and he could say what day it was. You didn’t think she’d have seen it, did you? You didn’t expect that?’ as their faces fell.

They certainly had not foreseen that such an independent witness would be able to speak for Joy. For a moment they had no answer ready, and Joy seized her advantage.

‘The book’s safe at home, and if any of you make use of what you read so sneakily, I’ll prove to everybody that you’re a horrid dishonourable set. I don’t know what Miss Macey

would say about it, but I'm sure of Cicely and Miriam and Marguerite. They'd despise a girl who could do such a mean thing, and then try to use what she'd found out in such a sneaky way to make me do something I know would be wrong. I've an idea Edna and the rest wouldn't exactly like it either. I've said all along I'll join neither Saints nor Sinners while I'm Queen, and I'm going to stick to it. You can do what you like. If you do anything you know what I shall do. I can produce the book——'

'You daren't!' panted Carry, her eyes angry, her breath coming quickly. Joy's words had gone home to her uneasy conscience. She was not anxious to hear Cicely's opinion of her conduct. 'You daren't show them what you've written!'

'I've a good mind to take it straight to them to-morrow morning!' stormed Joy, angry and excited almost beyond self-control. 'I would, too, if it wasn't matric. week! It's you who daren't. You've read my book, but you daren't make any use of it. And since you've given me the chance I'll tell you what I think of you. I think you're a horrid mean sneak. You stole my book—you *did*! Why didn't you give it back at once? You knew it was mine, but you kept it as long as you wanted it—that's stealing! You're dishonest, and dishonourable, and sneaky, and I meant every word I wrote about you, and I just wish I'd put some more! It wasn't half strong enough. I hate a sneak! And you're the biggest one I've ever met, and I hope I'll never meet another like you!'

'Joy! Joy, my dear child!'

They all turned hastily. Joy's cheeks were burning, her eyes blazing with angry excitement. They fell before Miss Macey's astonished look, and she stood trembling with rage. The other three felt guilty and uncomfortable also, but Agnes flashed a look of triumph at Kitty. This outbreak could hardly fail to get Queen Joy into trouble—unless she took the bold course of telling the whole story, and even then things would not be too pleasant.

'Joy, tell me the meaning of this! I heard your voice from the end of the corridor. What is the matter? Why were you addressing your companions in such a tone?'

Carry, her eyes cast down, waited anxiously. Explanations would be awkward for everybody. But Joy had as little desire for them as she. If need be she might explain to Cicely, but she felt she could not to Miss Macey.

'I—they made me angry—I can't tell you, please, Miss Macey,' she faltered, struggling to steady her voice, and Carry breathed more freely.

'Made you angry! That is a very insufficient apology for such a display of temper. I am deeply disappointed in you, Joy. I did not think you could so lose control of yourself. Whatever the provocation, you had no right to speak in such a tone. I trust your good feeling will lead you to apologise to your companions for making such an exhibition of yourself.'

Joy raised her head swiftly. 'Miss Macey, I can't do that, and they know I can't. They—they know quite well what's wrong, and whether I had any excuse. I—I'm sorry if I lost my temper, for that's babyish, but that's all I can say. I'm not sorry I was angry. I—I'm *glad*!'—her tone was full of defiance.

'You grieve me deeply, Joy. That is not the spirit I had thought you would show. Girls, I am quite aware that you must have given Joy severe provocation to make her speak as she did. You have been in the school longer than she, and you know how I dislike quarrelling among you. I hope that when you all think it over you will make up your minds not to behave like silly children. But I am particularly disappointed that you should show such a quarrelsome spirit, Joy, because of the position to which your school-fellows have elected you. The

younger children will naturally follow your lead, and I am grieved that it should be such an unworthy one. I hope to see no more of this childish and most unladylike behaviour.'

She turned away, looking very grave. It was time for afternoon school, and girls were creeping into the class-room, casting startled looks at the little group. Joy dropped into her seat, pulled out a book, and apparently began to work in feverish haste. Carry, with a jeering laugh, drew Agnes away for a whispered consultation. Kitty caught her eye, and winked meaningly. Peggy, staring at them all, sat down by Joy.

'Joy, what's the row?'

'Can't tell you now. Ask me later.' Joy was not prepared to discuss the scene yet. Fortunately, the sound of the gong put an end to Peggy's inquiries for the moment.

After school they were renewed, but Joy's explanation was not very satisfactory.

'Carry had made me wild. I can't tell you how without telling tales. I was just telling her what I thought of her, and enjoying it, when Miss Macey came in and rowed me for losing my temper. I'm sorry about that, for I really was in a rage. I don't know what I was saying, and she said she heard me all down the corridor. But whatever I said, it wasn't a bit too strong, and I won't take back a word of it. Carry knows what I think of her. I could never be friends with her again.'

'But, Joy! She's your bridesmaid!' cried Peggy, aghast.

'Don't care. I wish she wasn't. But I needn't speak to her.'

'Look here, Joy, the girls won't like it! It will be awfully uncomfortable for everybody. I'm sure the seniors will say it's bad form for a Queen to quarrel with anybody, and particularly with her bridesmaid. Couldn't you——'

'No!' Joy's tone was final. 'Not be friends with Carry. It hasn't happened before because you've had seniors for Queens. You couldn't quarrel with a Sixth Former. You might criticise her, but you couldn't quarrel with her. You said you wanted a Queen who was more in the thick of things. Well, you've got one, and this is what's come of it. Carry and I can't make it up now. I've said too much, but not more than she deserved. I meant it all. I'll never apologise.'

'It's awfully horrid!' Peggy said doubtfully. 'One expects a Queen to—well, to be nicer than other girls, and to——'

'Oh, set a good example and all that! I've heard it till I'm tired. I didn't ask you to choose me! You would have me, without waiting to know what I was like or anything. You must have known it was risky. If you're disappointed, it's your own fault. I'm sorry, but I can't help it,' and Joy withdrew her arm and walked away, leaving Peggy gazing after her in deep dismay.

CHAPTER XXVI

A QUEEN IN DISGRACE

‘Carry, what have you done to upset Joy so dreadfully?’ demanded Edna next morning. Carry laughed scornfully. ‘I wish you’d heard her! *Queen* Joy, indeed! ’Tisn’t my idea of a Queen, to fly into a rage like that over nothing!’

‘I don’t believe it was nothing. That wouldn’t be like Joy. What had you said or done?’

‘That’s my business. Ask Joy!’ laughed Carry.

‘You’ll get nothing out of those three,’ Peggy murmured, as Carry went off with Agnes and Kitty. ‘But I’m sure Carry’s done something!’

‘Of course. Joy ought to tell us,’ and Edna went to remonstrate as soon as Joy appeared.

At mention of Carry’s name Joy’s face grew grim, and she interrupted quickly.

‘It’s no use, Edna. I don’t want any more to do with Carry.’

‘But why, Joy? You must tell us! If she’s done anything awful—which we can quite believe—it’s all right, and we’ll all be on your side. But we ought to know!’

‘I can’t tell you. I’m sorry, but I really can’t.’

‘But that looks as if it wasn’t anything really important, Joy, and—and it’s such bad form for a Queen!’

‘I know. I wish you hadn’t chosen me. You may choose some one else, if you like. I won’t say anything.’

‘That’s silly! But it will be awfully awkward till you and Carry make it up again.’

‘That will be never,’ said Joy stonily.

‘Oh, rot! People say that, but it doesn’t mean anything.’

‘Doesn’t it? Well, if Carry begs my pardon for she knows what, I’ll think about it.’

‘You know she’ll never do that, Joy.’

‘That’s what I said. I said “never,” and you said “rot!”’

Edna stared at her. ‘I didn’t think you could be like this, Joy!’

Joy’s lips quivered. ‘Look here, Ed!’ she pleaded. ‘Don’t you get wild with me too! Peggy was mad last night——’

‘Not cross, only awfully worried about you.’

‘I can’t help it,’ Joy said wearily. ‘I know you’re all cross with me because I’m Queen. If I wasn’t, you’d let me quarrel with Carry and not care. But it’s not my fault that you chose me. I tried to get out of it, but every one said I must do it for the sake of the club. It’s too bad to row me now because of it. I can’t change myself because you made me Queen. But I don’t want to lose all my friends. Don’t you turn round on me too! I don’t feel as if I’d done anything wrong. Carry played me an awfully mean trick; that’s all I can say without sneaking. I feel as if I had every right to be angry, and I could never say I’m sorry. Can’t you believe me and not be too wild? You know what Carry is!’

‘All right, old girl! I’ll stick up for you. She’s a cat, I know. But couldn’t you’—and Edna took her arm and spoke persuasively—‘just because you’re Queen, couldn’t you stretch a point and try rather harder than usual, and be just a little nice to her? Even if you’d be decently polite it would help. You can’t explain to everybody, and it will look so awfully bad. Whatever you may say, the girls do expect something extra from the Queen. Of course it’s rough on you, being chosen as a new girl. When an old girl is chosen, everybody knows what

to expect. And we've had such jolly Queens, and seniors too, that it is awfully hard for anybody to follow them. But you can see for yourself how it will look, after Miriam, Honor, and Marguerite, if you won't speak to your own bridesmaid! Couldn't you perhaps do what you wouldn't do for any other reason, just because you're Queen, Joy?'

Joy shook her head. She saw very clearly how ugly her action would appear, how striking the contrast between her attitude and that of the previous Queens. She had discussed the situation with Joan, and Joan's advice had been definite—to go straight to Marguerite, since Cicely was engaged with her exam., show the 'guide-book,' and explain the trouble. But Joy would not agree. She did not want to show that book, for her own sake. She was not sure how it would be received. And there was a flavour of sneaking about this course which repelled her. Carry might not deserve consideration, but yet it was impossible for Joy to clear herself without accusing her enemy, and she shrank from doing that. If she went to Marguerite, it could only be to betray Carry, and that would be sneaking. If Carry attempted to use her knowledge, Joy would feel free to defend herself. But till Carry made some move Joy could not bring herself to action.

She soon found that Edna's opinion was general. The girls did not like Carry, and were prepared to sympathise with Joy, but they wanted an explanation of the trouble. Joy's refusal to give this caused irritation and discontent. And there was a widespread feeling that it was 'bad form' for the reigning Queen to quarrel with any one, and particularly with her Maid of Honour. Miriam and Marguerite, by their age and position, had been removed from the atmosphere of ordinary school disputes; Cicely had never really reigned at all, though her position as President of the Hamlet Club gave her a permanent authority over the juniors. Unconsciously, the girls expected Joy to reach the level of her predecessors, and felt disappointment in her failure. They felt, without expressing the thought in words, that the spectacle of a Queen not on speaking terms with some of her subjects was undignified, and everybody was very uncomfortable.

Joy, fully aware of their critical attitude, shared the general discomfort and was glad the term was nearly over. Perhaps after the holidays things would be better, though how she did not know. She felt the strain of the trouble coming at the end of the long term and of a spell of hot weather, and often during those last uneasy days she thought longingly of the quietness of Gracedieu, the peace of the cloisters, the calm serenity of the sacristy or the abbot's garden. She almost envied Joan her monotonous, secluded life, and found herself longing for home and holidays.

Marguerite could not be blind to what was going on. After a year in which everybody's business had been hers, she could not fail to perceive the trouble among the younger girls. She questioned several before she understood, for no one was willing to say much, but at last she knew as much as any one except the few who were in the secret. She consulted Miriam and Cicely, and one day they summoned Joy into the library.

She had been expecting it, and went unwillingly. 'I know why you want me! It isn't any good. Talking won't help. It's far too serious. Please don't look at me like that, Marguerite!'

'But, Joy, have you realised the effect on the school, on the little ones particularly, of this quarrel between you and Carry? They are fond of you and look up to you. It's not good for them to know you're keeping up a quarrel, without giving any reason——'

'There is a reason, and a good one,' Joy said stoutly. 'But I can't tell it to everybody.'

'Joy, couldn't you make an effort because of your position?' pleaded Miriam. 'It's so very horrid for everybody.'

‘That’s what Edna said,’ Joy said wearily. ‘I can’t, Miriam. And Carry doesn’t want me to. If I tried to make it up, she’d only laugh. She’ll never forget the things I said’—her eyes gleamed—‘and I’m glad of it! I couldn’t unsay one of them. She deserved them, and they were true.’

Cicely’s curiosity was aroused. She had “said things” herself in her time. ‘I think you ought at least to tell *us* what it was all about, Joy! If we approved of your attitude it would make the girls feel better, even if we couldn’t explain.’

If the matter had been anything different, Joy would gladly have taken this way out of the difficulty. But the feeling of which she had spoken to Joan restrained her. What if they insisted on seeing her book, and were hurt by some of the entries? Cicely might resent her criticisms, and Cicely had been very good to herself and Joan. Joy felt she could not bear to hurt her feelings.

‘I can’t tell anybody anything about it!’ she said shortly.

Cicely eyed her indignantly. ‘You’re just like Joan, as immovable as your own abbey! I liked it in her, for she stuck so hard to what she’d decided was right. But in you it’s just sheer obstinacy, Joy, and I’m disappointed in you.’

Joy’s lips quivered. ‘You don’t know all about it! You can’t judge! I’m not the only one to blame!’ and she fled, knowing that they were indeed disappointed in her.

Miss Macey, too, talked to her seriously of the responsibility of her position and her duty to the school. She questioned, scolded, and argued, but though Joy felt in disgrace on every side she would not give in. She was not sorry for her anger. She would not apologise nor unsay the words for which Carry would never forgive her. She admitted that it had been childish and undignified to lose her temper, and for that she was sorry, but that was as far as she would go. She thought sometimes of Cicely’s comparison, and remembered the old gray arches of the abbey standing there through storm and sun, rain and wind, tumult and conflict, since Norman days, while Crusade, rebellion, and civil war swept past, and even the hand of the grasping Henry left them standing, though despoiled of their ancient glory. Obstinacy or resolution, call it what one might, she could not see her way to change any more than they had done.

The storm had broken upon her, thanks to her position, but its waves reached Carry and her friends, and Miss Macey, the Queens, and the girls did their best to get to the bottom of the trouble. But Carry was satisfied for the moment. She had accomplished more than she had expected, and to betray Joy further would be to accuse herself. She was content to leave matters as they were, and would give no more satisfactory answers than Joy.

When Agnes had found the ‘guide-book’ lying on the dressing-room floor, and had discovered the nature of its contents, she had taken it straight to Carry. Carry’s first thought had been to tease Joy by refusing to give it up, but a second glance had shown her the references to herself. She had read every word then, and her desire to tease had changed to fierce anger as she discovered Joy’s opinion of her. Since then her one wish had been for revenge, and she had succeeded beyond her hopes. She had brought Joy into disfavour in every quarter, and for the moment it seemed wiser to attempt no more.

She could do much in an underhand way, however, and she, Agnes, and Kitty were always whispering in corners. At last Edna caught the drift of their remarks, and went raging to Joy, any hesitation in her sympathies dispelled for ever.

‘I heard them talking to Muriel Bayne, and it was about you and your people, Joy—I suppose because Muriel’s rather keen on you. Well, I heard Her Royal Highness Caroline

saying—"Just caretakers—quite ordinary, you know! Show people round the ruins, and take money at the door!" Isn't she a cat?"

Joy had flushed. 'Well, we do!' she said doggedly. 'You know Joan does it, except the money part. She never takes tips. But we aren't ashamed of living there.'

'Joan does it jolly well. I wish Muriel would go to Gracedieu and see for herself. I've a good mind to tell Cicely. She'd send Carry to the stocks jolly quick.'

'You won't do that, Edna! I'll never speak to you again if you do. It would be sneaking, and awfully horrid.'

'She deserves it! I'd like to see Carry in the stocks—or out of the club.'

'I won't have that done to any girl because of me, no matter how much she deserves it! I'd feel worse than Carry. And I can't drive her out of the club after making her my bridesmaid.'

'Guess you're sorry now, aren't you?'

'Very! But I can't undo it,' Joy said grimly.

Edna, however, could and did act in another way.

'I say, Carry!' and she interrupted one of the whispered conclaves. 'I heard what you said to Muriel just now. If I hear any more of that rubbish I'll tell Cicely. And you'll go into the stocks next dance-evening, and you won't like it!'

'Sneak!' said Agnes promptly.

'It would be a lot sneakier to let you and Carry go on, and keep quiet because I was afraid of what you'd say.' Edna was of an independent turn of mind very displeasing to her more conventional comrades. 'Call me what you like, but if you go on talking about Joy behind her back, *I'll tell Cicely!*'

'I only said what was perfectly true!' but Carry knew she would have to be more careful.

'I'm not at all sure of that!' She looked round quickly to make sure Joy was not present. 'Mrs Shirley and Joan are *not* ordinary caretakers, and you know it. Or perhaps you don't. You've only Agnes's word to go on, so far as Mrs Shirley is concerned. Perhaps Agnes doesn't know a lady when she sees one. But you do know Joan, and you've been perfectly satisfied with both her and Joy till this horrid business began. You're only talking like this to try to make Joy uncomfortable, and if there's any more of it you know what I'll do!' and Carry glared but subsided.

Muriel Bayne had listened with interest. There had been no dance-evening since she had come to school, and she had not seen Joan. It was hardly surprising that on the following Saturday she should cycle to Gracedieu to see for herself. She rang the big bell, and had almost greeted the bronze-haired girl who answered it as Joy before she realised that this must be the cousin. There was a slight difference of expression, and this girl wore no silver medal.

So Muriel followed her through the cloisters, garth, and monastery, more interested in herself than in her description of refectory or chapter-house. She was not wearing her school hat and nothing betrayed her connection with the Wycombe school; she wondered if she would see Joy, but Joy was out on tramp, following the Icknield Way to Watlington and beyond, and Muriel only saw the Curate and the Mother Superior romping in the cloisters. She went home with a greatly enlarged knowledge of architectural periods, and of the rules and customs of Cistercian monks, and with her mind made up as to Carry's insinuations.

'I say, Carry!' she called across the class-room on Monday while Joy was having a music lesson. 'You were awfully mistaken in what you told me about Joy Shirley's people. I don't know who had told you all that rubbish, but there was no sense in it. I went to see for myself.'

Edna chuckled openly. Carry scowled at her, and Muriel went on, with apparent innocence.

‘I was shown round by an awfully pretty girl, the image of Joy. I almost called her Joy, but just in time I saw she must be the other one. I had a word with her mother too, and I quite fell in love with them both. They’re as nice as they can be. What that pretty girl doesn’t know about her abbey isn’t worth knowing. Have any of you heard her? Doesn’t she make it interesting about the monks and lay brothers? Hasn’t she a pretty way of telling it! And such a soft voice! I liked her awfully!’

Carry scowled on, but had the wisdom to say no more. Edna, chuckling, slipped away to meet Joy and tell her all about it.

Thereafter Muriel was a devoted champion of Joy’s cause, quite seeing through Carry’s petty tactics, and begged to be properly introduced to Joan at the next dance-evening.

‘I knew better than to offer her money, of course,’ she confided to Edna. ‘One couldn’t, to a girl like that. I thanked her, but I’d like to do it again. She really seemed to be taking so much trouble.’

‘That’s because she’s so awfully fond of the abbey,’ Edna explained.

Muriel’s attitude was typical of what was happening in other quarters. The girls were taking sides, and the state of feeling in the school was very uncomfortable.

‘It’s horrid!’ sighed Peggy, as the end of the term drew near, and still Joy and Carry met in cloak-room or corridor without a glance or word. ‘Will they keep it up after the holidays? The old Queens don’t like it! I do wish Joy would be sensible!’

And Joy was as uncomfortable as any of them, and longed for the holidays, and the loneliness of Gracedieu.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE ABBEY SANCTUARY

The sports and tennis tournaments were over; also the exams. Joy, tired out with the strain of the last few weeks, and utterly weary of herself, Carry, and everybody, threw her books into a box under her bed, and gave herself up to rest, music, and the quiet of the abbey. She had worked well, and had earned her remove along with Peggy, Agnes, and Kitty. Unfortunately, Carry would be moving up also, so the future promised only a continuance of the present uncomfortable conditions. But Joy was glad she was not to be left behind. That would have been very galling. She had satisfied Miss Bates also, and was beginning to know the reasons for the things she instinctively felt in music, and to hope that some day she might be able to write her own songs.

During those holidays she appreciated for the first time at their full value the peacefulness and loneliness of her home. From the first evening, when she had put her books out of sight and wandered, sore and tired with thoughts of school, across the cloisters and garth, to sit in the rose window of the sacristy, the serenity and strength of the old buildings soothed and helped her. At first she only knew that she felt better for being there, and for strolling under the ancient arches and doorways—that the gray stones, with their robe of beautiful brown and yellow lichen, had a message for her. But gradually she came to love them as Joan did, and to crave to be among them whenever she was not at the piano or out in the woods. She was still ‘Traveller’s Joy,’ and spent many days in the tramping and exploring which so delighted and refreshed her, but always in the long August evenings she came back to the abbey under the beech-clad hills, and learned to know it as she had never done before.

Her new love for the ruins made her wish to know their history, and Joan, much amused, was delighted to act as guide. So Joy learned for the first time that the chapter-house and sacristy had stood there since the days of Henry the Third, and the low, round doorway near them since the time of Stephen; that the narrow windows of the dormitory dated from the days of John, while the high, wide-arched lights of the refectory were not earlier than Henry the Fourth’s reign. She learned to feel something of Joan’s enthusiasm for the vaulting of the chapter-house roof and the high arch of the refectory, and to share her regret that the beautiful stone tracery had vanished from the rose window. She followed her as she led parties of Americans from garth to cloister, and heard her description of ‘angel corbels,’ ‘hammer-beam roof,’ ‘aumbries,’ and ‘piscinæ.’ Much of it she had heard before, but without understanding its significance. Now she felt as if some one had opened her eyes. For the first time the fact that an arch was pointed and not round, that the support on which it rested was circular and not square, that a pillar was divided into separate graceful shafts instead of being solid stone, had a meaning, and Joan’s delight in the craftsmanship of Early English days began to infect her also.

‘I can almost see those old monks building while you’re talking, Joan!’

‘I fancy the lay brothers did a good deal of the building,’ Joan laughed. ‘They lived in our bedrooms, and all along our side of the cloisters, you know.’

‘Weren’t they as good as the real monks, then?’

‘Not so holy. They didn’t take such strict vows.’

'I'd have been a lay brother! This is very pretty! Have the other arches got it too?' and Joy went to look at the moulding as if visiting the abbey for the first time. 'I never noticed it before! I only knew they were pretty. I've been as blind as a bat!'

'You can tell the age of the arch by the pattern,' and Joan led her to see specimens of 'dog-tooth,' 'zigzag,' and 'nail-head,' and to explain their meaning.

It was a relief that none of her school companions had been invited to her home. Several of them knew the way, but it was far from most of their homes, and many were away at the seaside. Occasionally a post card came from Edna or Peggy, suggesting a picnic, and they met at Whiteleaf, or Bledlow, and spent the afternoon in the woods. But during the whole holidays Joy never went near Wycombe, but always walked in the other directions, across the vale to Chalgrove Field, round the foot of the hills by the Icknield Way, or across the heights towards Fingest and Hambleton.

One morning a note arrived from Cicely, requesting their attendance at a dance-evening in Darley's barn, in preparation for the fête. Neither she nor Marguerite was away, as both were going abroad in the autumn, Marguerite to spend six months in France, Cicely to take her long-promised trip to Ceylon. Many Hamlet girls were at home also, and these would enjoy a dance-evening.

Joan accepted the invitation, but Joy explained that she need not go since she was not required to dance. She would stay at home, and if any Americans turned up she would help Mrs Shirley to attend to them. She almost felt qualified to show them round alone, she declared.

'Carry wasn't there. You needn't have been frightened,' said Joan, as she came in late at night. 'She's away at Brighton.'

Joy flushed. 'I couldn't be sure. Did Cicely mind?'

'No, but she talked to me about you and Carry, and she minds that awfully, Joy.'

'I know. I knew she'd talk about it.'

'Wouldn't it be better to tell her, Joy? I believe it would worry her less than the present state of things, even if she was annoyed at your book. She hates the thought of going away and leaving such an uncomfortable feeling in the school. And everybody's dreading the fête.'

'So am I!' said Joy grimly. 'I think I'll have a cold.'

'That wouldn't do. They'd know.'

'Yes, they'd know I'd funk'd it. No, I'll have to go, but it will be hateful.' She thrust away the thought and spoke lightly. 'Joan, we had some Americans!'

'Oh?' Joan threw aside her light coat and stood in her dancing dress. 'And did you go round with them? How did you get on?'

'Fairly. I muddled Decorated and Perpendicular.'

'Joy, how could you? What would they think?'

'That I didn't know very much, and they weren't far wrong!' Joy laughed. 'But one muddle was your fault, Joan! You must have told me wrong.'

'I'm sure I haven't!'

'Well, they argued it, and I couldn't explain. How do you account for this? All that—she led the way out into the moonlit garth and pointed at the row of broken windows above the cloisters—is Norman. Round arches, zigzag pattern—even I can see that. But the cloisters underneath are Early English, and so are our rooms. Our windows are all lancets, with dog-tooth work and all the rest! Now, how can the low part be newer than the higher? It's impossible, and yet it's so!'

Joan laughed. ‘You poor thing! Yes, I ought to have explained that. It is so, the top story is older. They often did that—built under a good part, just as people do now. You’ve seen new shops built under old houses in town? They’d support that upper story, where the lay brothers slept, while they rebuilt the lower rooms and cloisters. In those days they never pulled down anything if they could help it. That’s how it happened. I wish you’d been able to explain! I don’t like people going away unsatisfied.’

‘I couldn’t possibly have explained that! And he asked if it was used as sanctuary, and I didn’t know what he meant, but I knew it must be something to do with “holy,” so I said I thought most likely it was.’

Joan laughed again. ‘He meant a place where people could take refuge, and their enemies couldn’t touch them. You answered all right. It must have been used so.’

‘I like the idea,’ Joy said dreamily, her mind reverting to her troubles. ‘That’s how I feel about it—a quiet place where your worries can’t get at you and people can’t plague you.’

‘Poor kid! But you know what I think, Joy.’

Joy shook her head. ‘I couldn’t do it,’ she said.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AN UNCOMFORTABLE CEREMONY

The guests at the Hospital Fête saw nothing wrong with the pretty festival they cheered so loudly. But every girl in the school hall knew all was not well, and the principal figures were conscious that things were very far wrong indeed.

With the exception of the abdication and crowning ceremonies, the proceedings followed the precedent of May-day. A rollicking country-dance was suddenly interrupted by shouts of 'The Queen!' and all knelt to cheer the Royal procession.

Joy's face was very grave as she bowed to right and left without a smile. The girls were only cheering because it was necessary; the heartiness of May-day was lacking. It was just part of the show to-day. She felt in a very unfestive mood herself. It had been very uncomfortable while she dressed in one corner and Carry in another, and neither looked across the room. Joy had needed her maid's help, and would have fared badly if Edna and Peggy had not come to her aid when their own Queens were ready. They had arranged her train and placed her crown straight, exclaiming with delight, for Joan had made it and arranged her bouquet, and Joy had gathered great trails of wild clematis, with its creamy stars, to bind the flowers into the wreath and to hang from the bunch in her hands. But in spite of their help, Joy had been conscious of the universal disappointment—in them, among the former Queens, and in the school in general—when the new term found matters no better for the seven weeks' interval. The three elder girls, dressing in the same room and laughing and talking together, disapproved of her attitude, and she knew it, and was keenly unhappy. But Carry had not looked at her when she walked into school on the first morning, and Joy felt it out of the question for her to make any advance.

So as she walked between the lines of cheering girls, she knew that behind the shouts there was disapproval, and she wished the day was over. Carry, holding the green train spread out, looked proudly defiant, for several had expressed their surprise that she had not resigned her position, and she knew that many blamed her equally with Joy. But she knew also that nothing would have pleased Joy better than to have had the chance of choosing a new maid, on whose sympathy she could rely, and Carry was not likely to gratify her by resigning.

The elder girls following in procession were as grave as their leaders. Marguerite, wearing the forget-me-nots which were her right and might be Joy's next year, carried a sheaf of daisies, her rich pink train borne by Edna. Cicely, carrying golden sunflowers, with streamers of red creeper like the autumn leaves on her golden train, and Miriam, with her hands full of early white dahlias, showed by their faces that the trouble in the school, and the shadow of coming separation, was weighing upon them. They had been close friends for three years, but in a week now they must part.

'But you've promised to be home for May-day!' Miriam reminded them again and again. 'Don't leave Joy and me to make a procession by ourselves! I do wish you weren't going! I know Marguerite will come home Frenchified, and you'll go and get engaged on the voyage!' and Cicely's peal of derisive laughter at the idea had been the one cheerful sound in the dressing-room.

But the audience saw nothing wrong, and set down the gravity of the Queens to the importance of their position, and praised their dignity warmly. Miriam's fair beauty, which

always caused her to be voted the prettiest Queen of them all, Cicely's proud bearing and stately carriage, Marguerite's dark glowing colouring, all came in for their share of admiration, while 'the little new Queen,' with her shining bronze hair and delicate fair face, was counted a worthy successor to the line. She was so obviously much younger than her predecessors that the spectators wondered if she had found her position difficult.

The shouts of the kneeling girls as the procession passed were for their particular favourites: 'Long live the White Queen! Hurrah for Mirry Honor!' 'Good old "Strawberry!" Three cheers for Queen Marguerite!' 'Go it, President! Hip, hip, for Cicely!' The audience could not know, but Joy was well aware, that the cheers for the Green Queen were less hearty than for the others.

Looking very grave, she ascended the platform and stood till her companions were seated. Then she bowed right and left, with a particular glance to where Sir Antony sat, and took her place. At the first notes of 'Sellenger's Round' the girls sprang to form big circles, and a country dance began.

But the Musical Society had its share in the programme also, and Queens or not, its members must do their share. Miriam's voice could not be spared from any entertainment, and presently she rose. She had threatened to sing, 'Will ye no' come back again?' but the Strawberry Queen had been so certain she would cry that Miriam had yielded and sang instead an Old English folk-song, which, after all, was more suitable to the occasion.

Her song, Cicely's recitation, and a song from Marguerite, were as necessary features of any Musical festivity as Nell Branscombe's pianoforte solo or Kitty's violin. But when Joy went to the piano, her train sweeping the ground, the audience smiled, supposing she had been allowed to take part so that she should not be the only Queen left out. Their surprise at the treat she was able to give expressed itself in a roar of applause, and Sir Antony eyed her in grim astonishment, for he had never heard her play.

When called upon for another solo later, she did not return to the piano, however, but placed the stool behind a small table handed to her by Margia, and coming to the edge of the platform bent to take a strange instrument from Joan, who had hidden it in a class-room. While everybody stared and Cicely smiled, she laid it in position across the table, fixed a little ring on her right thumb, and deliberately tuned the thirty-two strings; then without music began to play a melody of strange, clear notes, like those of a harp, and a deeper bass as rich as a piano. She had pleaded to be allowed to play the zither once as a novelty, if she must play a second time at all, and Miss Bates had consented.

'You have given us a surprise, Joy!' Miriam exclaimed, as Joy took her place again. 'That's awfully pretty! It would make a lovely accompaniment for singing.'

'I'd love to play for you some time, if you'd be willing to sing with me,' Joy said eagerly.

'I'd like to! You'll have to play again. Do you know anything else?'

Joy laughed and went back to her table, since there seemed no other way to satisfy the demands of the crowd. When she had handed the zither to Joan, Cicely greeted her with a laugh.

'You've kept that dark a long time, "Traveller's Joy!"'

'You won't be able to keep it to yourself any longer,' the Strawberry Queen assured her. 'They'll insist on hearing it at every Musical,' and Joy found she was right.

'You'll bring that queer thing of yours, won't you, Joy?' was the way the request was worded, till her indignant remonstrances taught them the 'queer thing's' name.

She sat down again, and the girls took their partners for a minuet. But in spite of the delight her surprise had given, Joy was glad when the afternoon was over, and she could lay aside her robes and crown and go home with Joan to the quietness of Gracedieu. Her 'bridesmaid,' sitting sulkily at her feet, had not applauded any item in which her royal mistress had taken part. The strained relations were apparent to any one who cared to look, and it was only the ignorance of the visitors which prevented the fact being patent to everybody. The girls knew, and the mistresses knew. They were all very uncomfortable, and wondered if the quarrel would go on for ever.

There was no time for comment that day, for Joy purposely hurried away. But she expected criticism next time she appeared at school; Miss Macey would certainly have something to say.

'I'm glad there's a Sunday in between!' she sighed, and spent a quiet evening in the sacristy, nursing the Curate and resting.

'I'm going to the Hall to ask if Sir Antony was pleased,' Joan announced on Sunday morning. 'I don't believe he'd been to anything so jolly for years. Wasn't it queer to see him there?'

'I hope the excitement didn't upset him,' Joy laughed. 'He enjoyed the minuet, though you wouldn't have thought it to look at him unless you'd known him as we do. He looked just a speck less grim than usual, that was all. But he watched you all round the room, Joan. Your gray dress did look awfully jolly with Muriel Bayne's pink. But then Sir Antony likes you.'

'I like Muriel! She promised to be my partner regularly when you were "queening." Sir Antony looked awfully surprised at your solos. I suppose he didn't believe you could really play. I'm glad he's heard you at last,' and Joan went off through the tresaunt and abbot's garden. She had been many times now, for an odd friendship had sprung up between her and the lonely old man. He sent for her continually, and Joan humoured his whims as she had done at their first meeting in the abbey, remembering that he was old and disappointed and in poor health. Joy was invited occasionally, when he demanded the minuet or morris jig again, but when he wished for one alone it was always Joan. It had become a joke between them, and today as Joy sauntered into the kitchen, she said, 'Joan's gone to inquire for her young man, and see how he enjoyed the dancing yesterday, mother dear. I believe she quite likes him. Aren't they funny?'

Joan came flying back ten minutes later, her face white. 'He's ill! He had a stroke last night, and they've wired for a nurse, but he's awfully bad, can't speak or move—oh, mother, couldn't you go and help?'

Mrs Shirley had started up, her face full of distress. 'I may be able to do something. That is terrible news, Joan.'

Joan broke down and cried. 'They asked if you'd come. There's only the housekeeper and servants. It seems so lonely. Hasn't he any one of his own, mother?'

Mrs Shirley paused at the door of her bedroom. 'His daughter died. His only son went abroad years ago, and they have been searching for him for the last few months.'

'How awful! It's dreadfully sad, mother!'

'Mother dear!' cried Joy, with eyes wide with dismay. 'Do you think yesterday had anything to do with it? Was it the excitement and unusualness of it made him ill? If it was, I'll never be able to enjoy our dancing again!'

'No, dear, I don't think so for a moment. At his age this might have happened at any time. I had a word with him last night. He stopped the car here on his way to say he had enjoyed the

afternoon and you had looked very nice. You have nothing to regret. You gave him a happy afternoon, and if it should prove to have been his last you will be thankful.'

'Mother, do you think he'll die?' wailed Joan.

'Isn't it queer that we should care?' added Joy. 'For we *shall* care. Three months ago we wouldn't have cared a scrap, and I don't suppose anybody else would either.'

'I'll tell him, if I think he can understand. It's only right you should be prepared, girls, so I'll tell you what you didn't know. This is the second time he has had such an attack. The first was soon after we came here, while he was still abroad, and it left him weakened as you saw. I fear there is not much hope. He may linger for some time, but he is not likely to be strong again,' and she hurried away, leaving them sobered and greatly distressed.

CHAPTER XXIX FOR CICELY

Joy arrived late at school on Monday morning, partly with a desire to check any comments on her behaviour and Carry's, partly because Mrs Shirley had been at the Hall all night, helping the nurse, and Joy had hoped to see her before she had to go. She waited till the last minute, but Mrs Shirley had not come, so she had reluctantly to set off without hearing the latest news. Sir Antony had been unconscious all the day before, and the doctor and nurse feared he could not rally. Joan, attending to the housework at home, was as sober and anxious as Joy setting out for school, for a curious liking had sprung up between them and the irritable old man, and they were awed by the sudden blow and pitiful for his loneliness.

'If only he had somebody!' Joan said again and again, and as Joy went to school her thoughts were more of him than of herself and Carry.

In the playground Edna and Peggy came racing to meet her.

'Joy, did you really write those "Remarks by a Queen?" Did Cicely and Marguerite really say——'

'I don't know what you mean. What remarks?' Joy's sharp question cut her short. Had Carry made a move at last?

'On the notice-board in the hall. I said you didn't!' Edna cried triumphantly. 'But who did, do you think?'

'Carry, of course. Made it all up herself,' said Peggy. 'She thought we'd believe Joy did it, and——'

'Why, Joy, what's the matter?' cried Edna, as Joy, white and resolute, pushed past them.

'I want to see. I don't know what you're talking about,' and regardless of rules concerning hats and boots she went swiftly to the big hall, where the girls' notice-board hung.

All kinds of intimations were pinned up here—notices of lost and found articles, requests for exchange by collectors, jokes, advertisements by the editor of the magazine, announcements of meetings of the clubs. There was generally a crowd round the board; to-day it was larger than usual, for several reasons. A farewell letter from the Strawberry Queen to the Hamlet Club was posted there, for she was leaving the country at the end of the week. It was not in front of this that the crowd was thickest, however. The girls stood laughing, pointing, and discussing a typewritten sheet, running as follows:—

REMARKS BY A QUEEN ON ADVICE RECEIVED

'CICELY HOBART.—Don't let the kids impose on you. They'll make up troubles just to make you fuss over them.

'THE QUEEN.—Doesn't sound likely, President! Are you sure you're right? Even Presidents might make mistakes, you know—especially when they're always positive they're right.

'MARGUERITE.—Never quarrel with any one. If you do, you won't be able to stop other quarrels.

'THE QUEEN.—I should never quarrel with anybody! I'm far too gentle and sweet-tempered!

‘EDNA GILKS.—Don’t waste time on other girls! Always wait for *me* after school! Nobody else is worth while!

‘THE QUEEN.—Like your conceit, Edna! Perhaps I’m not so keen on you and your Saints as you think.

‘CICELY HOBART.—Jump on Edna and Peggy now and then. They need it.

‘THE QUEEN.—If somebody had jumped on you when you were younger, President, you wouldn’t be such an awful bully now. You think nobody can ever be right but yourself!’

‘I *never* said that!’ and Joy’s pent-up rage broke out. She had restrained herself with difficulty as she read the garbled version of her notes.

‘Why, Joy, we never thought you did! It’s all a joke of Carry’s, isn’t it? Rather a nasty one, though. But no one would take it seriously.’

Joy took it seriously, however. She knew that this public beginning would be followed by a campaign of underhand accusation, that the story of her book would be whispered, and that every one would believe the entries to be genuine. The matter had gone far enough, and Carry had gone too far. Joy had hesitated to take Joan’s advice before, but this blow brought her to the point.

‘Where is Carry?’ she demanded, facing the curious eyes turned on her. Some were friendly, but several were critical.

‘She’s not coming. She’s got a cold,’ Agnes said defiantly.

Joy gave a scornful laugh. ‘So she sent her messages by you! You may tell her I’m much obliged to her. She’s given me the chance I wanted. I wasn’t going to sneak, but now she’s left me no choice. I’m going straight to Cicely and Miriam——’

‘You daren’t! You can’t show them that book!’

‘That’s what Carry counted on, I suppose. But I do dare, whatever happens. If I’m to be blamed for anything, it shall be for the truth. I’ll show them just what I did say. I only wish I had the book here——’

‘Then did you write some of it, Joy?’ cried Edna sharply. ‘Did you say that about me?’

‘I wrote something, and Carry has twisted it till it’s all different. I’ll show you and everybody what I wrote.’ Joy’s wrath was still at white heat, and her voice rang out as it had done that other day. ‘Is Cicely here yet?’

Carry had chosen her day well. Cicely and Marguerite had not come back to school this term, as both were leaving home so soon, but to-day Marguerite had promised to come to say good-bye, and Cicely was coming to meet her, since their homes lay far apart. Their obvious meeting-place was school, and Miss Macey was always glad to welcome old girls.

‘They’re all in the library,’ and Peggy, looking scared at Joy’s expression, shrank out of the way.

‘There’s going to be a jolly old row!’ murmured Edna, as Joy strode away, her cheeks flaming. ‘I never knew Joy had a temper like that! She hasn’t stopped to take off her hat!’

‘Or her boots, and they’re always muddy because she will tramp across the fields! Hope Miss Anskell doesn’t catch her!’

The three seniors were talking earnestly when Joy burst in upon them. They were very close friends, and they all had the welfare of the school at heart. Miriam would be the only one left, for though she had passed her Intermediate exam. successfully, she was now aiming at her degree, and was glad of Miss Macey’s invitation to continue her studies at school. She

would have to work alone, of course, but she had done so for a year now, and the mistresses would give her the help she required.

When Joy entered, flushed, angry, and untidy, her name was on their lips, for they were reluctantly agreeing that the Green Queen had not been the success they had hoped. Cicely was begging Miriam to watch how matters developed and write to tell her if they improved, when the door was thrown open and Joy burst in.

‘May I speak to you, please, all of you?’

‘Joy!’ Marguerite said reprovingly. ‘You shouldn’t be here in your hat and coat. *And* your boots! Joy!’

‘Is anything the matter, Joy?’ Miriam asked quietly.

‘Is this the explosion?’ queried Cicely, under her breath, and watched Joy with interest, being the owner of a fiery temper herself.

‘Have you read what’s on the notice-board?’ Joy, breathing quickly, brushed aside the reproof unheeded.

‘No? Is something wrong?’

‘I wish you—would you mind looking?’

‘I’ll go!’ and Cicely sprang up, her curiosity aroused.

‘We’ll all go!’ and they followed her to the hall, while Joy sank into a chair and struggled to steady herself.

The younger girls drew back respectfully at sight of them, but watched their faces eagerly.

‘Well, I never did!’ Cicely murmured. ‘I say! What cheek!’ as she read the last sentences.

‘Joy didn’t make that up, Cicely,’ Miriam said quietly. ‘She asked us to come and look. It’s some one else——’

‘Carry, of course! Let’s get to the bottom of this!’ and they returned to the library.

Joy sprang up. ‘Do you believe I did it?’

‘Now, “Traveller’s Joy,” suppose you just explain and have no more mysteries! Did you put that paper on the board?’

‘No, I came late, and Edna and Peggy fetched me to see.’

‘It’s Carry, I suppose?’

‘Yes! But it’s not all made up! I’ll have to tell you now,’ Joy faltered. ‘Joan told me to tell you weeks ago, but I was afraid you’d be offended or hurt. I wanted to be a good Queen, and I knew it would be difficult to come after you three, and I did want to do well, so I got a book and wrote in it all the advice any one gave me. Most of it was from you, but some was Miss Macey, and some was Edna and Carry and the other girls. And then—then it was tempting, and some of the things seemed funny, so I—wrote comments of my own underneath. Perhaps some of them were cheeky; Joan and Miss Lane said so, but I didn’t mean any harm, and none of the things were as bad as those Carry’s made up. You see, Carry found my book, and——’ she came to a stop.

‘She read it?’ Cicely asked quietly, but in keen interest.

‘I don’t want to sneak, but——’

‘Obviously Carry read the book! And that’s what you quarrelled about last June?’

‘I told her what I thought of her,’ Joy admitted, and shot a swift look at Cicely.

Cicely laughed. ‘I wish I’d heard you!’

‘Miss Macey did!’ Joy said ruefully. ‘I said a good deal, you know, and then Carry wouldn’t speak to me, and I wouldn’t speak to her, and you all told me it was my duty to make friends, but how could I?’

‘But why didn’t you explain? If we’d known what was wrong we’d have understood, and every one would have felt so much better.’

Joy flushed and hung her head. ‘I was afraid—I didn’t want you to read my book. I thought some parts might hurt your feelings—yours especially—and you’ve been so awfully jolly to me and Joan. I’d rather have you cross with me, as you’ve been ever since. If you’ll believe I didn’t mean any harm, I’ll let you read it, but I wasn’t sure how you’d take it. If you had thought I meant to be horrid I’d have felt awfully bad.’

They looked at one another. Then Cicely asked gently, ‘And what did Joan say?’

‘That I ought to risk it and tell you.’

‘Yes, you ought to have told us, Joy,’ Miriam said quietly.

‘But it was very nice of you to care how we’d feel! I’m sorry we’ve all seemed to blame you, Joy, but how could we know?’ the Strawberry Queen said earnestly.

‘But where is the book now, Joy? May we see it? Or perhaps Carry has it still?’

Joy, much relieved, described the finding of the book. ‘I couldn’t tell you without seeming to tell on Carry. That was another reason. I didn’t want to sneak. The book’s safe at home. I wish I had it here! I’d give it to you. I’d said things about Carry too, of course, but she didn’t put those on the board!’

‘It seems to me, Mirry, that Marguerite and I had better see Miss Carry before we go, or we’ll be leaving you a difficult job. I’ll enjoy talking to her! But she won’t enjoy it; she doesn’t like me! Joy, do you know what I’m going to do? While you go into morning school, I’m going to cycle to Gracedieu and fetch that book. We want all this cleared up to-day. Do you mind?’

‘Not if you’ll believe I didn’t mean to be cheeky or horrid.’

‘We’ll remember,’ and they dismissed her, and sat discussing the solution of their problem while the gong rang for classes.

‘Poor kid!’ Cicely said at last. ‘She’s had a horrid time, and all because she didn’t want to hurt our feelings! Every one’s been down on her, but I don’t quite see what else she could have done, feeling as she did. Carry’s a little cat.’

‘We must be quite sure she knew the book was private before we blame her,’ Miriam remarked.

‘As Joy says, Margia can prove that. I’m quite keen to read what she did say! Will you come too, “Strawberry?”’ and they went off together to ride across the hills to Gracedieu.

Edna and Peggy, Agnes and Kitty eyed Joy curiously when she appeared, the last two with some anxiety. But she shook her head and would tell them nothing, even at the eleven o’clock interval, and waited eagerly for her summons to the company of the seniors.

They had spent half an hour over her book, laughing occasionally, or remarking, ‘Cheek! Cheeky kid!’ now and then, but thanks to her explanation taking her remarks in the spirit in which they had been written. Cicely came upon the first one quoted by Carry, in its original form, and laughed uneasily.

‘Perhaps I am too positive sometimes! “Traveller’s Joy” has been acting the “chiel amang you takin’ notes,” it seems. But I’m glad that last paragraph of Carry’s is all humbug. I wouldn’t have liked Joy to have written that.’

‘Carry must have known this was private,’ and Miriam frowned.

‘Of course she knew! She’s an absolute rotter. I shall have much pleasure in telling her so. I don’t wonder she didn’t come to school to-day!’

‘Do you think she knew what would happen, then?’

‘No, on the whole, I don’t. So her cold can’t have been put on for that reason. No, I think she thought Joy would be afraid to show the book, and so wouldn’t be able to get out of the hole Carry was trying to put her in.—Well, “Traveller’s Joy,” we’ve read your libellous remarks,’ as Joy entered in answer to their summons, and flushed at sight of her book in Cicely’s hands.

‘Joan gave it to you?’ she faltered.

‘Joan did, with the remark that we ought to have had it ten weeks ago. You’re a cheeky child, my dear, to criticise your elders and betters when they were only trying to help you!’

‘Don’t row her when you know you don’t mean it, President,’ said Mirry Honor.

‘Joy knows just how much to believe,’ said the Strawberry Queen.

‘I am sorry. I’ll say so as often as you like. But I didn’t mean any harm,’ Joy pleaded, relieved by Cicely’s tone.

‘I’m glad to know all about it before we scatter to the ends of the earth! I’d have gone to Ceylon quite worried, but for Miss Caroline. Now what are you going to do, “Traveller’s Joy?”’

Joy’s eyes gleamed. ‘I thought of handing my book round. The girls ought to know what I really said. There are some things in it that will make Carry feel worse than anything I could say. She hates to be laughed at, and the girls will love it. And they’ll see how mean she was to read my private book.’

The Queens looked at one another. Cicely nodded. ‘You’ve every right to do it. She played you a horrid trick. They ought to know.’

‘But if you do, Joy, what then? You ought to think what’s going to come of anything before you do it,’ Marguerite urged.

‘Joy!’ said Miriam earnestly. ‘If you do that, Carry will never forgive you, and this horrid quarrel will go on. It has made everybody uncomfortable already. Couldn’t you try to end it? You’ve a chance now to be very unkind to Carry and make her feel really bad. Any of us can make her see that. If you’d be generous and give up your chance of hurting her, it might be possible to make her say she was sorry for reading your book and using it as she has done, and then you could at least pretend to be friends again. I know it would be difficult for you to be really friends, but you might get the length of speaking decently to one another, and after a while you’d find you were forgetting all this. It would be better for the school. I know you feel you want to pay Carry out. But couldn’t you give that up?’

Joy looked from one to the other. ‘I don’t feel like doing anything for her. She doesn’t deserve it.’

‘Perhaps not. But couldn’t you be generous?’

‘It would be so much pleasanter for everybody, Joy. And it’s my last day, and I would like to know there’ll be no more trouble,’ urged the Strawberry Queen.

‘Buck up, “Traveller’s Joy!” You’ll do it for the sake of the school, I know.’

Joy gave Cicely a quick look. ‘I won’t! But I’ll do it to please you, if you really want me to.’

The others laughed. Cicely said quickly, ‘That’s really nice of you! But you ought to do it for the school. But never mind the reason. It will let Marguerite and me go off feeling much better. Now, Joy, I shall get hold of some of the girls, and tell them all about your book, and just what you meant it for, and give them the real version of Carry’s entries. I’ll tell them you can’t show it because there are things in it about her that would only make matters worse, and if you’re willing we’ll burn it here and now and have done with it. Then they can’t ask to see

it,' and Joy nodded assent. 'I'll tell the girls you and Carry quarrelled about it, and that will be quite enough. If you're really willing to please us, you won't tell them how she found and read your book. Keep that to yourself as long as she behaves decently to you. Then I shall see her and tell her what we think of her and what we expect in future. Unless I'm much mistaken she'll apologise when next she sees you, and you'll accept her apology and do your best to make it easy for her. And if you can't be friends you'll be as friendly as you can. Now will you play up?'

Joy looked up at her. 'Yes, to please you!'

'How awfully nice of you, "Traveller's Joy!"' Cicely flushed. 'You couldn't give me a jollier send-off. I want to feel that the school's quite all right. And when Marguerite and I come home for May-day, we'll hope to find everybody happy and jolly again. I wonder who the new Queen will be? I'm afraid you may have the same old Saint and Sinner trouble over again. I say! Wasn't it uncomfortable on Saturday?—in spite of your zither, for which we're much obliged, Joy! Well, when you're crowning the next Queen and wearing your forget-me-nots, advise her never to quarrel with her bridesmaid! And try not to quarrel any more yourself!'

Joy looked up piteously. 'I'm not really quarrelsome! How could I help it? Don't think me a rotter altogether!'

'We don't. But you've got a temper something like mine, "Traveller's Joy."'

'I don't know about yours, but I was quite surprised at my own,' Joy admitted. 'Nobody ever makes me cross at home, and so I never flare up like that with Aunty or Joan.'

'I'm sure you don't! They're too good to you. Now do be nice to Carry, Joy!'

'It will be very difficult for Carry, you know,' Miriam reminded her. 'You'll meet her half-way, won't you, Joy?'

'Not that she deserves it, all the same,' said the Strawberry Queen. 'And now, Cicely, having said all you want to, don't you think you might give Joy her sister's message?—cousin's, I mean. I always think of them as twin sisters!'

'Gracious, I quite forgot! Joy, Joan wants you to go home after dinner, instead of waiting for afternoon classes. She didn't say why, but she said you were needed. I hope there's nothing wrong, but I thought she looked worried. Miss Macey will excuse you if you ask her.'

Joy's eyes were wide with dismay. 'It's Sir Antony! I'd forgotten him in all this fuss. He was taken ill on Saturday, and we're afraid he's very bad. But why do they want me?'

'I'm sorry he's ill. I don't know, but perhaps Joan thinks she could help, and wants you to take charge at home.'

'Yes, Aunty's been there ever since. Perhaps Joan wants to go too,' and Joy went soberly off to consult Miss Macey, and then to start for home and eat her sandwiches on the way.

CHAPTER XXX

SIR ANTONY'S MESSAGE

'Joy, it's awfully queer, but he's asking for you.'

Joy tossed her books and cap into a chair. 'Whatever for? It's you he likes. He's made a mistake.'

'I think perhaps his mind isn't quite clear, for he keeps calling for "Joyce," not Joy. Mother came home just after you'd started, and said there was a change in him and now he was able to speak, but didn't seem quite himself. She sent me up to ask if I could take any message or do anything to help, and the nurse asked if I knew who "Joyce" was, as he seemed to want her. I said there was Joy, my cousin, but I knew no one else, and then I came home and told mother, and she told me to send you up as soon as you came home, and then went back herself. So when Cicely turned up I thought I ought to tell you. I knew you only had needlework and prep. this afternoon.'

'Glad to miss the needlework! All right, I'll go at once,' and Joy hurried away through cloisters, garth, and tresaunt.

Joan, thankful that no visitors had come to-day, sat turning over a problem. What could Joy do at the Hall that she could not have done? Why had the sick man called for Joy? He had never seemed to prefer her; he had shown more interest in Joan herself. Above all, why should he call for 'Joyce?' It might be a mistake on his part, but not one a sick and very feeble man was likely to make. Surely, if he had meant Joy, he would have used the name he knew!

Was 'Joyce' perhaps some one else, some relation? But Mrs Shirley had seemed to think Joy was meant, or might be able to help. It was very puzzling.

Two facts claimed sudden recognition. Mrs Shirley had always admitted distant relationship, 'connection by marriage,' she had said, with Sir Antony's family. And Joy's mother had been Joyce.

Joan, flushed and startled, sprang up and began to wander in garth and cloisters, too restless to be still. It would be impossible to say anything to Joy without permission, of course, but to-night in bed she would ask her mother. After all, it was not so impossible as it had seemed at first, only amazing because they had been so unsuspecting. Joy had certainly guessed nothing.

She kept glancing at the low round arch of the tresaunt, and when they appeared she ran to meet them, then stopped with a sob at sight of her mother's look and the tears on Joy's face.

'Oh, mother—*no!*' she cried piteously.

'He didn't know me, Joan. I was too late. He'd stopped calling for any one——'

'He died quietly an hour ago. But he had been conscious for an hour, and had been able to make me understand,' Mrs Shirley said very gravely.

'Mother, how awfully sad! All alone like that! Hadn't he any one belonging to him?'

'Just one little girl,' Mrs Shirley sat on the broken cloister window-seat on which Edna had stood to whistle for the morris dance so long ago. She put her arm round Joy. 'Girls, I have something to tell you. I wasn't allowed to tell you before, but now you will have to know.'

Joy's eyes were wide and wondering. 'A girl, mother dear? But where is she?'

Joan's face was full of suppressed excitement. 'I think I've guessed, mother. I've been thinking it over.'

Her mother smiled faintly. It always pleased her when Joan sprang swift and unerring to some conclusion or decision unperceived by Joy. Joan's clear insight and logical powers had come from her father, and the resemblance always delighted her mother.

'I thought perhaps you would, Joan. Just one little girl, Joy, and he might have had her all this time if he hadn't been so obstinate and unforgiving. And though she was with him at the end he was too weak to know it. Joy dear, you are like him in some ways. When I hear of you at school being "so angry you don't know what you are saying," I'm afraid for you. You must be careful——'

'Mother dear!' Joy's astounded cry rang out.

'Yes, he was your grandfather. He was calling for your mother. When he allowed me to bring you here, he forbade me to tell you. And you had never heard your mother's name, for you were only fourteen when we came, and I had promised your father not to speak of her till you were old enough to understand. Sir Antony forbade her to marry your father, because he was of such a restless and unsettled nature that he feared she would not have a comfortable home. She ran away from home, and he said he would never forgive her and would never give her a penny of his money. He refused to see you, although he allowed me to bring you here, and he never came near the abbey until last June.'

'How did it happen that we came here, mother?' Joan asked eagerly, while Joy still stared incredulously.

'When your father died, Joan, as you know we managed very well till the failure of his business and of those who had carried it on for me left us very awkwardly placed. I did not know what to do for you two girls. Joy was not strong and seemed to need a change from London, and I felt the responsibility of having to care for her as well as you. At last I wrote, not to Sir Antony, but to his solicitors, explaining the circumstances and that I wished to do my best for her, and asking them to tell him if they thought well. They told him, and his answer was a formal offer of the post of caretaker of the abbey, if I cared to accept it, on condition I told you girls nothing of the relationship and kept you out of his sight. I accepted reluctantly, for it interfered with your education, but it gave Joy the chance of country air she needed, and I hoped it might be only temporary. At first I hoped something might be saved from the wreck of the business and I might be able to send you back to school, but that hope proved a disappointment. Then Joan and Cicely Hobart between them solved the difficulty so far as Joy was concerned, and you, Joan, have done very well without outside help.'

'And to think we never dreamt of it!' cried Joy.

'May we wear black for him?' Joan asked soberly. 'You won't leave me out, will you? I know I was no relation, but I'd got to like him.'

'We'll think about it. I'm inclined to think he wouldn't have wished it.'

She was summoned to the Hall late that same evening, to meet the lawyer who had hurried down from London. The girls, sobered by the tragic suddenness of it all, were still sitting up for her when she returned. She scolded them slightly, but only on principle, and was not surprised to hear their plea that they could not have slept.

Sir Antony had left a letter, to be given to Mrs Shirley after his death. It was characteristic of him, abrupt, almost grudging, but showed that he had relented in his attitude to his daughter's memory, though no actual word of forgiveness was said. It was dated in July, shortly after the evening on which the girls and Margia Lane had visited the Hall.

‘MADAM,—I am obliged to you for your care of my granddaughter’s welfare and education. Kindly send her to school hereafter at her own expense. I have made arrangements for her, and she need not be dependent on the charity even of school-girls. Send the other girl too—I like her best. She has something in her. I have arranged for that also. Tell her I like her courage and the way she let her cousin have first chance. Get some woman to help you in the abbey, and let your girl teach her as much as she can. She’s not likely to know as much as that child knows, nor to tell it as well. Tell the other girl I was her grandfather, but don’t let her wear black for me. Silly nonsense! They can’t pretend to be sorry. Don’t want any show or fuss.

‘I am, madam,

‘Yours,

‘ANTONY ABINGER.’

The girls looked at her and one another as she read the letter aloud. They did not criticise, though some points in it cried out for comment. But Joan said gravely at last, ‘It’s a kind letter—when you remember it’s from him. I think he was trying to make up. But what does he mean about school, mother?’

She looked up, flushed and eager. Mrs Shirley said gravely, ‘We must wait till we hear more definitely. I think he means that he has left money for Joy’s education, and has included you. He certainly says so.’

‘Oh, wouldn’t that be just——! But why should he, mother?’

‘Because he liked you,’ Joy said promptly. ‘What an old dear!’

‘We shall know in a few days,’ Mrs Shirley said quietly.

Joy arrived at school next morning looking so grave that Edna whispered to Peggy, ‘Queen Joy doesn’t look awfully pleased about having to make friends with Carry, does she?’

Miriam Honor glanced across the dressing-room. ‘I hope you found good news waiting for you at home, Joy?’

Joy hung up her coat and cap, then turned soberly. ‘He died last night. I’m glad I went home early. Sir Antony,’ in answer to Edna’s instant question. ‘I expect Joan showed him to you on Saturday. He was taken ill that same night.—Oh, Carry, is that you? How are you? Cold better?’

Her tone said plainly that she had more important matters to think about than Carry Carter. The quarrel seemed a very small and far-away thing in the fight of the greater happenings of the night.

The girls stared and waited curiously. Carry flushed. She knew that Miriam was watching her. She was unwilling to apologise, but was still more unwilling to have her dishonourable conduct made public. Cicely had done wisely to leave the trump card in Joy’s hands.

‘I say, Joy, I’m sorry——’ she began awkwardly.

‘Oh, that’s all right! Girls, something so queer! I may as well tell you,’ and they crowded round eagerly, while Carry, though feeling thrust into the background, yet realised with relief and some gratitude to Joy that the ordeal was over—much more easily than she had expected.

‘Sir Antony was my grandfather, and we never knew. He wouldn’t let us be told till he was dead, because of an old quarrel. He says we’re not to wear mourning, because it’s silly nonsense, and Auntie says we mustn’t if he didn’t wish it, but we feel as if we ought to. And Joan’s to come to school too, probably at half-term. He was awfully keen on her in his funny way, I believe. And may I speak to you privately, please, Miriam?’

‘I’m jolly glad about your sister—cousin, I mean!’ Edna said warmly. ‘It will be ripping to have her. I always want to talk to her when she comes to dance-evenings.’

‘She’s awfully anxious to come,’ and Joy walked away with Miriam to explain that she must no longer hold the Hamlet Club’s scholarship and to ask that a new candidate be chosen.

‘I’ll tell Cicely. She’s coming this morning to see if you and Carry have settled things properly. But I don’t think we can choose any one till next term. I’m awfully glad about Joan, and Cicely will be too.’

‘How will you find some one else?’

‘If Cicely has no better way, we’ll probably ask the Gilks girls. They might have some friend who would be glad of it. I believe Peggy has a little sister, for instance.’

‘Oh, I’d like that! And I’ll look after her and see that she gets on all right!’

Cicely had another suggestion, however. ‘What about Babs, Mirry? Perhaps she’s hardly old enough yet. But I’ve often thought I’d like Babs to be our Hamlet girl when she’s ready for it.’

Miriam laughed. ‘That’s awfully good of you, but Babs will win an open scholarship, or I’ll know the reason why! I intend to coach her myself. Thanks awfully, all the same.’

‘These are for you,’ and Joy touched Cicely’s arm, a flush on her cheeks. ‘I gathered them for you this morning.’

‘Whatever are they?’ and Cicely examined the blue flowers. ‘*Gentian!* “Traveller’s Joy,” where on earth did you get them? Did you send to Switzerland? But it’s not the time of year! Are they imitation? No, they’re real!’

Joy laughed. ‘From the hill above the Icknield Way, at Chinnor. I came round that way. Near the old sunk bridle-path, you know. They grow all over the hill there. Auntie thought you might like them as a curiosity.’

‘I should just think I do! I never dreamt you could find them here! Thank you awfully, “Traveller’s Joy!” You’re the one to know all the secrets of the countryside, evidently!’

‘I found them one day, when I was exploring,’ Joy laughed, ‘and took them home to ask Auntie what they were,’ and went off to her own class-room proud that her gift had been accepted.

CHAPTER XXXI JOAN'S ABBEY

Sir Antony's will was read a few days later. Mrs Shirley, having guessed certain of its provisions, was not surprised that she was requested to be present. It was eloquent, however, of the dead man's friendless state that there was no one but herself and the lawyer.

'He has left gifts to his servants, but nothing to charities,' she told the girls that evening. 'As we guessed, he has made provision for your education. We must find some one to help me here, and you shall train her, Joan, for you must go to school at half-term,' and Joan gazed into the fire, rapture in her eyes.

'Fancy Sir Antony turning out such a darling!' said Joy warmly.

'The lawyers are to continue their search for his son, who, of course, inherits the house and estate——'

'It wasn't exactly "of course" with Sir Antony, was it, mother?' Joan observed. 'But it would have been dreadful if he hadn't treated his own son fairly. I hope they'll find him. I wonder what he'll be like? He'll let us stay here, won't he?'

'We are to stay as long as we wish. Sir Antony particularly says that he would like us to stay on at the abbey. I think your love for it took his fancy. He had the same feeling himself.'

'How nice of him! I want it to be our home "for always and always"—if you don't find it dull, mother dear? I only wish I'd been born here!'

'What if they can't find his son? Or if they find he's dead?' queried Joy.

'Then there are other relations who will inherit,' and her aunt gazed thoughtfully into the fire.

'Then I think they might have come to him when he was ill!' Joy said indignantly. 'Had he quarrelled with them all?'

'There wasn't much time, Joy dear,' and Mrs Shirley did not explain why the other relations who might become the heirs had not been invited to the funeral.

Cicely Hobart laid down a letter she had just received. It was early in February, almost a year since her visit to Gracedieu with the Rambling Club. Five months of travel and holiday-making, of gaiety and invitations from her father's friends, had made her feel very different from the school-girl who had sailed for Ceylon in October. She had enjoyed the new experiences and the enlargement of her outlook, but the old days were not forgotten, and in the heat of the tropic summer she had often thought longingly of the bracing wind sweeping over her loved hills of Bucks, of the shady beech and pine trees, the cool depths of the woods round Hampden, and the wide view from the Whiteleaf Cross by Miriam's home. She had a constant discussion with her father on the subject, for he had not meant to go home till June, and Cicely insisted on the necessity of being there for May-day. He had never seen a Coronation, she argued, and it was high time he did. It was impossible for the ceremony to be postponed, and equally so for it to take place without the President. Therefore she must go home, and he had better come too.

Georgie Gilks's letter confirmed her determination to be there. Georgie, whose pen ran easily, wrote to describe the close of the autumn term, with its breaking-up concert and dance-evening to close the festivities.

‘Mirry and Joy looked awfully lonely without you and “Strawberry!” If you don’t both come home for May-day none of us will enjoy it a scrap. You simply must be there, President! Mirry and Joy said they wouldn’t dress up this time, as it would only make all of us feel bad. But Miss Macey wanted to invite some visitors, so she asked them very particularly, and they had to play up. It was very doleful for Ed and Peggy without their Queens, so we let them walk in the procession and carry your crowns. Peg’s was of yellow chrysanthemums on a white cushion for you, and Ed’s was of pinky ones for Marguerite. So we felt you weren’t quite left out, after all. Oh, one thing I must tell you! When it was decided on, I saw Carry Carter go up to “Traveller’s Joy” and offer to resign her place as her maid; I suppose she was thinking of that awful time when they dressed on opposite sides of the room. But Joy told her not to make a silly of herself if she could help it, and I think Carry rather liked it, though it sounds queer to say so. She said, “I thought perhaps you’d rather have Edna or Peggy this time.” “They’ll stick to their own Queens. They’re too loyal,” said Joy. “Well, your own Joan, then, or Muriel Bayne,” said Carry. “They wouldn’t. They know it’s your job,” said Joy. “Besides, I don’t want any change.” Carry didn’t say any more, but she looked awfully pleased, and I think they’re quite good friends now. She didn’t want to lose her place in the procession, but I suppose she felt she had to offer, after all that’s been said about that last time. And you know—it sounds horrid to say it, but it’s true—it has made a lot of difference to Carry to know about Joy being Sir Antony Abinger’s grandchild. Carry’s that kind. She thinks far more of Joy now!

‘Talking of Joan Shirley, she’s ripping! I never knew her much till she came to school, but she’s getting on awfully well, and everybody likes her. She’s in Ed’s form, working for matric., and Edna says she simply *eats up* the work! It’s Ed’s expression, not mine. And I’ve an idea that next May-day—well, it’s early to think about that yet! But Edna thinks so too, and says lots of the girls would like it. And it would be weird to have two Queens so much alike. Think of Joy crowning Joan! Wouldn’t strangers stare? You see, she isn’t either a Saint or a Sinner yet, and that would make things easier. She was asked to join both, of course, but she hadn’t anything to draw her towards the Sinners, like Joy and her music—you should have heard her solo at that concert! Chopin, they said; *I* didn’t know! But it was awfully fine. And she’s given me the sweetest little song for the winter mag.—Well, Joan wouldn’t join either set at present. She said she’d wait till Joy could join too. I don’t say she’ll be chosen, but she’s a favourite all round, and we don’t want that silly Carry v. Edna business over again. And it would be rather a joke to have Joy’s double for the next Queen.

‘And talking of the Shirleys, something queer has happened to them lately. I haven’t heard all about it, and Ed’s rather vague, but it’s something about a will, and somebody being dead in Australia, and Joan and the abbey, and Joy and the Hall. I don’t really know, but no doubt they’ll tell you when you come home. But they aren’t living in that old abbey any more, but in the big house that used to be Sir Antony’s. It’s rather queer, and I’ve an idea it’s romantic, but I don’t like to ask too many questions.

‘But you will come home by Easter, won’t you, President? Even if you’ve put your hair up and got engaged, as Mirry says? She says you’d meet such heaps of

men on the voyage, and you're such jolly good company, that she wouldn't be a bit surprised. She says men like that kind of thing—I don't know how she knows! Well, if you are, bring HIM along to see how you look in your crown and golden robe!

Cicely laughed. 'I really must be there! I couldn't bear to miss it. A May-day at the other side of the world would make me ill with home-sickness. But I'll set Mirry's mind at rest. Good company or not, I haven't met HIM yet!'

'Joan Shirley, I congratulate you! I'm just awfully glad! For once the girls have shown real good sense!'

There was great rejoicing in the school at Wycombe Moor. It was the morning of the May-day ceremony at Broadway End, and the President and the Strawberry Queen had kept their appointment and arrived just in time. They had come to school to get the first greetings over, to show how they looked with their hair up and that they wore no engagement rings, and to hear the arrangements for the evening festival.

'I've brought a jolly present for the new Queen from Colombo, and I know what Marguerite chose in Paris on her way home. I hoped my gift would be for you, but one can never be sure till the voting's over. I consider it quite satisfactory!' and the President's face showed her approval.

Joan flushed in mingled pleasure and confusion. 'It's awfully nice of them. They haven't known me very long.'

'We didn't know Joy at all, but she's been quite a success. Isn't Mrs Shirley pleased?'

'Oh, yes! She's just delighted.'

'Now tell me all about it. Who's your bridesmaid? What's your colour? And your flower?'

Joan flushed again. 'I wanted little Molly Gilks to be my maid, as she's the new Hamlet girl. I thought it would be nice,' and Cicely nodded. 'But she's only a kiddy, and they all said I ought to have some one nearer my own age, so I've asked Muriel Bayne. I like her, and she was very pleased to be chosen.'

'And she's dark. She'll be a change beside you and Joy and Carry! Yes?'

'I've chosen deep violet for my colour, a lovely rich shade, and Miss Lane has painted white violets round the edge.'

'A Violet Queen! How pretty! And what a jolly contrast to all our bright colours! And how is the abbey? I hear you don't live in it any longer?'

Joan's eyes filled with eager light. 'I'd like to tell you about it! Have you time? You'll understand. You know how I felt about it.'

Cicely nodded. 'Come and whisper, if it's private.'

'Oh, it's not! You know the arrangements that were made before you went away? We were to go on living there, but Sir Antony had made it possible for me to go to school, and the lawyers were looking for his son, who had gone abroad years before.'

'Yes, I heard all that. But why have you left the abbey?'

'They found news of his son at last. He had died unmarried in Australia more than two years ago.'

'Then was there no one left?'

'Only Joy. There were no other relations,' Joan said quietly. 'So then we were told the rest of the will. Mother hadn't thought we ought to know while there was any chance of him turning up. If he was found to be dead, the Hall and the gardens and most of the money were

to be Joy's, and mother was to be her guardian. Joy had never dreamt of such a thing, and she nearly collapsed when she was told. Now she says Sir Antony was an absolute dear. But the thing that almost knocked me down was this. He didn't want the property divided if his son was alive, but if the Hall went to Joy, then he wanted me—*me!*—to have the abbey, and its grounds, and a lot of money to pay for keeping it in good condition! Because of my love for it, he said, and because my knowledge of it was so thorough! Wasn't it simply awfully good of him? To think that my abbey is really mine!

'I am glad! That's just splendid!' Cicely said heartily, as she looked at the younger girl's glowing face. 'But you aren't living in it now?'

'No, for mother said Joy must live at the Hall. But we've put an awfully nice woman in as caretaker, and I've kept one little room—Joy's old bedroom, opening off the cloisters—and furnished it for a cosy place for myself, and I often go there. And of course we're in the abbey whenever we like. If visitors come, I slip into my room, or through the tresant and abbot's garden and away by our own little gate, but I often do my homework sitting in the sacristy or chapter-house as I used to do.'

'Do you still dance minuets on the cloister garth?'

'We sometimes dance there, but only in early mornings. And I still drill the children there occasionally. Of course, I'm responsible for the abbey now. It's left to me in trust, and I have to keep it in good condition. Joy says she's glad I've got it, since she won't have to worry over the old thing, but that's only to tease me. She's fond of it too, you know, but not——'

'Not as you are. I expect Sir Antony knew that. I think he's arranged matters very well.'

'He's been awfully kind. I really had nothing to do with him. I thought when he said I was to go to school he'd been far too good.'

'I think he was a very clever old man. Well, "Traveller's Joy," are you to get forget-me-nots to-night?' as Joy came up to join in the conference. 'There was a time I thought you wouldn't, you know. But it wasn't all your fault.'

'It was partly my Sir Antony temper. Has Joan been telling you what a perfect dear he's been?'

'Yes. I'm relieved to hear the abbey isn't to be left to your tender mercies! Are we to have the zither again to-night?'

'They seem to want it. Isn't it ripping to have Joan for Queen? When I have to kiss her I'm going to give her such a big one that they'll hear it all over the hall, because I'm so glad!'

'Joy!' protested the Queen-elect.

'But I'm inclined to think she may be rather bossy,' the reigning Queen continued. 'One thing we've quite decided. She isn't going to make a guide-book! President, the new Queen's going to be "At Home" at the Hall on Saturday afternoon, and every one's invited. Will you come? We'll give you tea!'

'That's quite an incorrect version!' cried Joan. 'The Hall's your home, and it's you and mother who will have to welcome the girls. I intend to show them the abbey! You can attend to the tea!'

'All right! I'll stay near the cakes! Joan, I came to tell you! I saw Minnie Britton bullying a new kid just now. I jumped on her, but you'd better keep an eye on her. All these little worries will be yours now!' said the reigning Queen.

When the pretty ceremonies of the evening were over, abdication and Coronation, the procession, the presentation of the Queen's medal and gifts, and the plaiting of the Maypole,

and Joan sat enthroned in state, with Joy at her right hand wearing her forget-me-nots, the White Queen rose to sing the Welcome Song.

‘You’ll find it will fit all right, except the second verse, so I’ve re-written that,’ said Cicely, and Miriam made a laughing curtsy to the new Queen, and began to sing the ‘Welcome to Joan.’

‘Queen Joan is our lady, she’ll do nothing shady,
So greet her with singing on May-day!
It’s time for frivolity, all kinds of jollity,
Cheers are all ringing on May-day!
Queen of our choice she is reigning,
Every one’s heart she’s enchaining,
So give her a greeting at this our glad meeting,
While gifts we are bringing on May-day!’

As Miriam sat down Edna sprang to her feet. ‘Three cheers for our President, and all our Queens! Hip, hip, hurrah!’

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *The Abbey Girls* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]