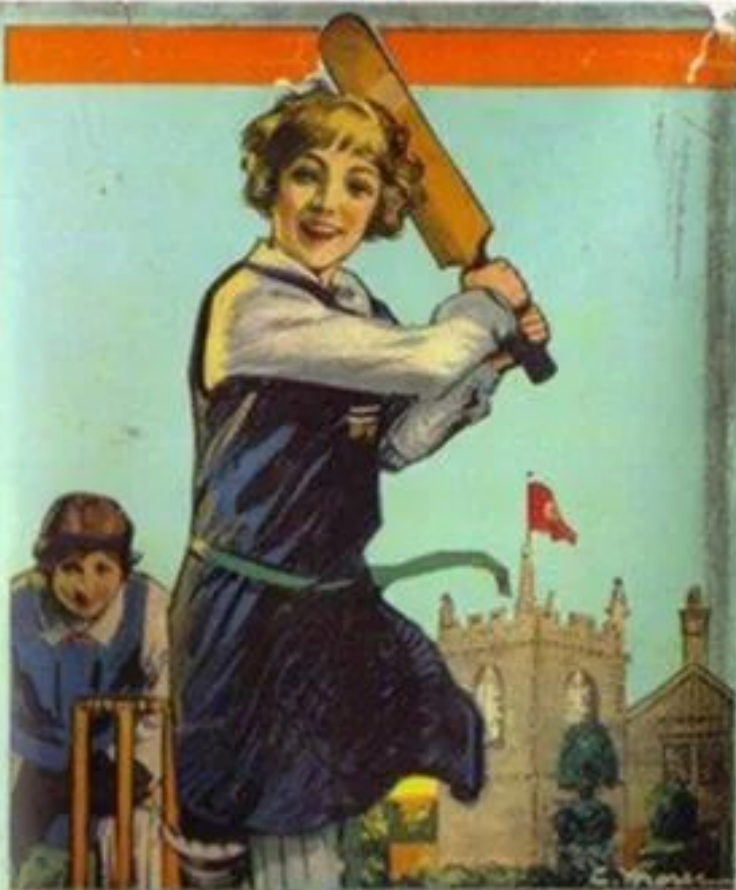


QUEEN
OF THE
ABBAY GIRLS

Elsie J. Oxenham



COLLINS



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THE ABBAY GIRLS

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She found them playing cricket.

Q.A.G.

QUEEN OF THE ABBEY GIRLS

by
ELSIE J. OXENHAM

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DEDICATED TO
THE MEMORY OF THE BEST OF MOTHERS
AND
TO MY FATHER
JOHN OXENHAM
WITH HEARTFELT THANKS FOR THE VERY REAL HELP
OF A GREAT EXAMPLE IN HOPE AND FAITH
BY
ELSIE JEANETTE OXENHAM

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CHAPTER I

THE CALL OF THE ABBEY

“That’s done it!” and Dick came gloomily out from beneath the car.

“Oh, Dick, what’s wrong? Can’t we go on?” wailed Sheila from the back seat.

Della leaned over the side. “What’s up, old chap? Is it serious?”

“’Fraid so. I don’t know exactly,” Dick confessed ruefully, “but she’s crashed; something’s crocked inside. I’ll have to get help from the village. Luckily, it isn’t far.”

“Then we’re stuck here, I suppose;” his elder sister looked round at the hedges, and the fields, and the lane for inspiration.

“Oh, but we must get on somehow!” Sheila cried strenuously. She was thirteen, with long waving brown hair, while Adela, who was twenty, was brown also, but had neatly shingled hair to show a prettily-shaped head.

“We can’t desert Dicky and the car, Shee,” her sister said reproachfully.

“I can! He doesn’t want us, if he’s going to tinker at the old thing’s inside. I’m dying to see your Abbey, and all its girls. Is it much farther, Dell? Couldn’t we walk? Or get a lift somehow?”

“My Abbey! Thanks awfully! That’s a handsome present to give me. And it’s a thousand chances to one against any of the girls being there.” Della reached for the map. “Just exactly where are we, Dick?”

“You know all about the Abbey. You’ve told me about it for years, and made me keen to see it. I’m dying to go down those secret passages you found, and to see the pit where Dicky nearly starved to death.”

Dick turned sharply, as at a gruesome memory, from another examination of his engine. “Do take the kid away and stop her babbling, Dell! We passed a station five minutes ago. Why not take the train on and see the old place, and come back for me? It can’t be more than five miles. If you have any luck with trains, it won’t take you long. Then the infant might be satisfied.”

Sheila ignored the epithets, or forgave them for the sake of the suggestion. “Oh, Dell, do! *Do* let’s go on and see the Abbey! Who wants to stick here in a lane? Come on back to the station, Della darling!”

Della looked at her watch. “It’s only eleven. I said we’d started too early. The Abbey isn’t open till twelve. We’ve time to do it and get back for lunch with you. But suppose we don’t get back, you’ll remember there’s lunch for three in this basket, Dick.”

“Trust me!” Dick grinned. “I’ll look after myself. But if I can get this old crock patched up, I may come after you and pick you up.”

“I don’t suppose we shall ever meet again,” Della said equably. “Don’t you see, idiot, if you come to look for us, we may be coming back by train to look for you? We’ll spend the rest of our lives between here and the Abbey. You’d much better stop till we come back.”

“Dinner’s at seven,” Dick told her. “If I don’t find you, you’ll get home somehow. But just to give us half a chance of meeting, you hang about the Abbey till three, or else get back here before one, for lunch. If you haven’t come, and if I can’t get to you by three, you go home by train and I’ll do ditto.”

“Right-o!” Della said cheerfully. “I’ve a shilling or two for fares. If we can’t get back to you, we’ll have something to eat in the village. I know my way about, you know.”

Dick grinned. “May have changed in seven years! Give my love to the chapter-house! And to the Joan-girl; and the smart one that guessed my tune. What was her name?”

“Joy. It’s Jen I’d like to see, because she was so jolly decent to me,” Della said wistfully. “But I know there’s not one chance in a thousand of her being at the Abbey now. There’s no reason why she should be. She wasn’t related to the Abbey people; she was just one of the school crowd. But if we could meet any of them from the Hall, I might perhaps hear about her.”

“She adopted you, didn’t she?” Sheila asked eagerly, as they set out for the station. It was a story of which she never tired. “I’ve always thought it was rather cheek, you know, Dell! She can’t have been so much older than you!”

“My dear, she was one month younger, I believe,” Della said seriously. “But that didn’t matter to Jenny-Wren. She thought I needed bringing up, and she set out to do it. She was about right, too. I was rather a little rotter. She used to give me reams of good advice at night.”

“She sounds awfully stodgy,” Sheila observed.

Della’s laugh rang out. “Only motherly! She was a jolly good sort. I remember her with long legs—always in a gym. tunic, of course—and big blue eyes, and two long yellow pigtails. She was my ‘mother,’ and Jack was ‘father’; Jacky-boy was her chum, and they slept together and did everything together, and always said they were married. Jack was dark and bobbed; quite jolly, but Jenny-Wren was the jolliest.”

Sheila sighed. “I do wish we could see some of them! You needn’t tell me about Dick and the chapter-house; I know what he meant. It was simply awful of him! I’m glad Joan and Joy got hold of him; it served him right.”

“If Dick really had to crash, I’m glad he did it so near a station. And our luck is in,” Della remarked, as they stood on the platform of a little wayside halt, and saw the motor train approaching. “To catch this with only five minutes to wait really is a bit of luck. Perhaps we’ll have luck at the Abbey, too, and find somebody at home.”

“I wonder if they’d remember you?” Sheila said curiously.

“Shouldn’t be surprised! If any one should be there, I’m hoping they’ll ask us to lunch at the Hall. It would be only decent, when we’re such old friends.”

Sheila gave a little excited jump of joy. “Oh, that would be gorgeous! Oh, Della darling, do manage it somehow! I’d love to see inside the Hall! You’ll show me the outside in any case, won’t you?”

“As much as I can. But you’re to leave the ‘managing’ to me, Shee,” Della said imperatively. “Don’t you go asking questions on your own, or you’ll mess things up altogether. If the same woman is there still, I’m going to see if she knows me again. She’s the caretaker now, but she was our nurse, years and years ago, when we were just kids. Let me do the asking; you keep quiet and listen, and see all you can of the Abbey. I rather think Dick wants to come after us,” she said, as they took their places in the train. “He pretends he doesn’t care a scrap about seeing the Abbey; but he seemed rather keen on coming to pick us up there, if he’d got the car running again. I wonder if he wants to see the girls, now that they’ll be grown up?”

“It can’t be the Joan-girl he wants to see, for he never forgave her for catching him in the passages,” Sheila remarked. “And I’m sure he’s never forgiven the one who guessed his tune. So it must be Jenny-Wren he wants to see!”

“Which side of the line is the Abbey on? Oh, it’s close to the hills, isn’t it? This side, then!” and Sheila presently crossed the carriage to gaze out of the window towards the wooded slopes and away from the fields of the other side.

The train was of the tramway-type, long open cars, with seats along each side, driven by a motor engine. There was a small first-class compartment between two big third-class cars, and Della had taken first-class tickets from force of habit. There was only one other occupant of the car, a young man, who sat gazing towards the hills as eagerly as Sheila herself. He had glanced at the girls when they entered, and had looked a second time, for Della, with her smooth brown head and bright colour, was pretty and very full of life. Careless, though not unconscious, of his eyes, she had thrown her little hat on the seat, and stood by Sheila, looking eagerly for the Abbey among its trees.

“There!” Sheila pointed excitedly ahead. “A gray tower, in those woods! Won’t that be the Abbey? And that big white house on the hill, farther on, will be the Hall, Dee!”

“It’s too far off,” Della demurred. “The Hall is quite close to the Abbey. There’s miles between that big house and the Abbey; well, half a mile, at least! We used to run across the lawn, just outside the windows of the Hall, and through the gate into the Abbey. I’m sure it’s too far, Shee. And the Hall used to be gray, not white.”

“Oh, you’ve forgotten!” Sheila said impatiently. “It’s seven years since you were here, Della.”

“Forgive me!” the young man spoke pleasantly. “I think the gray tower must be the Hall; the Abbey is out of sight among the trees. The white house is Marchwood Manor, the house next to the Hall.”

Della turned to look at him. She was not in the habit of allowing strange men to speak to her. But this man’s face was so pleasant, his interest so genuine, and his manner so frank, that she forgave him as instantly as she awoke to lively curiosity concerning him. For “traveller” was written all over his sunburnt face, and was confirmed by his rugs and overcoat and the labels on his travelling bag. Della’s glance swept over them—“Mombasa”—“Marseilles”—“Nairobi”—“Dover”; he had come a long way, but he seemed quite at home in this corner of Oxfordshire! At once she wanted to know more about him.

“I believe you’re right,” she exclaimed. “Now I come to think of it, Sheila, the Abbey hasn’t a tower on it anywhere. It must be among the trees, buried out of sight, and that must be the Hall we can see. You know this part well, then?” she condescended to ask of the traveller.

“I have stayed here as a boy. My grandfather lived near here. But I’ve been abroad for some years,” he explained.

Sheila was pulling at the sleeve of Delia’s knitted coat; their heavy wraps had been left in the car. “Dee, ask him——” and she whispered energetically.

Della raised her eyebrows. Then she laughed. “Sheila wants me to ask if you know whether Marchwood Manor has any connection with the great traveller, Sir Andrew Marchwood? If you know the district, you may know if it belongs to his family?”

The young man laughed. “It did. It belongs to him now. Came to him from his father some years ago. He lives there—when he’s at home; but he still travels a good deal.” Then with another quick laugh, “In case my knowledge of the Manor should seem surprising, may I explain that I’m going there? I am Kenneth Marchwood; Andrew is my brother.”

“Oh!” Delia’s eyes were so full of excited interest that she dropped them hurriedly. “Oh, I see! Of course you could put us right about the Manor and the Hall! Thank you very much.”

Sheila's face was frankly radiant. "How thrilling! But you've been travelling, too! Or is all that his luggage?"

He laughed. "I live on the Equator," he told her lightly. "I'm only home for a visit, to see my mother and to meet Andrew's new friends. He said I must come and stay on his *shamba*, as he's stayed so often on mine."

"*Shamba*? What's that?"

"A plantation; a coffee-farm."

"Oh, do you grow coffee?"

"I try to, when the rains and everything else will let me," he said laughingly. "The trouble often is to get *bibis* to pick it for me."

"Babies?"

"*Bibis*; native women and girls. We're generally short of labour."

"Oh, do you have women to work on your farm?"

"To pick the berries," he corrected. "But we have boys to do the cooking and washing and to make the beds and clean the house. They make very good housemaids."

"Why do you do everything backwards?" Sheila demanded.

"We're nearly at the station," Della interposed, and pulled on her hat. "We're only tourists, day-trippers," she said; then relenting, for she knew the words might give a wrong impression. "We were coming to see the Abbey when our car broke down. So we left my brother crawling about underneath it, and Sheila and I came on by train. I stayed in the village near the Abbey years ago, and then went to school at the Hall for half a term; I've always wanted to see it again. Sheila has never seen any of it; she was just a baby seven years ago. We're going to walk up through the woods to the Abbey, when we've had a look at the village. I want to see if the cottage I stayed in still looks the same."

"I expect—yes, the car is here to meet me," and Kenneth Marchwood looked across the station to the big motor waiting at the gate. "Would you allow me to drive you as far as the Abbey? My brother is in town, so there is no one to meet me. Only my mother is at home at the moment. May I drive you up?"

To Sheila's intense indignation, Della declined the offer politely, but firmly. "We want to see the village first. And we should be too early for the Abbey; we'd have to sit on the doorstep till twelve o'clock. It's very kind of you, but we'll walk up through the woods, thank you."

"Della—why did you—why didn't you?" wailed Sheila, as the car drove off with the bronzed interesting traveller and the much-labelled luggage. "He's a perfect dear! I wanted to stay with him as long as ever I could! What does the old village matter?"

"My dear kid, however nice he is you can't go dumping yourself on a strange man! If he hadn't been so jolly, of course I wouldn't have spoken to him. Now, don't grizzle, Shee. Be thankful for the bit of luck you've had. Not many kids of your age have talked to the brother of Sir Andrew Marchwood. You've not got much to complain of!" and Della led the way along the road to the village, and presently, when the outsides of various small shops and cottages had been inspected and identified, by a narrow winding path through the beech-woods towards the old Abbey of Grace-Dieu.

It was the first week of May. The beeches were uncurling their earliest vivid green leaves, high up, and on the outskirts of the wood, where they could see the sun; but as the path led into the depths, all was still bare and cool and quiet, tall gray columns soaring up, satin smooth and shiny, deep red-brown carpet everywhere below, and a spongy ribbon of soft

beechmast winding along, like a cushioned pathway. The girls' feet sank in it and made no sound; overhead, wood-pigeons were crooning, but the rest of the world seemed asleep.

"Even the trees!" Sheila whispered, and trod softly lest she should wake them. "But beeches are always lazy, aren't they, Dee? This is topping! I'm almost glad we didn't go in the car, after all."

Della laughed quietly. "Dick and I used to play Indians and Robin Hood in these woods. We were great at stalking and tracking. Look, Shee!"

They had reached a sudden end to the trees. Here, in the middle of a smooth lawn, stood a great arched gateway, a wide round tunnel under a high gable, with big supporting buttresses at the sides. The stones were gray, but covered with brown and yellow lichen; and here and there grew clumps of golden or brown wallflower.

Sheila, as she gazed, sniffed enjoyably. "How it smells! Is this the whole of the Abbey, Dee? Oh, but it couldn't be! You said there were dining-rooms and sleeping-places. And there's more behind; I see it now. What's this, then?"

"Only the gateway. That's the first Abbot, in that niche. He's Michael, the one whose grave is in the crypt, where Dick got buried and they found the jewels. This is where the monks used to give food to the poor, and strangers were allowed to sleep in a little room upstairs."

"We shan't need Mrs.—what's her name? Mrs. Watson! You'll be able to tell me all the history," Sheila suggested. "But don't begin giving me lectures yet, Della dear! I want to see everything. Let's go on!"

Della laughed. "You'll soon get to the end of all I know! Here's the Abbey; and this is the door we go in by. Now we'll see if Ann Watson remembers me!"

But when the low door in the long gray wall was opened, and they looked through the pointed arch to the gray shadowy passage, it was a stranger who stood there, to Della's great disappointment.

"Oh——! Oh, can we see the Abbey? It is just twelve, I think. . . . It's not Ann Watson," she murmured in Sheila's ear. "Perhaps she's dead, or gone away. I shall ask this woman presently."

As they stood in the cloisters, looking out over the sunlit garth, a dreamy green lawn in the heart of the ruins, Della turned to their guide and interrupted her discourse on Early English architecture.

"Have you been here long? I came before, but it was some one else who took me round."

"Mrs. Watson; it's her job," the woman said readily. "But she had to go away sudden, to her sister, up north, who were taken bad all in a minute. I come here before, when Mrs. Watson had her holiday, so they sent for me to help now. I can't tell it all like she does, and that's the truth; but I'll do my best, miss, and nobody can't do more."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll tell us all we want to know," Della said absently, and followed her towards the refectory, her eyes thoughtful but disappointed.

"I'd meant to pump Ann, and get lots out of her about the people at the Hall," she whispered to Sheila, as they climbed the dark winding stair. "I don't suppose this old thing will be able to tell us much. It's rotten luck!"

CHAPTER II

THE GIRLS AT THE ABBEY

Della was listening to the caretaker's description of the monks' dormitory, and thinking how much better Ann Watson had told the story, when Sheila, a little bored by ancient history, cried: "What's that?"

Della raised her head and listened intently.

"It's one of the young ladies from the Hall," said their guide.

"It's a dance," said Della. "But where is she? And what music is it?"

The notes drifting across the garth and through the long lancet window-slits were high and clear and sweet, an imperative lilting tune with an urgent rhythm that almost compelled movement; Della's foot was tapping unconsciously, even while she wondered what instrument could sound so like a bird.

Sheila sprang up on to one of the high window-sills. "Della! Oh—come and look! Who is it?"

Della stood gazing down over her shoulder. "Oh, Shee! What a bit of luck!" she breathed.

From the shadows of the cloister out on to the sunlit garth, a tall yellow-haired girl came marching to her own music. She wore a short skirt and a jumper, and her bobbed waving curls were bare. There was a lilt in her walk that matched her tune, and a poise and balance in every movement that made her mere crossing of the garth a beautiful thing. A brown wooden pipe was in her left hand, held in two fingers, and touching her lips, while the thumb and first two fingers played lightly over the holes; her right hand was tapping her side to the rhythm of the tune.

"By all that's weird and wonderful, and by gorgeous good luck, it's Jenny-Wren!" Della exulted under her breath. "Jen Robins grown into a lamp-post, and with bobbed hair; but it *is* Jenny-Wren! And isn't she pretty? I never remember her being pretty. She's jolly pretty now!"

"She's topping," Sheila said fervently. "What kind of whistle is she playing, Dee? She's only using one hand! Is anything wrong with her right arm? Can't she lift it? Can't we go and speak to her?"

"There never used to be anything wrong with her. Wait a moment, Shee. There's some one else coming. Perhaps it's Joy or Joan."

"Miss Joy is in London," the caretaker volunteered; "and Mrs. Raymond has left the Hall."

"Who's Mrs. Raymond? What has she got to do with us?" asked Sheila, bewildered. "It isn't Joy or Joan, Dee. You said they had red hair."

"No, it's some one older. Wait, Sheila! We'll go down in a moment."

"It's Miss Devine. She's staying in the Abbey," said the woman. "Miss Jen comes to sit on her bed and talk."

"It sounds like Jenny-Wren," Della gazed down at the older girl, brown-haired and quietly dressed, who had followed Jen out of the cloisters.

"Where are the silly children?" Jen ended "Lads a Bunchum" triumphantly, and stood shading her eyes with her right hand as she looked about her, in a way that effectually proved there was nothing the matter with her arm.

Round the corner of the chapter-house, and out on to the garth, came a whirl of schoolgirls; only three, but for a moment they seemed a dozen. Sheila, absorbed and

overjoyed, watched breathlessly.

Della's eyes were bright with curiosity and interest. Who were all these younger girls of the Abbey? She had thought Jen must be the youngest they would be likely to see.

Two were sixteen, the other a year younger. The younger one had flying black hair, thick and long, and great dark eyes, and she wore a scarlet jersey over a short dark skirt. One of the sixteen-year-olds, wearing blue, had two long yellow plaits on her shoulders; the other, in a green jumper, had dark brown curls tied back.

"Jen, play something we can dance!" the yellow-haired girl cried insistently.

"Three of you?" Jen teased. "Or do you suggest I should dance and pipe both at once, Rosamunda? It isn't done!"

"Oh, Mary will join! She'll be Biddy's woman; I'll be Maidie's man. Pipe 'Ruffy' for us, Jen; there's a good chap!"

Laughing, the older girl standing in the cloisters looked at Jen. "Is it allowable on the garth? I know it's improper."

"Just for once! Nobody cares; and anyway, nobody will know," Rosamund said largely.

Della chuckled. "Trustful kid! And it's after twelve o'clock. Are all their watches slow?"

"Oh, let's see this!" Sheila insisted. "You said they were always dancing!"

"Jen, Joy told me you danced a jig here one night," Maidlin urged, her black eyes eager. "So there can't be any harm in it!"

The brown-haired schoolgirl laughed and went to the older girl, who came out from the cloisters as Jen raised her pipe again. "May I have the pleasure of a dance with you at this party, Mary-Dorothy?" she asked ceremoniously.

Facing Rosamund and Maidlin, they began the dance, running up to meet the other couple, setting to partners and turning round on the spot, running away and coming back hand in hand, then leading out their "opposites," to the clear shrill treble of the music. As she piped, Jen's right hand tapped her side unconsciously again in time to the tune.

The movements of the dance, the running steps, the leading out and back in couples, were as simple and natural as the little tune, and all seemed strangely in keeping with the severe simplicity of the buildings around the garth, the strong pure lines of the Early English windows, the arches of the chapter-house, the wide, dignified refectory. Nowhere was there any ornament, any unnecessary decoration; that had been forbidden by the severe Cistercian rule under which the Abbey had been built. The music had no note that could have been spared, the dance no unnecessary movement; no fancy or decorative attitude was even hinted at.

As it ended, Mary-Dorothy and Maidlin bobbed little curtseys, and their "men" gave them brief little nods, and the set broke up.

"That was topping!" Rosamund said exuberantly. "Thanks, old thing! Can't you play 'Hey, Boys,' for us, too?"

"I'm not going to, whether I could or not. You'd better scoot home, all of you. It must be nearly twelve—good gracious alive! it's half-past!" cried Jen aghast. "We'd better all vanish. There may be troops of tourists or Americans here, any minute!"

"Oh, Dee, stop them!" Sheila implored. "Or I shall!" she added desperately, as Rosamund, Maidlin, and Biddy ran off towards the chapter-house again.

"We're going by Underground!" Biddy called to Jen.

Della leaned out of the window and called: "Jen Robins! I say, Jenny-Wren!"

Jen turned from a final word with Mary to stare blankly. The girls at the chapter-house door stopped, and gazed open-mouthed.

"It's some one up there!" Biddy proclaimed, and pointed to the lancet windows of the dormitory.

"Somebody called you, Jen," Maidlin said unnecessarily.

"Who is it? Who are you?" Jen called up to the narrow window. "If you really know me, and if there's more of you than just a head, come down and explain yourself!"

"We're coming," and the smooth brown head of Della vanished from the window-slit.

When she crossed the lawn, swinging her hat and followed closely by Sheila, the schoolgirls and Mary had gathered round Jen to hear the explanation of the mystery. Jen had thrust her pipe into Mary's hand, and now came striding forward to view the intruders.

"I knew we might be caught by tourists if we were Cinderellas and stayed after twelve," said she, "but I didn't expect the tourists to hail me as Jenny-Wren! Who are you, and how—why, *Della!* By all that's funny! If it isn't my adopted daughter grown up, and dressed in the very latest fashion!"

"Well, look at yourself, 'mother'!" Della retorted. "It's only seven years, but you've grown about five feet taller than you used to be! A regular lamp-post!"

"Most people say 'maypole,' which is much prettier," Jen said severely, and seized her hands warmly. "How topping of you to come back! And who is the little kid? She's far more like my adopted child than you are. She's just exactly what you used to be, Della Jessop. A sister, I suppose? Oh, yes, you told me you had a little sister!"

"My sister Sheila. She's heard so much about the Abbey that when we found ourselves not many miles away, staying with friends near Oxford, she teased till we brought her to see it. But I never dreamt of finding you here! Our car broke down, so we left Dick to see to it, and came on by train."

"Oh, is Dick somewhere about, too? Well, as Joan and Joy are both away, Dick will not be admitted to the Abbey except in charge of a keeper," Jen said determinedly.

Della's laugh rang out. "Oh, he wouldn't go carving his name on the walls *now!* He learnt a lesson. He may turn up presently, if he can get his engine right again."

"It would be queer to see Dick again," Jen said reflectively. "It's queer to see you! Somehow I've always felt you'd turn up again some day."

"But why are you here?" Della asked curiously. "Are you staying with Joan and Joy at the Hall? Wasn't your home in Yorkshire or somewhere?"

"It's still there. But my people are in Paris, and I'm living with Joy for a while. I suppose you know Joan's married?"

"I didn't know. How should I? Oh, is she Mrs. Somebody? That woman said Mrs. Somebody had left the Hall; we couldn't see what Mrs. Somebody had to do with it."

"Mrs. Raymond. She's been here with her husband and Janice; that's her daughter. But they went home yesterday. Janet's just four months, and the most beautiful kid that ever was. But then you'd expect that; I'm her godmother."

"I see," Della agreed. "Of course! Your families always turn out well, don't they?"

"I don't know," Jen said seriously. "I can't say yet; I haven't heard enough about you. You were my first. Are you doing me credit?"

"And Joy isn't married yet?"

"Oh, no; only engaged! A fortnight ago; we're hardly used to it yet."

"Oh? Only just happened? And isn't she at home? Can't I see her?"

"I don't think you're likely to, unless you come back. She's in town with Andrew Marchwood; well, I mean, staying with friends of Lady Marchwood's, you know."

"Jen!" Della's little shriek of excitement quite drowned Sheila's eager question. "You don't mean that Joy's engaged to Sir Andrew Marchwood?"

"From next door, where our nice man lives?" Sheila added eagerly.

"That is what I mean," Jen said calmly. "Why not? He does live next door, at the Manor; it's very suitable. They're as happy as a pair of—well, anything you like. But only so long as they're together. If they're long apart, they get difficult to live with. Joy does, anyway; and Andrew's always hanging round the Hall unless she's out with him. They're no use to any one but one another. It's a very good thing I *am* staying at the Hall! I can do some of the things Joy forgets every day; there are thousands of them. Mrs. Shirley's always saying she's glad she's got me."

"Well, that is thrilling!" Della said, deep satisfaction in her tone. "Fancy Joy Shirley marrying Sir Andrew Marchwood! We came in the train with his brother," she said offhandedly to Jen.

"Oh?" Jen's face lit up in interest. "Has he arrived, then? We've heard heaps about Ken. What is he like? Nice? Andrew says he's quite different from him!"

"He looked jolly," Della said guardedly. "Very brown; lots of luggage; we knew he was from abroad before he told us who he was. We were arguing about the Manor and the Hall, and he put us right. Is the school still staying at the Hall, Jen? Who are all the kids?" For Ros and Biddy and Maidie had drawn Sheila away, and were plying her with questions about Kenneth Marchwood.

Jen laughed. "Oh, no! These are just Joy's family. Ros and Maidie live at the Hall and go to school in Wycombe; Rosamund is the yellow one, and Maidie is the little dark Italian, Maidie has lost her parents, and Rosamund's people are abroad, and Joy has adopted them both out of sheer kindness of heart. Biddy—the brown girl—is staying with us for Easter, and Mary-Dorothy is her sister. Mary! Where have you got to?" severely. "Come and be introduced! You know all about the finding of the crypt and the jewels and the Abbey books? Well, this is Della Jessop, out of that old story. Now you'll understand our excitement at meeting again after seven years. Della, this is Mary Devine, a friend of ours from town. She writes books; if you ask her very nicely, perhaps she'll put you in one some day. The first one is dedicated to me, because I'm her fairy godmother."

"The first and only one, so far," Mary said shyly, laughing across at Della. "Jen's plural is very optimistic. The rest of the books are still in the future."

"Oh, they'll come all right! Mary's staying in the Abbey," Jen explained. "When she came, before Easter, the Hall was rather full of all kinds of people, so Mary and her cousin had a room in the Abbey here. And now though the people have all gone, and there's heaps of room, she won't leave the Abbey. We can't persuade her to come to the house."

"I love the Abbey. I'm delighted to have the chance of living in it. And I don't ever see ghosts, or mind in the least about being alone," said Mary.

"The result being that I'm to be found at all hours sitting on her bed, hearing about the next book, or talking about Joy and Andrew Marchwood," said Jen. "She's all alone now, for Biddy won't leave Ros; we can't tear them apart. Mary's cousin had to go suddenly, two days ago, to join her parents, who were arriving at Marseilles and wanted her to meet them and see something of the Continent before coming to England. They're South Africans, and want to see everything while they're over here. So Ruth Devine hopped off to town to pack and fly

across to Paris, *en route* for the Riviera and Italy and Switzerland; she wasn't going to miss such a chance! And so Mary's left alone in the Abbey."

"And enjoying herself thoroughly," Mary added.

"Dee, what do you think?" Sheila broke away from the three girls with a little shriek of joy which matched Della's own, and rushed up to catch her sister by the arm. "Dee, they go to the school—*my* school! I'm going there; I'm starting next week," she explained breathlessly to Jen, who gazed down at her calmly. "Dee, Rosamund and Maidlin go there, and Rosamund was the May Queen last year, and she says she'll look after me and see me through."

"It's really Jen's business now, though," said Rosamund. "She's the new Queen, you know."

"Jenny-Wren! What does she mean?" cried Della.

"You can't go to school?" cried Sheila. "You're grown-up! Doesn't the Queen have to be in the school?"

Jen drew herself up to her full height, which was considerable, and looked down on them all majestically. "I do go to school. I am the new Queen. I was crowned at Broadway End last week; that's why Mary and Bidy are here, and what all the other visitors came for. And I shall have another Coronation as soon as school begins; our Queens always have two, one for the Hamlet Club and one for the whole school. So I hope you'll treat me with proper respect in future, Miss Jessop."

"But you aren't still at school?" Della argued. "Jen Robins, you're twenty!"

"Oh, my dear, I'm very old!" Jen said airily. "All sorts of things have happened that you know nothing about! I left school at sixteen, and I've had years and years at home, and all kinds of experiences, including a serious illness in which I grew several feet taller and they bobbed my hair. I've taught clubs and classes; I've been to Vacation Schools and folk-dance parties; I've met heaps of interesting people! And now I've gone back to school. Don't say they wouldn't have me, for they would. They welcomed me with open arms. And the children have chosen me for the new May Queen, bless their little hearts!"

"But what do you do at school?" Della asked severely. "You couldn't possibly settle down to classes after all that? And why are you doing it?"

"Partly to please my parents, and partly to please myself. I was sorry to leave school so early," Jen dropped her teasing tone and spoke seriously. "When father and mother went off to Paris for some months, I jumped at the chance of going back to Miss Macey's, and of living with Joy for a time. I've been at the Hall a good deal; of course, I had to be Joan's bridesmaid! I was her Maid of Honour when she was Queen. I do Domestic Science at school; cookery and hygiene and housewifery; besides French and music. Some of it's a fag and a bore; but quite a lot is jolly interesting. And I love being at school again."

"Oh, I see! I've been in Paris for two years, and I'm going abroad now with the friends we're staying with, as soon as we get Shee settled at school. Pater and the mater are off on a tour in the East."

"So they've had to dispose of you and Dick again?" Jen's eyes twinkled at memory of the former occasion. "Oh, well, you're old enough to have some sense now! Do you want to go on seeing the Abbey? Miss Jenkins is bringing in another party; suppose we vanish? You can come back later, when they've gone. You'll come to the Hall for lunch, of course? It's almost time. You haven't any one waiting for you?"

Sheila's eyes flashed joyfully to Della's. Della said warmly: "Oh, no, we're alone! We were meaning to get something to eat in the village, but of course—but it's very good of you!

Are you quite sure it will be all right?"

"Oh, Joy would want you to come to the house. She always asks everybody. And we must give Sheila a chance to make friends with Ros and Maidie, if they're going to school together. Of course you must come! Mrs. Shirley will be pleased. Come along, Mary-Dorothy! You'd promised to come to lunch; you aren't going to sneak away just because Della's turned up. I'm willing to let you have the Abbey to yourself at night, though I'm rather jealous of you; but you really must come to the house for meals!"

Mary had been hesitating diffidently in the background. "I don't think——"

Jen stamped her foot on the cloister garth. "Mary-Dorothy Devine! I will not have you saying you don't think! Haven't I told you so before? Come on, silly! Here come the tourists and Jenky!"

"You needn't make holes in the lawn, if you are in a rage," Della remarked, as Jen seized Mary by the arm, and, being so much bigger, carried her off by force.

"Lawn!" groaned Jen. "As if it was meant for tennis! You'll call it 'the green' next, and suggest drying clothes on it. Della Jessop, you always were a horror! Don't you know it's where the monks were buried?"

"Then you shouldn't stamp on it," Della retorted.

"Oh, they're used to me! But I don't allow anybody to call the cloister garth a lawn. Where have the children gone?"

"I can guess, knowing Shee fairly well. She's simply panting to see those underground passages."

"Oh, well, Ros can guide her through them! They might have waited for us. I haven't got a torch, so we'll postpone the secret passages till after lunch," and Jen led Della and Mary to the tresant and the Abbot's garden, and so to the old gate which led to the Hall.

CHAPTER III

IN DEFENCE OF THE ABBEY

To Della's eyes, Mrs. Shirley at the Hall had hardly changed at all in the seven years; she was quieter and frailer, her hair a little more white and her face a little paler, that was all.

But Mrs. Shirley found it almost impossible to recognise, in this grown-up and shingled damsel, the thirteen-year-old schoolgirl with long brown curls who had spent a few weeks at the Hall, much against her will, in bygone days. Like Jen, she found more of Della in Sheila, who was very like her sister.

Della's one request was that she might go upstairs to the little room in which Jen and Jacqueline Wilmot had been her adopted parents.

"If you insist, I suppose you'll have to. But I don't advise it. I'm sleeping in it," Jen warned her, "and not even a term's Domestic Science has been able to turn me into a tidy person. But I don't mind! You can see it at its worst, if you want to."

"Do you ever see Jacky-boy? What's she doing, and where is she? And are any of the others married?"

"Jack lives in town now. I see her whenever I'm up there, of course. I saw a lot of her at Christmas. She's at college, going for her B.Sc. Several of the old May Queens are married. Cicely Everett—the President—has a son, twins with Joan's baby; one day between them. Miriam has a big girl and a baby boy; Marguerite has a daughter. Quite a junior Hamlet Club coming along!"

"You'll have to go and do likewise, since it seems the fashion for Queens!"

"I! I hope not!" Jen said fervently. "I've no leanings at all that way. I'm not going to carry on that tradition!"

"Oh, you never know," Della told her hopefully. "These things just happen, and often when you least expect them."

"You seem to have had experience!" Jen retorted. "What about yourself?"

"There's that jolly man next door," Della went on. "Not Joy's one; the one we met in the train. If you married him, you'd be Joy's sister."

Jen turned and stared at her. Then she said, her voice really chilly for the first time: "I'm not in the habit of looking at every man I meet as a possible husband. And I've not even met this man yet. Kindly stop being an ass, Della, and come down to lunch."

She led the way down the wide staircase, with all the dignity her height could give her; and Della followed, feeling as nearly crushed as was possible to her in these days. "My dear, I felt thirteen again!" she said, when retailing the incident at night for the benefit of the friend she was staying with. "Icy doesn't describe her! I began to wish we weren't staying to lunch!"

Jen knew her duty as Joy's hostess, and pulled herself together sufficiently to be pleasant and cordial. But Della knew that her foolish speech had undone the friendly warmth of their meeting, and that the atmosphere had changed.

Mary Devine, keenly sensitive, felt the drop in temperature also, and wondered what had happened. She knew that Jen was being polite now, and was trying to be kind; the kindness had been real before, now it was forced. Mary wondered what Della had done to ruin the warmth of the welcome she had received.

The ominous fact of Jen's extreme politeness was fortunately covered by the chatter of the schoolgirls and Sheila. Rosamund was full of plans for the coming term, and of promises to stand by Sheila as long as she felt "new." Bidy mourned that she could not be there with them, as she and Mary would have to go back to town as soon as Jen's school coronation was over, Mary to her post in a big typing office, Bidy to her closing term at a commercial college.

"I'll be ready for a job in the autumn," she told Sheila, who gazed at her with wide-eyed respect. "I hope I get a decent one! I'm going to be Maidie's private secretary some day, but she doesn't need me yet, so I'm going to practise on other people."

"It's just now I do need you," Maidlin objected. "If you could be here all the time, to help me with my homework, you'd be really useful, Biddums."

"To do your French for you, I suppose," Jen said severely. "You must buck up, or you'll never be able to go and see your ancestral estates in Italy, Madalena. Bidy can't do your French for you! But you'd find it a very good plan to swot at French yourself, Bridget. The better your French is, the more use you'll be to Maidie."

"I've made a note of that," Bidy told her, in a business-like tone. "I'm swotting at French already."

"I'm sure you'd like to see the rest of the Abbey," said Jen, as they rose from lunch. "I'll take you there through the secret passage and show you round, and then you'll still have time to meet Dick, as you'd planned."

Della understood that her stay at the Hall was not to be prolonged. She would have liked to linger there all afternoon, and leave Dick to find his own way home; but that was out of the question with Jen in this discouraging mood. So Della accepted the situation, and made the best of it by enjoying to the full the trip to the Abbey by the underground passage, the visit to the buried crypt, and the well which had once held Dick for a few terrible hours.

The garth was deserted when they reached it, so they wandered about, from refectory to chapter-house, and Jen told all the stories she knew, for Sheila's benefit.

Laughing and talking in a noisy crowd, they were entering the sacristy to see the rose window which Joy loved so much, when an astonished silence fell on Maidlin and Bidy and Rosamund, who were leading the way.

A man was standing there, with his back to them, apparently looking closely at the wall. Rosamund turned doubtfully to the elder girls behind, and made a grimace which was intended to convey many things to Jen.

Jen came forward, raising her eyebrows. Behind her back, Della's face filled with delighted laughter, but she kept back an exclamation, and laid her hand warningly on Sheila's arm to restrain her.

For one moment Jen stood as if turned to stone. The stranger had a pocket-knife in his hand, and having selected his spot carefully, he raised it and touched the wall with the blade.

In the background, Mary Devine gave an incredulous gasp of horror. Rosamund gave a cry: "Jen! Jen! Stop him, the beast!"

Jen, like an avenging angel, had shot forward. She was several inches taller than the young man. She seized him by the shoulders, and dragged him back, and shook him. "How *dare* you! Oh! Oh, Dicky Jessop!" and she released him suddenly, and glared at him. "*You* haven't changed! Were you really going to do it? Or were you only ragging? Did you hear us coming? Did you know he was here?" and she swung round wrathfully to meet Della's mocking eyes.

“You were fairly had!” Della said triumphantly. “Oh, I didn’t know! Till I saw him; then I knew he was trying to pull your leg. He did it, too. You do get fitty, Jenny-Wren! As if he’d scratch his name on your old walls now!”

“With Dick, and people like him, one never knows,” Jen said haughtily, but wishing in her heart she had been a little less hasty. Della would not easily let her forget the incident.

“Of course, it’s very jolly to be remembered,” Dick said, putting away his knife, “but it was rather an—er—unusual form of greeting, Miss Robins.”

“Do you always fly at tourists and shake them?” Della teased.

“He deserved it,” Rosamund cried hotly, quick to defend Jen, though in private they might quarrel. “I wish she’d hit him as well!”

“You were taken in, too,” Della told her. “You thought he was really going to do it.”

“I’ll send Miss Jenkins to show you the rest of the Abbey,” Jen said coldly, and moved towards the door. “She ought not to have let you go round alone. But then, she doesn’t know you.”

“Bit of luck it wasn’t old Ann Watson!” Dick grinned. “I told her I’d been before, and knew my way about. Then I heard you coming—heard you miles away!—and thought I’d have a bit of a rag. I’d asked the woman if Dell and Shee had been here, of course, and she’d told me they’d gone to the Hall with Miss Jen. Seemed a bit odd to think of seeing Jenny-Wren again! So when I heard your voices, I knew it must be you. I say, Jenny-Wren! I haven’t got to call you Miss Robins now, have I? Doesn’t sound a bit natural, don’t you know!” and he looked up at the stern person who was still regarding him severely.

He had hardly looked at her before. His first vision had been of blazing eyes and wrathful face, an avenging fury of a girl, and a great deal of her; he had felt suddenly uncomfortably small beside her. But as he looked now, something new dawned in his eyes, and his gaze, at first merely astonished that Jenny-Wren should have grown so pretty, changed to one of startled admiration. “Jolly fine girl!” was his secret comment.

“I don’t care what you call me. It’s of no consequence, and doesn’t affect me in the least,” Jen said haughtily, unhappily unable to forget that she had shaken him before she knew he was Dicky Jessop. Afterwards, of course, it would not have mattered; it seemed natural to shake Dick. But she knew, and Della would not let her forget, that she had flown at a strange man, and shaken him, in defence of Joan’s Abbey. “What does matter a lot, is that you should keep your hands off these walls. There’s no more to see in here. If you’ll go outside, I’ll call Miss Jenkins to go round the rest of the Abbey with you.”

“I say, Jenny-Wren! Miss Robins, then!” as Jen’s look grew still colder. “Can’t you take a joke? Don’t be so down on a fellow! I was only ragging. I never touched your rotten—er—your walls, and never meant to. Won’t you go round with us? You were going with Dell; and Shee and those kids don’t want to be parted yet. Won’t you forgive me? I’ll be a good little boy!” Dick pleaded, determined not to lose sight of her so quickly. “I want to hear all about the rest of the crowd who used to be here. And Micky; I suppose you couldn’t tell me what has become of Micky, could you?”

“You can hear all about Micky in the village. His friends there can tell you more about him than I can,” Jen said briefly. “Come along quickly, then. I can’t spare very long; Mrs. Shirley may need me, and while Joy is away I try to take her place.”

Her only desire was to get rid of Dick and Della, and to forget the unfavourable impression each had made. But she realised that to show sore feeling now would be undignified, so she relented so far as to go round the ruins with them, and even gave Dick a

brief account of the events of the past few years, in answer to his questions. But she was not cordial or at ease, and Della murmured in amused dismay, as she watched her: “We’ve both put our feet in it! Rotten luck, for Dick’s awfully struck with her. What if Jenny-Wren was *my* sister some day, instead of Joy’s? What a weird idea! Dick’s begun badly, though. He’ll have to get round her somehow!”

Dick did not show much real interest in Joan’s marriage, though he raised his eyebrows at the news of Joy’s engagement; and talk of May Queens and school did not move him at all. But this was Jen’s unlucky day, and in a careless moment, for which she blamed herself bitterly afterwards, she referred to her accident when she was sixteen—“a motor-bike smash-up, outside of Cheltenham”—and Dick’s questions fairly rained upon her. What had happened? Who was the rotten beggar who ran over her? What damage had been done? Why couldn’t the idiots keep their bikes under control? Was it the man Joan Shirley had married? No? Then who? And Dick tried to insist on having an answer, and a full account of the crash.

Jen froze instantly. Not to save the Abbey from destruction would she have told him who had been to blame for that accident. She changed the subject and flatly refused to return to it. Seeing Dick’s eyes on Rosamund and Maidlin, she guessed his intention, and proposed a visit to the crypt, which allowed her to catch Rosamund on the steps in the dark and whisper a word of caution.

“As if I would!” Rosamund flashed at her. “Or Maidie, either. He won’t get anything out of us. I don’t like him; but even if I did, nothing would induce me to give Joy away. You might know that, Jen Robins!”

“All right. Don’t you get shirty, too!” whispered Jen desperately. “Be a sport, and help me to get rid of them, Rose-of-the-World! That Della grins whenever I look at her, because of the way I made a fool of myself just now. I shall fly at *her* and shake her presently! I’m nearly distracted between his questions and her glares.”

“You skip off to the house and leave them to Biddy and me,” Rosamund suggested. “We won’t let him scratch any walls, bless him! I’ll be your watch-dog, if you like to remember suddenly that Mrs. Shirley always needs you at a quarter-past three sharp,” glancing at her watch. “Biddums and I will get rid of them for you in two ticks, old thing.”

“I can’t be absolutely rude,” Jen said unhappily, but looked sorely tempted.

The crypt was the one part of the Abbey Dick had been anxious not to see, and he was obviously unhappy in it. Rosamund saw it; every one saw it; and a teasing word of Della’s gave them the clue to his discomfort.

“Dicky doesn’t like this old place. He had too much of it once,” said Della, whose mockery did not spare even her brother.

Rosamund leapt at the chance. “It was here he was buried, wasn’t it? You know, Maidie; he fell into the well and broke his leg, and Miss Macey went after him to help haul him out. Don’t you wish you’d seen Mackums in the bottom of the well? Look, Sheila, down there; when you see Miss Macey at school, remember she went down there to rescue Dick. What did it feel like?” and she turned relentlessly on Dick, whose uneasiness was increasing as memories of those hours of agony crowded upon him.

“Did you really think they’d never find you?” Biddy had taken her cue from Rosamund. “It must have felt rather awful! No one knew there was a well, or a crypt, did they? And you’d fallen into it! You must have thought you’d starve to death!”

As that was exactly what Dick had thought for several interminably long hours, he was fiercely unwilling to be reminded of it; he would never have believed it could all come back to

him so vividly after seven years.

“You could put it in a story, Mary-Dorothy,” Jen suggested, a wicked gleam in her eyes as she grasped the possibility of paying Dick out. “It would make a thrilling chapter. A school, you know, and ruins; and the girls exploring them at night; and one girl, your bad girl—but you can make it up for yourself. Even I can see the whole chapter! You’d better get Dick to give you some points before he goes. He can tell you the thoughts she had while she was buried in the well. Did all your past life pass before your eyes?” and she turned to Dick. “I’m sure you wished you’d been a better brother to Della, and all that. And poor Della was sitting howling on her bed because you were lost.”

“I never cried about Dick!” Della said indignantly.

“Oh, you did! You cried pints. And the girls weren’t a bit comforting. You thought he’d run away to sea.”

“I’m going up again. This place is beastly stuffy. It always was,” and Dick turned to the doorway again.

“Oh, but you haven’t half seen it yet!” Jen and Bidy and Rosamund assured him together.

“And you’ve never told us how you felt——”

But Dick had seen, and heard, enough, and beat a retreat to the upper air with as much dignity as he could.

“If I really liked Della even a little bit, I should tell her that it was down here Joy first met Andrew Marchwood, and that she was wearing her gym. tunic, and that *she* was buried alive, too!” Jen murmured to Rosamund, as they followed, well behind Dick and Della and Sheila. “But as she’s Della I shan’t tell her a single word; and don’t you either. Joy wouldn’t like it.”

“Right-o! Here’s Grace!” as they reached the sunshine, and found one of the maids from the Hall crossing the garth. “She must be looking for us. Perhaps there’s a visitor.”

“Good job! Then these two will have to go,” and Jen went to speak to the girl.

Because Della was Della, and because of that unfortunate speech of hers before lunch, Jen deliberately kept back a bit of information which would have rejoiced Della’s heart. She called Rosamund aside. “Get rid of them, there’s a dear. It *is* a visitor, at the Hall. Don’t lose sight of them for a second till you’re sure they’ve really gone; they’re capable of anything. And warn Jenky that if they ever come back she’s to keep with them every minute.”

“I shall have to go to the house,” she said briefly to Della. “A visitor has called, and Mrs. Shirley can’t cope with strangers without help. She needs me, so I’ll say good-bye. You’ve been all round, anyway; and you’ll need your time if you’re to get home for tea. I’ll look after Shee at school; doesn’t it sound awful? Sounds as if I ought to say, ‘I’ll look after Her!’ I’ll see to Shee! She’ll be all right. Good-bye! *So* pleased to have seen you both again!” and she raced away across the garth and down the passage, and Della knew that Dick would not be invited to the Hall, nor all three of them to tea, as she and Sheila had been hoping.

CHAPTER IV

KEN COMES TO THE ABBEY

“I wouldn’t have dared to tell Ros it was Ken Marchwood, or she’d never have stayed,” Jen said to herself, as she went towards the ancient gate in the high Abbey wall. “But she’ll see plenty of him later, and I had to leave some strong-minded person to keep an eye on Dick! I’m not sure that Mary-Dorothy would have been firm enough.”

She paused in the gateway, taken by surprise, for her new guest was coming down the narrow shrubbery path between the bushes to meet her, and there was so much of him that he seemed to fill the landscape. Jen was used to looking down at people, but she had to look up at Kenneth Marchwood, who was taller and broader than his brother. Her momentary pause gave him his first sight of her, framed in the old Abbey gate, the afternoon sun lighting up her waving hair.

He knew which of the Abbey girls she must be, and came forward quickly to explain himself; and Jen’s remembrance of Della’s silly words, and the resentment they had caused, vanished before his frank, eager friendliness and pleasant manner.

“Mrs. Shirley suggested that I should come to look for you, and told me how to find the Abbey, Miss Jen. I saw Miss Shirley this morning with my brother, and they asked me to bring a message to you. And now, having been properly polite for the first time, don’t you think I may be considered one of the family, and speak of her as Joy?”

“I think you may,” Jen reassured him seriously. “She’ll be really one of your family quite soon, won’t she?”

He laughed. “Yes, but I want to be adopted into her family first, before she comes into ours. My brother says all you Abbey people are good at adopting friendless folk, so I don’t want to be left out in the cold. I’m certainly rather an outsider, after several years in British East. My orders from Joy were to come to the Hall and tell everybody I was Ken, and ask to be shown the Abbey; and that Miss Jen was to take care of me.”

Jen’s eyes twinkled. “You’ve paraphrased the last sentence. You’re being very polite, and it sounds like Joy, except the very end. But it crashes badly there. I’m quite sure Joy said ‘Jenny-Wren,’ not ‘Miss Jen.’”

“She did, but I hadn’t quite the cheek to repeat it.”

“And so you spoiled her message. Was that the whole of it, or was there anything really important?”

“Which I am not, of course,” he said laughing. “The real message was that she will be home on Friday, as there is a party she wants to go to on Thursday night.”

“I know; country-dancing, and a jolly programme. I wish I could be there! We thought she was coming to-morrow, so we’re glad to know. Thanks for bringing the message so promptly!” and her eyes danced again. “I’ll attend to the other part of it later on; I mean about showing you the Abbey! There’s a crowd in there just now; you don’t want to see it when it’s full of trippers,” and she laughed at thought of Della’s feelings if she could have heard. “Come back to the house, and we’ll see about tea, and then go to the Abbey afterwards. You can stay to tea, can’t you? What about Lady Marchwood? It’s good of her to spare you so soon.”

“She wasn’t expecting me till this evening,” he explained, “and she had arranged to go to tea with a very old friend who is too much of an invalid to be able to see a stranger. She’ll be

interested to hear I'm home, but she couldn't see me. So I took the chance to bring Joy's message to you. I'm very anxious to see the Abbey; of course, I have heard of you all from Andrew. He stayed with me last autumn, after spending the spring and summer at home, and I heard stories of you all till I felt I knew each one of you."

"But Joy best of all, I expect," Jen laughed, and walked with him back along the path. "Mrs. Shirley isn't strong," she explained. "It was just like her to shunt you off like that. You mustn't think she didn't want you. She'll love to have you there and to hear you talk, so long as I'm there to help, and she has only to listen and enjoy your stories. But she can't bear to be left with visitors; she can't stand alone or rely on herself at all. She must have somebody to turn to all the time. We can't quite see yet how Joy is going to get married, unless Joan comes home to live, and that will hardly be possible. I can't be here very long; but there will have to be somebody. The children are at school, of course. Well, so am I at present," she admitted, laughing again. "I'm not much good during term. But even for holidays I'm very temporary. My people will come back to England soon, I hope and expect; and then we may live anywhere, but probably in town. It depends on daddy's health. Our home is in Yorkshire. *I* say, Andrew will have to come and live here with Joy, instead of taking her to the Manor; that's one way out of the difficulty. He'll have to leave the Manor to his mother, and go to see her every day. But if he should want to travel again, I don't know what would happen."

"I've wondered about that," Kenneth said gravely. "What would Joy do? It's a difficult problem."

It was not difficult nor even a problem to Jen now, however. "She'd go with him," she said instantly. "She'd be awfully cut up at leaving home, but she'd go, if he'd have her. I mean, she'd go unless he was going somewhere that would be quite impossible for her. She's always been half a gipsy, wandering and exploring in her own way; our name for her is 'Traveller's Joy.' Her love for this place has balanced the gipsy side and helped her to settle down; but she'll go off again if she loves some one better than her house. And she does; that's all right! She'll go to Africa or Patagonia or Ashanti with Andrew, if he'll take her. He's more likely to refuse, because he won't think it's fit for her. It's not as if he'd want her to live away altogether; it would be only journeys. This will be home for both of them. But that doesn't settle the question of Mrs. Shirley. Joy's devoted to her aunt. We're all really worried about her."

"Could she go to live with her married daughter?"

"If Joan settled down, perhaps she could. But Joan isn't definitely living in one place yet. Jack keeps saying he'll leave the Army, but he hasn't done it, and Joan's plans are still uncertain. And that would mean uprooting Mrs. Shirley, after living here for seven years," and Jen shook her head doubtfully. "We're all anxious not to upset her more than can be helped."

They were sitting with Mrs. Shirley on the terrace, waiting for the tea Jen had ordered, when an avalanche—as it seemed to Ken Marchwood—of schoolgirls came racing across the lawn from the Abbey gate. The leader, a long-legged sturdy girl with yellow plaits flying, threw herself on Jen, who was balanced precariously on the grass at the top of the bank.

"They've gone," she announced triumphantly, "and I don't suppose they'll come back, unless Dick wants to see you again, Jenny-Wren. He lost all interest in the Abbey as soon as you disappeared. He doesn't care a scrap for ruins."

Jen collapsed under the onslaught, and they rolled down the bank and on to the lawn together.

The black-haired smaller girl, a little shy at sight of an unknown man, stood by Mrs. Shirley doubtfully, her great black eyes full of questions.

“Mr. Marchwood, this is our Maidlin, Joy’s ward,” Mrs. Shirley explained, taking the hand that rested on her shoulder. “Maidie, Mr. Marchwood has seen Joy this morning, and brings us a message from her.”

Ken noted the instant lighting up of the dark eyes as Maidlin turned to him eagerly. The sound of Joy’s name had driven away her shyness and changed her whole expression.

“Oh, is she coming home? It seems ages since she went.”

“Rosamunda, you are a hefty brute!” Jen cried indignantly, sitting, tousled and wrathful, at the bottom of the bank. “Can’t you behave when there’s company? Mr. Marchwood, I apologise for her. She’s a mere infant, in spite of her size. But would you believe she’s sixteen?”

“Oh! I’m sorry!” Rosamund picked herself up and pulled her jumper straight. “I didn’t see there was a visitor. I forgot.”

“Didn’t see!” Jen grumbled. “There’s enough of him. You never do see anything. You just go blundering along, tumbling over people——”

“Jen Robins, what a horrid thing to say!”

“Well, I don’t expect to be knocked off the terrace by great lumps of kids like you,” and Jen rose with dignity, and came up the bank again. “Mr. Marchwood, the whirlwind is called Rosamund, and the mouse is Madalena; no doubt you’ve heard of them from your brother. Bidy Devine is staying with us, and she’s Rosamunda’s twin soul. It’s a queer thing, but she’s also Maidlin’s twin soul. I don’t know how she manages it, for Ros and Maidie aren’t a bit alike.”

“What rot you talk, Jen!” Rosamund brushed Jen’s remarks aside as callously as she had overthrown her body, and accosted the stranger eagerly. “Are you really Sir Andrew’s brother from Africa? When did you arrive? Did you see Joy in town? When is she coming home? It feels horrid without her!”

“Where’s Mary-Dorothy?” Jen demanded. “I won’t have her left out of the family. I suppose she’s stayed behind because there was a visitor; how like her! Go and fetch her, Bidy, or none of you three shall have any tea. We’ve got to cure Mary-Dorothy’s shyness somehow.”

“I’ll go, Bidy.” Maidlin’s interest in Kenneth had waned when she heard Joy was not coming home till Friday; her face had fallen grievously at the news.

Jen was pouring out tea before they returned with Mary, and Rosamund and Kenneth were wrangling as to which of them should wait on the other.

“I’m part of the house, and you’re a visitor. I ought to hand things to you,” she argued.

“But I’m a man and you’re a lady,” he suggested, wickedly, for he guessed Jen would rise to the bait.

She did not fail him. “Lady! If you call that a lady——! Rushing at real ladies and knocking them down! Not even the beginnings of one, Mr. Marchwood. Don’t you make any mistake about it. She’s only a little girl, and a tomboy, and it’s absurd for you to treat her properly.”

“You’re only a schoolgirl yourself,” Rosamund retorted sharply.

“She’s spiked your guns, Miss Jen,” said he. “At least I may wait on Mrs. Shirley and Miss Devine.” And then, turning to Rosamund again, “Couldn’t we go into partnership, a kind of league of waiters, and look after those who haven’t had any tea, Your Majesty?”

“Oh!” Rosamund sparkled and coloured. “Who told you? But Jen’s a Queen too. She begins next week. She’s half crowned already. Shall you come to see me crown her at school?”

“I’m hoping to get myself invited somehow,” he said fervently. “After years in the tropics, a spring festival like the crowning of a May Queen would be a delightful welcome home.”

“She’ll be a jolly Queen,” Rosamund condescended to admit. “And she looks quite nice in her crown; almost pretty, in fact.”

“Oh, *thank* you, ‘Rose-of-the-World’! I *do* feel bucked!” Jen mocked.

“When I crowned her at Broadway End, standing on my toes because she’s such a fearful height, and knowing all the girls were giggling at me, what d’you think she whispered to me? —as if I wasn’t agitated and nervous enough! She kept saying, ‘Put it straight, kid! Put it straight!’” Rosamund told them.

“I knew you, you see; I didn’t want the thing all over one eye, and I knew you were quite capable of putting it squint,” Jen explained. “I expect every Queen who’s been crowned yet has said, ‘Put it straight!’ I’m quite sure you did.”

She turned to Kenneth. “Are we behaving horribly badly? Or are we only doing as Joy said, and making you feel at home? We’re certainly going on as if you weren’t here. We only mean to be friendly, but I’ve a dreadful fear that we’re being rude and you won’t ever come back, and then Joy won’t love us.”

“What’s the good of asking him, silly?” Rosamund remonstrated. “You know he’s got to say he likes it!”

“Then I shall have to prove I like it by coming back a great many times. But surely Your Majesties will believe that after living a very lonely life on the Equator or very near it, to be treated as one of a big jolly family is about the biggest bit of luck a fellow can have? I only hope you’ll go on forgetting I’m a stranger. If you begin to treat me as an outsider, I shall be so disappointed that I shall go away at once and never want to come back.”

“We mustn’t let that happen,” Jen said seriously. “Joy would be really annoyed. But we might be a little more polite to him, Rosamunda. Won’t you tell us something about Africa?” and she turned to him with a pleasant grown-up smile.

“Africa is a very large continent, situated chiefly in the southern hemisphere,” he began gravely.

“Form I., Geography. Mr. Marchwood will now conduct the class,” and Rosamund dumped herself on the grass at his feet and gazed up at him attentively. “I’m ready to drink in every word. Biddums, where’s your notebook? You say you can do a hundred a minute; now’s your chance!”

Kenneth helped himself to a toasted scone. “I’ll make a bargain. I’ll exchange my African adventures for Miss Jen’s stories of the Abbey. I’m told she knows them all.”

“Yes, she’s been telling them to another man this afternoon,” said Rosamund.

“A wasted afternoon! She ought to tell them to me. What did he offer to tell her in exchange?”

“Not anything at all,” said Jen sadly. “He didn’t even care about my stories.”

“Wonder who the silly ass was?”—but the words were not said aloud. “There’s a big car coming up the avenue,” he said instead, annoyed at the advent, as he supposed, of more visitors to interrupt the friendly party he was enjoying so thoroughly.

The four girls turned hurriedly. Then, with four shouts of surprise which seemed only one, they were off down the bank and across the lawn.

"It's Joy's car," said Mary Devine.

"I hope nothing is the matter," Mrs. Shirley said anxiously.

"I expect she has changed her mind for some reason, and come home earlier than she said," Mary said reassuringly, and took the cup from Mrs. Shirley's hand, and helped her to rise.

"Shall I go and see?" Kenneth saw that the frail little lady was nervous, and strode off after the girls.

They had reached the top of the drive just as the car drew up before the big doorway. Kenneth was in time to hear Jen's remonstrance, drowning the clamour of questions from the younger girls.

"Joy Shirley, you are awful! Sending messages you won't be home till Friday, and then rolling up half an hour later! What are you playing at? And where's Andrew? Have you dropped him somewhere on the road?"

"Oh, you've got here, Ken?" Joy greeted him over the heads of the girls. "It's all right. Is Auntie worried? Tell her there's nothing wrong, will you? I've run down on business; something that cropped up suddenly. I'll tell you all about it as soon as I've run the car round. Andrew's gone on to the Manor, so you needn't hurry home; your mother's got him now. I want tea, Jenny-Wren; send for some fresh for me, quickly! Biddy, tell Mary-Dorothy my business is with her and you; I'm coming to talk to you both in a moment. Hop in, Maidie! No, not you, Rosamunda; only room for Maidie."

"Oh, what a fib! Joy Shirley, you've room for six!"

"I don't mean in the car, infant," Joy said briefly, and drove off to the garage with Maidie enthroned in state beside her.

"Oh!" Rosamund said blankly. Then she turned to follow Biddy, who had run off excitedly to give the message to Mary.

Jen glanced at her. "You'll never quite share Maidie's place with Joy, Rosamunda."

"I know," Rosamund sighed. "It's all right, of course. Maidie's her favourite, and always has been. I'm awfully glad for Maidie. But I keep forgetting and trying to butt in, and then they have to squash me. I say, Jen, I'm desperately fond of Joy!"

Jen nodded. "I know, kid. But she feels Maidie is her own. It's not a case of favourites. She really has adopted Maidie. They feel they belong to one another. And Maidie has nobody else. You mustn't be jealous. Be a sport, Rosamunda!"

"I do try. I'm not one scrap jealous," Rosamund said wistfully. "But I would do anything for Joy, Jen! I just wish I could get the chance."

"You silly kid, don't you see you're doing something, and a really big thing, when you keep back and let her have Maidie to herself, and yet you don't hate Maidie for it?" Jen said brusquely. "You find it difficult to do; that shows it's real and worth while."

"Oh, but Joy doesn't know! She'll never understand," Rosamund spoke drearily, unconsciously touching on Joy's weakness. "Don't you go and tell her, Jen!" she added hurriedly, her voice fierce with sudden anxiety lest Jen, trying to help, should beg Joy to be kinder to her. "I'd never forgive you!"

"I know you wouldn't. Don't be a silly babe. I'd never do anything so mad," Jen's tone was gentler than her words, and she walked back across the lawn, pondering this revelation of Rosamund's deeper nature, and the suddenness of her change from the teasing tomboy to the wistful friend.

CHAPTER V

MARY, BIDDY, AND THE FUTURE

“Not a word till I’ve had a drink,” Joy proclaimed, as she came along the terrace with Maidie hanging on her arm, her big coat left in the car.

She kissed her aunt, and sat down in the chair Kenneth Marchwood placed for her. “You’ll be bored,” she said to him. “It’s only business; not private in any way, but not especially interesting to you. Ros, you and Jen might show him the Abbey; he hasn’t had time to see it yet, has he?”

“Oh, but if you’re going to talk about Biddums, I want to hear,” Rosamund protested.

“And if it’s about Mary-Dorothy, I want to hear!” said Jen. “I’m her fairy-godmother. I must know all about her.”

“How can your business possibly concern Biddy and me?” Mary marvelled, as she settled Mrs. Shirley in her place again.

“Please, I’ve been adopted completely as one of the family, so I want to hear all the news,” Kenneth said promptly. “But I want to be shown the Abbey too,” he added hastily. “Miss Jen has promised to tell me every story she knows.”

“Oh, I never! Not unless you tell some real African yarns, not just recite pages of the geography book,” Jen retorted.

Joy raised her eyebrows. “You certainly do seem very much at home, Ken! These people evidently haven’t been shy.”

“Oh, not at all,” Jen said airily. “Haven’t you had enough tea yet, ‘Traveller’s Joy’? How soon are you going to begin to talk?”

“Andrew and I had lunch with Marguerite.” Joy put down her cup and plunged into her story. “She’s spending a week in town on her way back to France, and she wired me this morning to meet her. Mary-Dorothy, how much longer has Biddy to stay at college?”

Mary gasped at the change of subject. “Till the end of the summer, we thought. She’s really ready for a post now, but three months more will give her extra speed and more finish in several ways, so we decided she’d better wait till the autumn before looking for a job.”

“We’re planning to go to the August Vacation School for a week, or two, if we can afford it,” Biddy put in, her brown eyes wide and her cheeks flushed with excitement. “So it seemed better I shouldn’t start anything till after that.”

“Marguerite asked me to find out if you’d like a jolly good post abroad,” Joy turned to her eagerly. “Her husband’s firm—they’re silk manufacturers, down Lyons way—wants a good junior English clerk. Shorthand, typing, and book-keeping essential, and some knowledge of French. Now, Biddy Devine, if you can rise to it, it’s the chance of a lifetime; that’s why I came flying home to tell you all about it. Marguerite would look after you herself, and she’s an old May Queen and a folk-dancer and Hamlet Club, and everything reliable and jolly and kind. It’s a thoroughly good firm, and besides getting business experience you’d have splendid opportunities for perfecting your French; you’d be forced to talk! In a year or two you’d come home with all the French you could possibly want, and more fitted to be Maidie’s secretary than you could ever be from swotting it up at home.”

Biddy gazed at her, her face blazing with excitement, her hands clasped round her knees in a fierce tense grip.

"I'd love it above all things," she breathed. "It's exactly the kind of job I'd like. Of course, I'd only take it till Maidie wanted me. She's my real job. But this would be the biggest step towards Maidie I can think of. I'll hate to say good-bye to all of you, but in business one has to be prepared for that kind of thing," and her face grew resolute. "But there's one thing. What about Mary, Joy? Now that Ruth's gone, we can't leave Mary all alone."

"You aren't going to lose a good job on my account," Mary's voice was equally resolute. "Don't worry about me, Biddy. I'll get on all right! I'll find some lonely person to come and share the flat with me."

Jen glanced at her quickly. She knew, in spite of Mary's brave pretence, the terror that had filled her at thought of this tearing up of their roots. Jen had seen Mary's face for one instant, as the meaning of Joy's offer dawned on her; the look had vanished before any one else had seen it, but Jen knew Mary too well to be deceived. Mary was sensitive and shy; the thought of any stranger sharing the tiny flat with her, the flat that had been home to the two of them for so long, was terrible to Mary. But Biddy's future must come first, and so no one must know the vague horror she felt of the lonely future.

"Oh, but that would be awful!" Biddy cried, in sharp distress. "Mary, you couldn't have a strange person in our little place!"

"Then I'll live alone," Mary said cheerfully—too cheerfully, for Jen and Biddy and Maidlin and even Rosamund looked at her quickly.

"My dear, none of us would agree to that," Mrs. Shirley said gravely. "There must be some better plan."

"Oh, I haven't forgotten Mary-Dorothy!" Joy assured them. "I've had a plan for her for ages; well, for a fortnight, at least! But it was no good proposing it unless we could dispose of Biddy somehow. I don't exactly want to get rid of you, Bridget dear; but if the chance of a lifetime should take you off to France—why, that's my time to sail in and suggest plans for Mary."

Mary gazed at her, strained anxiety in her eyes. Jen's face lit up in delight.

"Oh!" Biddy breathed. "Tell us, Joy! What are you going to do with Mary?"

Joy turned to Mary. "Mary-Dorothy, are you fearfully keen on your flat? I know you've had it for years; but could you bear to give it up altogether and move right out of town, and give up your job in that office?"

"For what?" Mary and Biddy spoke together.

"Where's she to go?" cried Biddy.

"What do you want me to do?" Mary asked breathlessly.

Joy's words fairly tumbled over one another. "To come here and take my place. To live here all the time, and be Aunty's companion, and carry on all my work when I go away. I must have somebody, and I'd rather have Mary-Dorothy than anybody else I can think of. How can I go off and let all the things I've started go flop? I want some one living here, so that I can go abroad, if I want to, with an easy mind. You'd be my secretary, or representative, or almoner, or any name you like, Mary-Dorothy. You'd go up to town in the car once a week, to take out my cripples; you'd see to the children's holidays in the village, and the girls' rest-home; you'd teach folk-dancing in the village hall; and you'd do all the other things I try to do. And most of all you'd look after the Abbey for Joan, and take care of Aunty and this house whenever I wasn't here, and be a hostess if people came to stay or call. Now wouldn't you like to do all that for me?"

"Oh, Mary! How gorgeous!" cried Biddy enviously. "Oh, I wish I could be here!"

"It's a jolly good plan, Joy," Rosamund said condescendingly.

Maidlin said nothing. Her hand had crept into Joy's when Joy spoke of going away, and a strained look had filled her face. Joy put her arm round her, with understanding, but said nothing.

Jen looked at Mary expectantly. This certainly was a possible solution of their problem.

Mary's face was bewildered. The prospect was so big that at first it frightened her. "I'd like it, of course. I'd love it, above all things. But I don't think I could do it. I wouldn't be good enough——"

And then Ken Marchwood ducked and gasped in amazement, as a cushion came hurtling across the tea-table, missing him by an inch, and fell beside Mary. Still unused to the ways of the household, it seemed an unnecessarily violent action on the part of a fairy-godmother. Surely it was only natural that Miss Devine, who was obviously shy and diffident, should hesitate before accepting a post of such responsibility! It was only to her credit that she felt some doubts of her own powers. At least, there was no need for her friends to throw cushions at her!

But Jen was furious. "Mary-Dorothy Devine, you're disgraceful! I'm ashamed of you! After all my work for this last year, to sit there and say you 'don't think'! Of course you can do it, and you're going to. Of course you're good enough, or Joy wouldn't have asked you. Don't talk rot and waste time. And you teaching clubs in town, and giving shows, and writing books! I've really no patience with you! Go on, Joy; tell us more about it. I'll see that she does it. After the first month, she'll love it. You know, she always does want to funk the first plunge. But what about her writing? She's got to type her book, and then to write the new one. I've discussed it with her, and it's going to be jolly good, great fun. I want to see it written down. You mustn't take all her time, you know! After all, she is a famous author; or she's going to be!"

"Jenny-Wren, you're just absurd!" Mary got a word in with difficulty.

Joy spoke quickly. "Mary-Dorothy, I haven't forgotten about your books. But you don't expect to give all day to writing, at present. Sometime perhaps you'll want to; but you meant to go home and keep on with your office work, and only give evenings to the books. I want you to take on my job instead of the office typing. It would be much jollier and better for you than sitting all day in an office; and you'd have more time to think out the stories that you were going to write at night. You'd keep one part of each day, afternoon or evening, for your own work, when you mustn't be disturbed; you'd have your own rooms here, and one would be your office, where you did business and typing—no, I won't have that! You'll have an office downstairs, where you attend to my work and answer my letters and keep my accounts; we'll put 'Secretary's Office' on the door, and the Hall will be kept in order as it never has been before. We shall be really business-like at last. But upstairs you'll have your sitting-room, with your own typewriter and desk, and you'll work there at the stories whenever you feel inclined. I won't have you trying to write all in among my letters and papers! You'd never get the proper 'atmosphere'; isn't that the right word? You must have your writing-room, and you can fill it with your own girls, and then they'll always come when you want them."

"Yes, that's a better plan," Jen agreed. "Right-o, Joy! If Biddy'll go to France, it's all decided. Are we to wire to Marguerite? What about dates? When do they want Biddy? Can she travel out alone? Mary'll have to go up to town to see about her moving, and to get Biddy provided with a trousseau and packed. You can be getting ready her rooms while she's away."

“Oh, Biddy’ll go to France all right,” said Biddy. “I shall cry my eyes out when I say good-bye, but I won’t funk and lose a jolly good job. I know a bit of luck when I meet it. And if I’m not good enough at first, I’ll soon find out why, and put that right! They won’t send me all the way back to England if they think there’s any chance of making something of me. And I’m not so hopeless as all that! I shall shake down into it somehow. Joy, thanks awfully for the topping chance. I’m ready to go ahead. What do I do first?”

“Yes, that’s what I’d say,” Rosamund observed. “You’ll get on all right, Biddums. And you’ll write every week.”

“Cheers! Good for you, Biddy! I knew you’d rise to it,” Joy said warmly. “Then can we go ahead, Mary-Dorothy?”

“My dear Joy, I’ve told you that’s all right,” Jen said emphatically. “What’s Marguerite’s address? Shall I go indoors and ’phone to her that Biddy accepts, with many thanks?”

“Jenny-Wren, you’re being a nuisance,” Joy said indignantly. “Can’t you let Mary speak for herself? Ken, you might take Jen to show you the Abbey! She’s heard all about this business now. If you’d take her away, Mary and I might be able to get on with it.”

Mary looked up, frightened courage in her eyes. “I’ll do my best, Joy. I can’t be beaten by Biddy. It’s a bigger job than I ever dreamed of tackling; it means responsibility, and I never thought I’d be fit to take on such a big thing. But if you’re willing to risk it and try me, I’ll do my best.”

“Of course you can do it, Mary,” Biddy said warmly.

“Mary-Dorothy, inside you, you’re one of the most really sporting people I know,” Jen said, more quietly than she had spoken for some time, because she was feeling so much more deeply. “You’ll make a good job of this, and we shall all thank you ever so much. Now you and Joy must plunge into business. Mr. Marchwood, I am ordered to show you the Abbey, so come along! But if I part with all my stories, you must play fair and come back very soon and give us yours in exchange. Are there lions and leopards in yours? Mine aren’t exciting, but extremely romantic; I’ve got monks, and ladies, and jewels, and secret treasures, and hidden passages, and buried churches, and tombs, and magic wells in mine; so come along and let’s get started!”

“I’ll let Marguerite know it’s all right, Biddy,” Joy said. “You’ll have to start almost at once, so I’d advise you to begin your last words to Ros and Maidie. I don’t mean to-night; but I do mean that you won’t have very much longer here. So if you care to vanish with them and talk it all over, now’s your chance.”

Biddy was gazing after Jen and Kenneth Marchwood. “He’s an inch taller even than Jenny-Wren. That Jessop boy was two inches shorter. It does make a difference, Maidie! Don’t look at me like that. Didn’t you see the way the Dicky chap looked at Jen? But she’ll never look at him, not for a second. He’s too skinny, for one thing. There’s plenty of this man, even for Jen.”

Joy looked at her with raised eyebrows; then looked after the two disappearing down the shrubbery-path, and raised her brows again. “What are you talking about, Biddy Devine?”

Biddy caught Rosamund by the arm. “Come to the summer-house and make plans, old thing! Come along, Maidie!” and she took Maidie by the other arm. “Come and talk about me managing silk firms in France! But you *will* write and tell me, Ros dearest, if——” and then they passed out of hearing.

“My dear,” Mrs. Shirley said gently to Mary, “this is a most excellent plan, and you will be the greatest comfort to me. If Joy has to go away, it is plain we shall need somebody here,

and there is no one I would as soon have as you.”

Mary turned to her, sudden tears in her eyes. “Oh, Mrs. Shirley, you are kind! That’s the one thing I wanted—to know if you would put up with me. I will do everything I can to make up to you for losing Joy; and Joan will often be here, I’m sure.”

“Aunty, you’re a dear,” Joy said warmly. “It’s been on my mind that we’d need some one, and I hated the thought of a stranger, for your sake. I could tell an outsider what I wanted done, so far as business goes, but where you’re concerned I was more doubtful. But Mary knows; there’s no need to tell her anything. She’ll be just like one of your own girls, and a better and much nicer one than I’ve ever been. Mary-Dorothy, I’m not afraid for you, as regards Aunty, or the Abbey, or any of the business. You can do it all better than I can. I’ll go to the ends of the earth quite happily, knowing you’re here. But I am worried on one point.”

“Yes?” Mary asked quietly, wondering where it was she was likely to fail.

“Those children,” Joy said restlessly. “It seems too big a job to give you, on top of all the rest. While Jenny-Wren’s here it’s all right; she fools with Ros, but Jen really is grown-up at heart, and she’ll never let Ros go too far. If Jen could be looked on as a fixture, I’d be quite easy in my mind. But she may have to go at any time, and you and Aunty will be left with Ros and Maidie to manage. And neither of them is easy to handle. I don’t know how you’ll get on. Of course, you can always say you’ll write to me, but that’s only a last resort, a kind of threat to hold over Rosamunda. I wish her folks would come home and carry her off to live with them!”

Mary was looking very thoughtful. “But that would be hard on Maidlin. She’s saying very little, Joy, but she’s heart-broken over your engagement.”

Joy stirred restlessly. “Poor kid! I know. She hasn’t said a word. She joined in with all the rest in congratulating us and all that, and she’s never gone back on it; but she looks at me with frightened eyes that hurt me, and she hangs on to me and follows me round, and watches me as if she were saying, ‘How soon am I going to lose you?’ I can’t take her with me; but she’s going to need a lot of comforting when I go.”

“I’ll do my best,” Mary said quietly. “I don’t think we shall have any trouble, not the kind of trouble you mean. Rosamund is so very fond of you; she’ll feel on her honour to behave as you’d wish. She won’t give trouble while you’re away, Joy.”

“Ros?” Joy raised her brows. “She likes me a bit, of course, but nothing out of the way. You’ll be able to hold Maidie down by saying ‘Joy wouldn’t like it,’ but I don’t believe it would work with Ros.”

“She likes you more than you know,” Mary told her. “She’s matter-of-fact and she doesn’t talk about it, but she does care for you, Joy.”

“Not very much, old thing. I’ve seen no signs of it, anyway. Who was here this afternoon, Mary? What was Biddy talking about?”

“Jen called them Della and Dick Jessop, and a little sister Sheila.”

“No! Dick and Della turned up again? And did he write his name on the Abbey anywhere?”

Mary began to laugh, and told the story of Jen’s greeting to Dick. “She shook him soundly before she knew who he was.”

“Good for Jenny-Wren! The Abbey will be safe, so long as she’s here. I must hear all about Della! And a sister, did you say? Aunty dear, I’m going to run after Jen and hear about these people! I’ll bring Ken back and make him stay to dinner, if I can. He’s a jolly boy; he met us in town, you know, and I liked him at once. Andrew thinks no end of him. Mary, you’d

better find Bidy and begin discussing her outfit. And your own! You'd better get things for yourself while you're at it, if you're going to live out of town," and Joy followed Jen and Kenneth along the shrubbery path, with a vague remembrance of Bidy's words in her mind, and a still vaguer idea that perhaps it was her duty to keep an elder-sisterly eye on Jen. It was difficult to believe it, but Jen was twenty, and her schoolgirl side was the merest pretence and might vanish at any moment.

"Jen! Ken! Where are you?" and Joy's call echoed through the cloisters. "Jen—Ken! How funny it sounds!" she said to herself.

CHAPTER VI

THE NEWS JOY BROUGHT

“I say, Joy!” and Jen’s tall figure appeared framed in the arched chapter-house doorway. “Ken says you told him——”

“Jenny-Wren!” Joy said severely. “Do you call that manners? I apologise for her, Ken. She’s only a school kid, you know; though she’s liable to grow up suddenly when you don’t expect it.”

“It’s the very best possible manners,” Jen said haughtily. “He asked us to make him one of the family, and we did it. It’s the height of kindness and courtesy.”

“Oh!” said Joy, utterly crushed for a second.

“Of course it is! I’ve been welcomed by the jolliest crowd of schoolgirls, in the jolliest possible way, to the jolliest possible household, and made to feel more at home in five minutes than I’d have expected in several weeks,” said Ken heartily. “Please don’t ask us to go back and be strangers again, Joy, for I don’t believe it can be done, and it would be a great disappointment to me if it could.”

“Don’t you go and upset the apple-cart; I mean the pleasant family feeling I’ve created with such care, Joy Shirley,” Jen said threateningly.

“I don’t want to upset anything,” Joy said helplessly. “But——”

“Is it true that you’re going to get married right away, almost at once?” Jen demanded. “He says you decided it in town, and told him. I think you might have the decency to inform your bridesmaid.”

“Oh, you aren’t going to be my bridesmaid! Don’t you think it!” Joy retorted. “As if I’d want to be dwarfed by a maypole like you! That’s Maidie’s privilege and no one else’s. You and Ros can be Maids of Honour, right in the background somewhere, but Maidie’s to be my one and only maid.”

“That will make her delirious with joy,” Jen remarked. Then she asked anxiously: “But you don’t really mean it? Not *soon*? Joy Shirley, not *at once*?” she wailed, as Joy’s eyes fell before hers. “Is that why you’re so anxious to get fixed up with Mary? Joy, what has happened? Tell me, you wretch!”

“Andrew has been asked to go out to East Africa almost immediately, to attend some conference. He’ll give it up, if I ask him, but he wants to go. So I’m going with him,” Joy said briefly.

“When?” Jen asked breathlessly.

Joy faced her with defiant eyes. “We’ve booked our passage for the first of June.”

“Joy! Joy Shirley!” Jen exploded. “Why, that’s only a month! And you’ve not been engaged for a fortnight, yet!”

Joy looked back at her steadily. “I’m quite aware of that. But what is there to wait for? I want him to go; and I want to go with him.”

It was true, and Jen knew it. A fortnight ago, Joy had not known she loved Andrew Marchwood; now he was her man, and she was ready to go across the world with him. And her friends who had seen her since her engagement knew that restless Joy was satisfied at last; she had found something for want of which her life had till now been incomplete, and she would not change. There was nothing to wait for.

"Of course, if he's going, you'd better go, too," Jen said decisively. "I'd far rather you did. I don't want you hanging round here, no use for anything, because he's on the Equator. I can just see what you'd be like, and the kind of time we'd have with you! But——"

"Thanks awfully!" Joy said indignantly. "I'm not in the habit of hanging round and being no use, am I?"

"Only since Andrew came along," Jen told her. "He's got half of you already. I don't want only half of you left on my hands. But he is a nuisance! I wish he'd never come home! Everything was so settled and jolly, and he's upset you thoroughly, and that upsets everything else."

Joy laughed a little at this attitude to the greatest event of her life. "He *has* upset me somewhat! Never mind, Jenny-Wren! Perhaps your turn will come."

"Me! I've got more sense. Joy, how can you be married in a month? You can't be ready!"

"Oh, can't I? I'm going back to town to-morrow to order things. We shall be married three weeks from to-day," Joy said definitely. "I want a week at home before we sail. We shall go down to Joan's place in Sussex for a few days, and have a few days here; the voyage will be our real wedding-trip."

Jen looked helplessly at Kenneth. "She really seems to mean it. Do you think she's in earnest? I can't quite believe it."

"You'll get used to the idea after we've gone," Joy told her ruthlessly. "Ken will help you. He's staying here for a while to look after his mother; and we're going to keep an eye on his coffee-plants and see that his manager's up to the mark."

"I thought you always said you could never bear to leave the Hall?" Jen challenged her.

"Oh, but this is different!" Joy had grown, and her attitude had changed towards many things, during the past two weeks. "Somehow I never realised that going away would mean going *with* somebody, nor how much difference that would make," she said reflectively. "And we're coming back, Jenny-Wren! What I dreaded was *living* somewhere else. There's no idea of that, and never will be. This is home for us both; and we shall soon be back. I shall love to see really wild places. Andrew's going to take me on *safari*; that means camping in a tent, with wagons, like Livingstone and Stanley. It will be simply topping!"

"And what about all of us at home?" Jen demanded.

"Mary-Dorothy's going to see to everything, and you're going to help her," Joy told her. "The longer you can stay here the better I'll be pleased, Jenny-Wren. I'll like to feel you're here. I know Mary will run the clubs and the hostel and the village work beautifully; and Auntie will love to have her. I'm easy in my mind about all that. But I do want you to help her with Ros and Maidie. There, in the family, I'm depending on you."

"Have you told Mrs. Shirley and Maidlin that you're being married in three weeks?" Jen asked anxiously.

Joy's eyes fell before hers again. "I hadn't the courage. I funk'd it. You must come and help me, Jenny-Wren," she pleaded. "Don't be unkind! You'll see me through, won't you? This will be the hardest bit of all."

Jen looked at her. Then she softened, and indignation and protests dropped from her. The matter was evidently settled; all that remained to be done was to help Joy to carry it out.

"You poor dear! Of course I'll help," she said generously. "I can't bear to think of this place without you. We shall all break our hearts. But if you've set your heart on going, I'll do my best to help you along. But you've got to tell them at once, and get it over."

“You’re a sport, Jenny-Wren!” Joy said warmly. “Andrew’s coming to dinner; do you think we could have it all fixed up and the air cleared by then?”

“It’s short work,” Jen looked at her watch. “But we’ll get down to it and see what we can do. You wouldn’t like to take Ken round the rest of the Abbey, while I go back and tell them for you, would you?”

“Oh, I *would!*” Joy said fervently. “But it feels mean to let you do it all. Isn’t it funking? You’re only a kid, after all.”

Jen drew herself up to her full height. “After that, I insist on being allowed to see the thing through in my own way! You entertain your brother-in-law. I’ll do your dirty work for you!” and she raced away across the garth.

Joy and Kenneth looked at one another. “You’re adopted, evidently,” said she. “Are you sure you wanted to be adopted so thoroughly? Jen comes of a family of big brothers, you know.”

“And I’m taken on as another one. It may have its disadvantages,” he admitted, “but we’ll face up to those later. Your little Queen is absolutely charming, Joy.”

“‘Little!’” Joy mocked. “First time for years I’ve heard Jen Robins called that. We usually call her the maypole. But, of course, you’re bigger still. She’s an absolute darling, and better than I am in every way, braver, and kinder, and more understanding and thoughtful—as much bigger than I am in her nature as she is in height. There! I say, Kenneth Marchwood! You couldn’t marry her and keep her in the family, could you? *My sister!* Oh, Ken, *do!*”

Ken Marchwood’s laugh rang out. “I’ve just been adopted as a big brother,” he reminded her. “I think we’ll say nothing about marrying for a little while. It wouldn’t do to frighten her. She might freeze up into a stranger again, and I’d feel chilly. But I’ll tell you this, sister-in-law! I’ve known her for less than two hours, so it’s early to talk of marrying; but there’s nothing I’d like better.”

“Cheers!” Joy said warmly. “I’ll go away happy! I’ll leave her in your hands. Come and see the Abbey, in case she asks you questions about it. But you may talk about Jenny-Wren, if you like. I don’t insist on your conversing entirely about Cistercian monks.”

“It was a most romantic story of a beautiful lady and a lay brother that you interrupted.”

“Oh, Jehane! She’s Jen’s favourite. It was Jen who unearthed Jehane for us, and that led to the finding of the jewels. Come and see the crypt,” and Joy led him underground.

CHAPTER VII

MISTRESS OF THE CEREMONIES

Jen, flying through the garden of the Hall, ran into Mary and Biddy, going slowly towards the Abbey to sit on Mary's bed and make shopping lists. Mary had wrested Biddy from Rosamund with difficulty, and had only just succeeded in drawing her away from the summer-house.

Jen pulled herself up sharply. "Mary-Dorothy, I want you—in the house. I need you badly. Biddy, where are Ros and Maidie? Summer-house? Fetch them, there's a good chap! I want everybody, just for five minutes."

Biddy, wide-eyed and excited, sped away, to return with Rosamund in an equal state of excitement, and Maidlin, looking startled, almost before Jen and Mary had reached the big hall.

Mrs. Shirley was sitting in one of the deep window-seats, looking out over the lawn and knitting a little coat for Joan's daughter.

"What is it, Jen? What do you want?" cried Rosamund. "Biddy hasn't an idea, but she says it's something thrilling, by your face."

"Come over here," Jen commanded.

She put her arm round Mrs. Shirley. As she crossed the lawn she had said quickly to Mary: "Stand by Maidie if my news upsets her, Mary-Dorothy! I must take care of Mrs. Shirley," but had given Mary no further warning.

Now she looked round at them all. "Look here, all of you! I've something to tell you. Joy has asked me to help her out. They've made new plans while they've been in town. Andrew's going out to Africa at once, and she's going, too. They're going to get married in three weeks, and they sail in four." Her arm tightened round Mrs. Shirley, and Mary put hers round Maidlin, as a frightened sob broke from the child. "And you mustn't feel too bad about it, people!" Jen said insistently. "She'll be home again quite soon. It's only for a trip. It's a little sooner than we expected, that's all. But it will simply break Joy's heart, and quite spoil her wedding, if we're miserable. I guess we all love her well enough to forget about ourselves and give her a jolly good send-off, don't we? There's heaps to do; millions of things! We'll be busy every minute. Can't we each one of us put away the thought of our own feelings till after she's gone? There simply isn't time to cry, Maidie. You've got to make her a wedding-present; nothing you can buy will be any good. You must give her your own work. Aunty dear!—I'm going to adopt you from this minute! I always think of you as 'Aunty'; I have done for years; and I've so hated being polite! I may, mayn't I?" and Mrs. Shirley's bewildered face relaxed into a pathetic smile of gratitude. "Aunty dear, don't you worry! It will be all right. We can't stop Joy; nobody ever could, could they? So we must do the best for her we can. But there won't be too much for you to do, and there'll be no need for you to worry. *I'm* going to run this wedding!"

"Jen! In three weeks? Really?" cried Rosamund incredulously.

"She *can't* be ready!" said Biddy, round-eyed.

Maidlin turned to Mary and hid her face against her arm. Mary held her closely, and followed up Jen's hint. "What will you make for her, Maidie? I've an idea, if you haven't any; something Ruth had, and she said she simply couldn't have lived on the voyage without it, and

it had been the greatest possible comfort. You'd like to make something for Joy that would be the greatest possible comfort, wouldn't you?"

Jen nodded vigorous approval. Mary-Dorothy was rising to the occasion more usefully than she had dared to expect.

Maidlin raised her tear-stained face. "What was it, Mary? Anything I could do? I'm not good at fancy-work."

"It wasn't fancy. It was plain, but tremendously useful. It was called a 'cabin-tidy,' and it was a thing, all pockets, to hang on the wall of her cabin, to hold her brush and comb, and hair-pins, and all the odds and ends you have lying about a dressing-table. You can't have them lying about on a ship, you know. Ruth said she'd never have got dressed at all without it. Joy will think about you and say 'Thank you, Maidie,' every time she uses it, and that will be several times each day."

"Will you help me?" Maidlin asked wistfully, and her eyes followed Mary adoringly all evening.

"Of course Joy can be ready, if we all help," Jen said sharply to Biddy. "You have to do your bit by clearing out with Marguerite and leaving Mary free to tackle the business here. Neither Mary nor I will have a second's free time till the wedding is over. Mary's got to send her story to be typed by some one else at her old office—Joy will pay for it; Mary's going to think of nothing but Joy's business and her wishes for the future, until things have settled down again. But her book has to go to the publisher, so she must get it typed by the office, for once. It can't be held up till June, or it will be too late for this year, and nobody wants that."

Mary nodded soberly. She began to see this would be necessary.

"You'll have your hands full, learning to take over all Joy's concerns, Mary-Dorothy," said Jen. "As for me, I'm going to see to the dresses!"

"Oh, Jen! You would bag that, of course!" cried Rosamund. "Can I be a bridesmaid? But what about school?"

"I'm not going to school till this affair is off my hands," Jen said determinedly. "I'll go for the Coronation, of course; can't disappoint the dear children! But I've no time for school and homework now. I shall run round and interview the Head to-morrow. She'll see it all right. School was all very well when I had nothing else to do and would only have been loafing about at home, but in a crisis like this I can't be expected to think about French and cooking, and how you make starch and gravy. Getting Joy safely married is much more important! There's no one else to do it, anyway. I've simply got to see her decently clothed; she's not in a fit state to think about undies, and outfits for the Tropics. Mackums will understand."

"I hope so!" Rosamund sounded doubtful as to whether Miss Macey would take this reasonable view of the crisis. "You'll be all the help in the world to Joy, if you can stop at home, of course."

"I shan't send for Joan, except just for the wedding, unless Joy really wants her to come." Jen's tone was already that of the Mistress of the Ceremonies, and Mrs. Shirley felt a sudden sense of relief, as if a burden of responsibility and decision had been lifted from her shoulders. "Joan's too busy with Janetta to be much help. We'll worry through better without her; and though Janetta's *very* nice, she does take up a lot of room."

"Besides the hours you waste cuddling her," said Biddy. "If you really mean to get things done, you'd much better not have that baby here."

Joy and Kenneth Marchwood walked into the midst of the discussion. Maidlin saw her first, and went straight to her arms.

Biddy and Rosamund hurled themselves upon her, with cries of: “Joy, how can you? Why need you be in such a frantic hurry?”

“Don’t you like being engaged?” Ros wailed. “Is that why you’re going to get through it so quickly?”

Joy broke away from them, but kept one arm round Maidie as she went to her aunt. “Auntie dear, forgive me! I’ll come back as soon as I can. But he’d promised to go before we got engaged, and though he’d back out if I asked him to, I can’t let him fail his friends out there. They want his help and advice, so he must go, and I’d rather go, too, than be left behind.”

“Rosamunda has uttered the one regret I have for you, ‘Traveller’s Joy,’” said Jen, in a motherly tone. “Never mind about *us*! We’re sorry to lose you; I hope we don’t need to tell you that. But you’re losing all the fun of your engagement; five weeks isn’t long enough. It ought to be a special kind of time for a girl, and you’re being done out of it. Don’t you think so?” she challenged Kenneth, who stood in the background.

“A very special time, and it’s hard lines to lose it,” he agreed heartily. “But I doubt if Joy would be happier if she stayed at home alone.”

“I couldn’t do it,” Joy told him. “I don’t mind giving up something. We’ll pretend we’re still engaged on the voyage out, if you like.”

“Oh, *will* you!” Jen said sceptically. “Ken, if your brother’s really coming here to dinner, hadn’t you better run along home and cheer up your mother? She’ll need it, if he’s going off so soon; but if she has you to take his place, that may help. I suppose you’re going to stay with her for a while? Then you may come and see us later on, when the rush is over! We shan’t have time to speak for the next three weeks. Now, Joy, just listen to what we’ve arranged so far!”

And Kenneth, with an amused look at Joy, took the hint and said good-bye.

Andrew Marchwood, arriving at seven o’clock, found the six girls still talking hard in an alcove of the big hall. Jen, throned on the arm of a chair which held Joy and Maidie, addressed Biddy and Rosamund, squatting on the floor, and Mary and Mrs. Shirley sitting in a deep window-seat. Everybody was talking at once, but the M.C.’s. voice could be penetrating when she liked, and she easily made herself heard.

“Well, green for Ros and me, then, if you’re so frightfully keen on it, though I don’t quite approve. I’m not superstitious, but a green wedding seems funny, and I simply can’t agree to a green bride! You’ll wear only white, except your hair, and don’t you say another word about it, Joy Shirley. You’ll look tophole; and you shall *not* wear green! Ros and I will be a green background for you, and that’s all the green you’re going to have. Maidie will be in white, as your special Maid; and she can have a hint of green, if you like; a girdle, and embroidery, as the Maids of Honour do at Coronations; but her frock must be white, and she must have a white wreath, because her hair’s so black. Ros and I can wear wreaths of leaves, as we’re fair, but they’d be wasted on Maidie. She’ll wear white flowers, like yours. Ros and I will be the tall trees behind; you and Maidie will be the white flowers—sorry! The lilies, I mean, of course.”

Rosamund giggled rudely. “How poetical, Jenny-Wren! When you have a wedding, send for me to run it for you! I’m drinking in your words of wisdom with thirsty ears!”

“Andrew, Jen’s taking charge of us. It’s going to be all right,” Joy called over Maidie’s bent head.

"Then we're provided for. In Jenny-Wren's hands our wedding is safe," said the bridegroom.

"Oh, you!" Jen spoke over her shoulder without looking round. "Go away! We haven't time for you, Andrew Marchwood. And not one of us likes you the least scrap. Joy may love you, but we don't, let me tell you that. Taking her away from us at a moment's notice! We haven't begun to think about forgiving you yet. I like your big little brother *much* better than you!"

"What a very good thing!" he said, laughing. "He'll be well looked after when I go away. Three weeks' notice I've given you, Jenny-Wren; please be truthful!"

"Three weeks! What's three weeks?" said the incensed Mistress of the Ceremonies. "Don't you come hanging round the house every day, or we shall never get her ready!"

Joy slipped into Jen's room to brush her hair that night, according to their custom, and found her M.C. sitting on her bed, looking very long and slim in pale blue pyjamas and ruffled childish curls.

Jen would have been grievously hurt and disappointed if she had not come. Indeed, she would have gone to look for her; but she had waited, feeling it was Joy's place to come to her. She handed out a box of chocolates. "Well, 'Traveller's Joy!' You have upset the family to-day! What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Where did you get these? You haven't been in to Wycombe, have you?" Joy temporised.

"Ken brought them," Jen said lightly. "Isn't he an angel?"

"Jen Robins, what do you mean? You never saw him till this afternoon!" Joy retorted indignantly.

Jen looked at her with wide blue eyes. "Well, why not? What's the matter? He found out from you in town that there were five girls left at home here, and he brought us each a box of chocolates. It was very thoughtful of him. He *is* a dear!"

"Oh!" Joy said feebly, and gazed at her doubtfully. For once she felt helpless. Was Jen really the child she seemed; a mere schoolgirl? Or was she putting it on?

Jen looked back at her calmly, and Joy longed to shake her, but dared not even hint at what was in her mind. And she had to go off to Africa with that question still unanswered.

She tried a new line of attack. "I hear you flew at Dicky Jessop and shook him," she said severely. "I'm sure he deserved it, but you shouldn't be so rough. You forget how big you are! It's all very well to take care of the Abbey, but you needn't attack our tourists. You'll be getting yourself run in for assault, and then how shall I be able to get married?"

"Oh, it's worse than that!" Jen told her ruefully. "If I'd known it was Dick, I wouldn't feel bad in the least. Dick can do with a good shaking at any time; always could! The trouble is, I didn't know it was Dick till I'd done it. It was a strange young man I shook; and I shook him hard too. I was completely taken in; he's an utter rotter! But all the same, I oughtn't to go shaking strange men."

"Oh, you do know that, do you? That's a sign of grace!" Joy mocked. "What's Dicky like now?"

"Comes about up to here," and Jen patted her breast. "Rather skinny. Thinks no end of himself. Della's very smart."

"She would be," Joy commented. "Has she improved at all?"

"Oh, a bit, perhaps! I didn't altogether like her. The little kid, Shee, is very like what Della was; Sheila, you know. I've promised to look after her at school, but I shan't be there to do it, so Ros will have to take the job on. I don't like Della," said Jen vigorously, in a burst of

confidence. "She said I'd better marry Ken Marchwood, so that I'd be your sister. I loathe that kind of joke! I ticked her off jolly quickly, and she saw she'd put her foot in it. She wanted to be asked to stay to tea, and if she'd known he was here I'd never have got her away."

Joy glanced at her, doubtful how far even she dared go. "It would be topping, if it happened," she said wistfully. "To have you here always! But that kind of thing has to come of itself."

"Oh, of course!" Jen said briskly. "You can't arrange a thing like falling in love, and I don't see myself marrying any one without that happening first. It's the only thing that can make getting married worth while; if you aren't in love it must be a horrid nuisance. Look at you! Going off to Africa at three weeks' notice! What would you have said about that a month ago?"

"It does make a difference," Joy admitted, with a laugh which had a note of relief in it, and yet a little disappointment. Jen was untouched by any deep feeling, that was obvious. But to have her for a sister——! Perhaps Kenneth would make good use of his opportunity, and this might "happen" some day.

"Besides," Jen said practically, "whoever marries Ken Marchwood will go out to live on his *shamba* in Kenya Colony, I suppose."

"Gracious! I hadn't thought of that! Jenny-Wren, for goodness' sake, don't!"

"I'm not thinking of it," Jen promised her. "You'd rather have me here, and just your own little friend, than your sister-in-law in Africa, then?"

"'Little friend!'" Joy quoted derisively.

"In the meantime, I'm running your wedding. As a first step, I'm going to interview Mackums to-morrow, and beg myself off school for three weeks."

"I'm coming with you. I'm going to beg Maidie off, too," said Joy. "I promised her I'd let her have these weeks with me. She hasn't a word to say, Jen. She just clings to me. You won't let her break her heart when I go?"

Jen looked grave. "We'll all do our best. But Maidie's so shut up inside herself. It won't be easy to help her. She only opens out to you."

"One of you must manage to get through to her. You ought to be able to; or Mary. Maidie doesn't express herself easily; as she says, she can't say things. But you must help her. She mustn't keep everything to herself, Jenny-Wren."

"I'll try," Jen said doubtfully. "But I may not be here very long, you know. Daddy and mother are sure to come home soon. Wild horses wouldn't drag me away till I've married you off safely; nothing but illness would make me go before that's over! But after that, if they wanted me, I'd have to go, Joy. It will be hard on Ros if you keep Maidie at home, and send her to school alone. Is it quite wise? It looks like having favourites."

But Joy was obdurate. "I promised Maidie. It pleased the kid no end. I can't have them both about. Ros knows Maidie's my own kiddy. She won't mind."

"It will be jolly decent of her, if she doesn't mind," Jen told her sharply.

CHAPTER VIII

CROWNING QUEEN JEN

The next three weeks remained in Jen's mind always as "the whirl."

"Oh, yes! That was during the whirl. I'd forgotten all about it," she would say afterwards.

But several events stood out clearly in her memory even from those whirling days.

The first was Rosamund's reception of the news that Maidlin was to have holidays till the wedding was over, but that she herself would be expected to go to school as usual. Miss Macey had "seen things in the right light," as Jen said, and had agreed that Jen's place was at the Hall till Joy had gone. She had agreed less willingly to Maidlin's absence, but it was very hard to refuse Joy anything at present, and Joy had pleaded so earnestly to be allowed to keep her adopted child at home that she had won the day. Perhaps Miss Macey realised how little good Maidie would get from school, and consented the more readily on that account.

Rosamund said nothing, after a first startled exclamation. A hurt look came into her eyes, which only Jen had time to see, and she went off into the garden alone to have the matter out with herself. Joy and Maidlin were far too much wrapped up in one another to understand; Mary and Bidy were hard at work shopping and packing in town. There was only Jen to see; she saw plainly enough, and waited anxiously to see what Rosamund would do, and how she would take this trial.

Sitting in the crook of a branch of an old apple-tree in the orchard, a few late daffodils still showing among the grasses at her feet, and the pinky blossom overhead and all around, Rosamund fought down the jealous feeling and all the resentment which Joy's preferment of Maidlin had aroused. Maidie must come first with Joy; it was natural and right. Maidie had been here first, and had been really adopted before Ros appeared on the scene.

"And I was only sent by Mackums. They took me because she asked them to. They've been awfully decent to me, but it wasn't their choice to have me. I never thought of that till now," she said gloomily to the apple-blossom. "They've never reminded me of it, or let me feel it once. They have been sports! But Maidie's different. . . . It's not Joy's fault if I care just about as much for her as Maidie does. She doesn't know I'm fond of her; she doesn't understand."

With tight-set lips she faced her tragedy, for it was a tragedy to her. A general favourite, used to being first with everybody at school, a May Queen inevitably and suited in every way to the position, it was a real blow to find herself of no account to anybody in this crisis. She did not easily take a second place.

"I'm only a rather noisy kid, and they don't want me in the way just now. I wonder why?" and she frowned down at the daffodils. "If only I could do something to help! But they won't ask me to do anything. But, I suppose," she said slowly, thinking it out more seriously than she had ever faced anything before, "I suppose they are asking me to do something! They're asking me to understand how bad they both feel, and to make myself scarce and let them be together, without me hanging round. That's the thing Joy really wants me to do for her. Well! It's up to me to do it, then!"

And what Jen saw presently, to her very great relief, was a new Rosamund, who was very patient and gentle with Maidie, was always ready to run an errand for Joy, was never in the way, and showed no trace of the resentment Jen had feared.

Jen caught her alone, the first evening that Ros had done her homework steadily by herself, shut up in a little library away from all the excitement. “Rosamunda, I’d just like to tell you you’re a sport!” she said warmly.

Rosamund, half-way up the stair, looked back at her. “Did you understand? Jen, that’s awfully like you.”

“You’re a jolly good chap, and of course I understand,” Jen insisted.

“Joy doesn’t. But then she never would. Oh, I’ve got to play the game,” Rosamund said drearily, and went on to put her books away.

Then came the departure of Biddy.

She and Mary came back from town after three days’ absence, having packed up their furniture and treasures and left them to be sent to Mary at the Hall. They had been busy shopping, and it was a grown-up Biddy who came back to say good-bye. In a new coat and skirt and very smart jumper and new hat, with her curly hair put up, she looked surprisingly responsible, surprisingly fit for her new position.

Rosamund walked round and round her admiringly, then sighed and pinched her “for luck.”

“You look jolly nice, old thing! Oh, Biddums, how I’ll miss you! I know it’s a gorgeous chance, and all that, and I’m glad, for your sake; but I am sorry it’s so far away! If you could only run in here for week-ends!”

“’Fraid it’s rather far for that. You’ve got to put up with lots of things in business,” Biddy said, with affected cheerfulness, acutely conscious that it was her last night at home. “I’ll write volumes, Ros, and you must, too.”

“It’s not the same,” Rosamund wailed. “It’s not so bad for Maidie, for, of course, you’ll come back to her, to write her letters and take her travelling. But I may be anywhere by then. I don’t know when I’ll see you again.”

She was not in a very cheerful mood at the moment, and Biddy’s departure next morning was an added blow. The three girls talked half that last night, sitting on Rosamund’s bed; Biddy’s serious talks with Mary had been got through in town, in the rooms which had been home to them for so many years; and this one night at the Hall was given to Ros and Maidie.

After a very cheerful—too cheerful—breakfast, Rosamund and Biddy and Biddy’s luggage were packed into the big car, with Joy and Jen. Mary had chosen to say good-bye at the house, with Maidlin and Mrs. Shirley; she stood on the terrace, waving bravely, till the car had disappeared down the drive, then fled into the Abbey, and hid herself for an hour, in the little room in which she had slept with Ruth.

Rosamund was set down at the big school gate. She called a brief, “Good-bye, old chap! Good luck! Write every single day, and tell me everything that happens!” and ran into the playground, to be so very busy with her friends that she had no time to realise that Biddy had really started for France.

Joy and Jen whirled Biddy up to town, saw her safely into Marguerite’s hands at Victoria, and then made for the West End, to plunge into a whirl of shopping and farewell visits.

The next event that Jen remembered clearly was her own Coronation at school, when, for one evening, Joy and her lightning wedding dropped into the background, and Jen herself was the centre of all the excitement. It was the tradition of the school, a tradition of ten years now, that the Queen should be chosen at a meeting of the Hamlet Club before Easter, and crowned by the Club, who all brought gifts and danced around the Maypole, at a meeting held at Broadway End, the home of the President, Cicely Everett. But as soon as the summer term

began, it was necessary that she should be crowned again at school, as many of the girls were not members of the Hamlet Club but were yet supposed to be under her authority for the year. Jen's first Coronation had taken place directly after Easter, earlier than usual, as both Cicely and Marguerite were going abroad with their husbands, and it was always desirable to have as full a muster of the old Queens as possible. But the second crowning still had to take place, in the big school hall, a few days after the term began.

"I'm deputed to look after you and explain everything," said Mary Devine to Ken Marchwood, who was among the visitors on the platform. "If Jen were any one else, I'd be afraid she might collapse, for she only arrived from town two hours ago, just in time for a hurried meal and a quick change. She and Joy have been shopping for two days at express speed, from their own account. But Jen never seems tired; she has endless energy."

They watched the country dances, with their quick changes of formation, their radiant moving colour. The schoolgirls who filled the floor of the hall wore simple dancing-frocks of vivid hues, with no attempt at fancy costume or arrangement of colours, which were allowed to blend at random, with very good effect. The girls were merely enjoying themselves, with no apparent regard for the onlookers, and there was no set appearance of previous arrangement, which might have been suggested had the colours of the dresses been more regularly planned. Some of the dancers wore white caps or bonnets, others had none; there was no other attempt at dressing-up.

"Those without caps are dancing as men," Mary explained. "But they often forget to put them on when they dance as women. It was the President's idea when the Club was started. You'll see her presently; she hasn't gone abroad yet, and she said she'd come, as she's very keen on Jenny-Wren, and wanted her to be Queen when she was sixteen and still really at school."

"Haste to the Wedding," and "Hey, Boys," and "Gathering Peascods," were being followed by "Galopede," when the two middle lines of dancers, clapping their hands while the top couple swung to the bottom, fell farther apart, and began to cheer, and those dancing in other sets came crowding up behind to watch the procession of Queens.

Queen Miriam, with her white train, Cicely, with her golden one, Joy, in bright green, Joan, in violet, and many another—though Marguerite and one or two were absent—came up the aisle between the walls of girls, each with her train-bearer and attendants. Queen Barbara, Miriam's little sister, wore cream-colour, decorated with painted wild roses; after her came Rosamund, her glowing crimson train, with big white roses on it, held up by Maidlin, whose dark rich colour, black eyes and hair, and burning cheeks, were such a contrast to Rosamund's English fairness.

Rosamund wore a faded wreath. On the platform, when all were in their places and the visitors had been given seats on the floor of the hall, with the girls crowding behind, Barbara removed the faded flowers and crowned the ex-Queen with forget-me-nots, a thick heavy circlet which Rosamund wore proudly as the token of her popularity. Followed by Maidlin, she came down the steps again, looking very regal, and walked with dignity the full length of the hall, to return in a moment followed by the Queen-Elect.

A great shout went up as Jen appeared, bareheaded, her crown of white starry flowers carried before her on a brown velvet cushion. Her train, carried by the tiniest baby in the school, was of bright beech brown, decorated, as she had explained, with "yellow things that dance"—daffodils and cowslips, buttercups, and a chain of laburnum winding among the rest. "None of your still roses and violets for me!" she had said. "I'll have flowers that dance in the

wind; and leaves—the most dancey things I know!” And among her yellow flowers were dotted dull brown oak leaves and golden triangles from the silver birch. Her great bunch of flowers was chiefly white, to comply with school tradition, but Mary had woven in a few stems of brown and golden wallflowers from the Abbey walls, and Jen was satisfied, as she could not have been without them. Her silver medal, with its date and inscription: “Queen Jen was crowned by the Hamlet Club as its Eleventh Queen,” hung round her neck; she would treasure it all her life; but she had flatly refused to be “Queen Janet.”

“Nobody knows me as anything but Jen. If you turn me into Janet I won’t go,” she had told Joy and Cicely.

Joy and Joan, Cicely and Miriam, and Nesta, Jen’s first dancing partner in the Hamlet Club, all rose to welcome her as she followed Rosamund up the platform steps; for in a very special way she belonged to them and was now entering into a comradeship from which chance had hitherto barred her.

“Come along, Jenny-Wren!” said Cicely, the President, and led her to the empty central throne, while the girls cheered again. “You’re only four years late! You ought to have been Queen when you were sixteen. Better late than never!”

Jen raised her long white robe, and made a sweeping curtsey, as she had so often longed to do when dancing “Hunsdon House.” “Thanks ever so much, Madam President! I’ll try not to disgrace this illustrious company!”

Then she turned, a tall queenly figure, to bow to the girls below.

“Kneel down, Maypole!” Rosamund commanded. “I can’t reach anywhere near your top end. I’ll put it perfectly straight; don’t worry!”

Jen knelt before her, and the white crown was laid on her waving yellow mop. Rosamund bent and kissed her: “I’m supposed to, so I’d better do it. You’ll have to put up with it,” she said, under cover of the cheering. “Your crown looks lovely, Jenny-Wren.” She gave her her hand, and helped her up.

Jen faced the crowd again, and bowed—to the girls, to Miss Macey, to the guests—with a straight amused glance down at Mary and Kenneth—to the Queens grouped around her. Then, with a little gesture which brought silence at once, she stepped forward, and thanked the girls for their welcome and the Club for the honour it had conferred on her, promised to try to be a good Queen, and expressed her hope that family arrangements would allow her to stay at school for a time at least, so that she might have a chance to do her duty in her new position.

She ended by apologising for her present absence from school. “Circumstances over which I have no control, and which I regret deeply, have made it inevitable.” And everybody looked at Joy, who “glared at Jen,” as Rosamund said afterwards.

Then the Club fell to dancing again; the maypole was brought in and set up, and the girls danced round it, with ribbons and without ribbons, in long lines, and in circles, and in squares. A triumphant “Sellenger’s Round,” ring within ring around the pole, brought the ceremony to a close, and the party broke up. Everybody talked in groups, and the Queens and visitors and the school staff gathered round Jen, to congratulate her and to admire her brown and yellow train.

“You’ve bagged my colours, though,” said Cicely, the golden Queen.

“I never!” the new Queen retorted with spirit. “You have big brown leaves on a gold train. I have tiny yellow dancing things on a train the colour of an autumn beech wood. Mine’s all my own, and my own idea; and it’s topping, and none of you thought it would be.”

“It’s very pretty, Your Majesty,” said the Head Mistress.

“But I think you all ought to have been allowed one dance for yourselves,” said Kenneth Marchwood, as he looked down into the Queen’s flushed radiant face. “It’s surely hard lines to have to look on all the time. Even I felt I wanted to join in. The dancing was the jolliest sight I’ve ever seen.”

“That’s what Andrew said, the day he saw it first,” Jen remarked. “Just you wait ten minutes! I had an idea the other day, and asked Miss Macey, and she gave leave, and everybody liked my plan. You wait!”

The Queens left the hall in a stately procession, and the schoolgirls who had been crowded into the gallery to watch began to disperse. The dancers still lingered on the floor of the hall, however, and the seniors came in with trays of lemonade and biscuits. Within ten minutes every one had disappeared except the dancing members of the Hamlet Club, and a few favoured visitors, who were put well out of the way on the platform. Kenneth and Andrew Marchwood and Mrs. Shirley were among these; Mary, in a corner, was hastily changing into dancing shoes.

Back to the hall came a laughing crowd of girls in short coloured frocks, who, ten minutes ago, had been regal Queens in white. Their brilliant trains were laid aside; Jen wore her vivid blue, Cicely dark red, Joan gray, and Joy green, Miriam lavender; Rosamund was in golden-brown, Maidlin in daffodil-yellow. With shouts of welcome, the rest ran to claim them as partners; Jen seized Mary by the hand; Joy caught Carry Carter, her maid, and led her into a ring; Cicely nodded to Dorothy Darley, who wore deep purple; Miriam paired off with her little sister, and Joan with Muriel, the Queen who had come after her and who had been her first Maid of Honour, until her promotion to be Queen gave the place to Jen. In two minutes the hall was filled with laughing rings of eight, and the fiddling girl struck up “Newcastle.”

With only those very few and very intimate friends looking on, the girls danced for an hour almost without a pause. In “The Old Mole” their high spirits and forgetfulness of everything but the music nearly took them off their feet; then came “Oranges and Lemons,” more courtly and polite; “Mage on a Cree,” to work off their energy; “The Fine Companion” and “Grimstock,” for contrast; and “Hunsdon House,”—“for manners,” as Rosamund told Kenneth Marchwood; “Childgrove” and “Jack’s Maggot” and “The Queen’s Jig,” in long lines, came between the set dances; and then “We Won’t Go Home Till Morning,” brought Jen’s party to a close.

“Not my party, really,” said the new Queen, as they rolled, exhausted, into the big car. “Joy’s last party—her last as Joy Shirley, anyway! She’ll be Lady Marchwood next time she dances with the Club.”

“Oh, go to sleep, Jenny-Wren!” Joy was touchy on the subject of her future title, for she had had to endure a good deal of teasing. “You’ve had too much excitement for a schoolgirl. It’s gone to your poor little head. Lie still and rest, and remember we’re going back to town early to-morrow, to see that wretched dressmaker. Why she can’t make one or two little frocks without so much fuss and fitting, I don’t know.”

“Well, anyway, it was a very nice Coronation,” said the Queen haughtily.

“And a very nice little Queen,” Joan said laughing.

CHAPTER IX

JOY'S LAST NIGHT AT HOME

The Hall was not overcrowded yet, for Joan had only come for one night, to be present at the ceremony; she went home again next day, to return just before the wedding. Since Joy and Jen were in town so much, Mary had reluctantly consented to leave her little room in the Abbey and live in the big house, and Mrs. Shirley learned to turn to her continually during those busy days.

Already Mary was helping Joy, attending to letters where possible, and taking much of her work off her hands. Even in the whirl of preparation, Joy did not forget her weekly trip to town, to give her East End cripples their day's outing; but she sent Mary in her place, to sit in the car and talk to the children, to see to their meals and safe return; and Mary, with the experience of her dancing club to help her, found it easy and interesting work, and soon learned not to be shy and to teach the children to forget their shyness also. The chauffeur drove them far out into Surrey, to a lonely inn buried in pine-woods; Mary enjoyed the beauty of this new bit of country even more than her charges did; she let them play on a sandy common, and helped them to gather bluebells and cowslips to take home; and was driven back to the Abbey at dusk, tired but very happy in the thrill of the new life she was beginning.

There was much that only Jen could do for Joy, however; and more that had to be done by Joy herself. There were endless personal letters; endless callers; endless wedding presents to be acknowledged; and all this Joy must attend to, with Jen as an able second. How she would have lived through those three weeks without Jen, Joy did not know.

When there was nothing else she could do, Mary devoted herself to Maidlin, and made a constant effort to give her things to do for Joy. That was the only way of happiness for Maidie at the moment. No one talked of Joy's going, but in everybody's mind, and most of all in Maidlin's, behind everything else was the shadow of dread, the thought of the time when Joy would be gone. Mary helped Maidie with the present she was making and insisted on its being kept a secret from Joy; and Rosamund, who had very little time to spare from school work, borrowed an alarm clock and woke herself very early each morning, and fetched Maidlin in to sit on her bed and sew. Jen heard from Mary of these working-parties, and provided Rosamund with a tin of biscuits and an unending supply of chocolates, to keep her and Maidie alive till breakfast-time.

In the midst of all her other work and interests, Joy found time to do one extra thing, and insisted on seeing it through herself. She undertook the personal supervision of the preparation of the rooms which were to be Mary's, and, rather to Mary's distress, would not let her go near them till they were finished.

"I'll make them very jolly, Mary-Dorothy. I promise you they'll be what you'll like," she said, as she begged Mary not to go into them until after the wedding.

Mary would very much rather have arranged them for herself, but she had to give in, and comforted herself with the thought that once Joy was safely off to Africa she could alter things as she liked. So she lived in the Abbey, as she loved to do, except when Joy and Jen were away in town, and while in the house kept her curiosity under control and did not go near the rooms which were to be hers.

One afternoon, when Joy and Jen arrived from town, weary and very ready for tea, Mary ended her list of the people who had called with: "And a gentleman to see Jenny-Wren."

"Oh?" Jen looked at her wide-eyed. "Who, please?"

"The boy who came with his sister to see the Abbey, that day Joy told us her plans."

"Dicky Jessop!" Joy and Jen spoke together.

"What cheek! *I* never asked him to come back!" Jen cried. "What did he want, Mary-Dorothy?"

"You seem to have made an impression on Dick," Joy remarked. "But you shook him, of course. He must have liked it. Did he come back for another dose?"

"He was staying with friends not far away, so he ran over on his motor-cycle to thank Jen for being so good to his little sister at school," said Mary.

Joy laughed. "Any excuse better than none, I suppose!"

Jen flushed indignantly. "I'd forgotten all about the kid. I haven't even seen her. What did he mean? Doesn't he know—if he knows anything about school at all—that I haven't been there?"

"I said something like that," Mary observed. "He said that Sheila's letters had said the Queen had been very kind to her, so he called to thank you."

"I'll pass on the thanks to Rosamunda," said Jen haughtily. "She's a sport; she must have remembered and looked after the kid for me. That was a *very* poor excuse on Dick's part! I hope he's satisfied now; we don't want him here any more."

"I'm afraid he'll come back to thank you yourself," Mary said. "I told him we should be too busy to see visitors till after the twenty-third. But I couldn't very well say he wasn't to come at all."

"Oh, you could!" Jen wailed. "Mary-Dorothy, I'm disappointed in you! You should have been more crushing! Dick's an idiot, and I won't have him hanging round here. Joy, Mary's too kind and gentle for your job!"

"I never told Mary part of her job would be to get rid of young men you didn't want," Joy retorted. "You're quite able to do your own crushing, Jenny-Wren."

"Men! Dick Jessop isn't a man," Jen said scornfully. "He's only a spoilt little boy playing at beginning to grow up. In ten years he may be a man; a kind of man, and rather a little skinny one, but he'll be what's called a man, for politeness' sake. But he's nowhere near one yet."

"I'm glad you got rid of him for the time being, Mary," Joy said fervently, dropping into a chair, as the Marchwood brothers came along from the garage, to which they had taken the car. "We really haven't time for outsider men these days."

"Shall I go away?" asked Kenneth kindly, as he brought a cushion for Jen, who was meditating a collapse on damp grass.

"Thanks; saved my life! Oh, you're one of the family," she told him. "We don't count you either an outsider or a man. You're just one of the crowd."

"I appreciate the compliment, but I think I ought to do something to deserve it. Won't you let me earn my right to the relationship somehow?"

"Oh, but you do," said Jen, accepting bread and butter. "Your stunt is to keep Andrew away from Joy, so that I can get her through this business safely, and you do it beautifully. If you weren't here, I'm sure he'd be hanging round even more than he is. I'm really grateful for your help. Between us, you and I will get them properly married. I couldn't do it alone. I simply couldn't get Joy to attend to things if Andrew was here all the time."

"I'm sure Andrew and I are very grateful to you and Ken," Joy remarked.

"I don't believe you are, a scrap. You want him hanging round. But you'd never think about clothes and letters and things, and then you'd find yourself out in Africa without any—without anything to wear."

"Jenny-Wren, you talk too much," Joy said indignantly.

"Well, I always did, didn't I? We'll have to find a new job when she's gone, Ken. I know! You shall help me to be rude to Dicky Jessop."

"Oh, you don't need help at that! Just fly at him and shake him again," Joy told her. "Besides, you'll be back at school, little one."

"So I shall. I forgot that. Ken will have to come and help me do my homework. I shall escape Dick, anyway. Mary will have to repulse him for me. *Could* I have a bun?" Jen asked pathetically.

Andrew and Kenneth both sprang to wait on her, and she helped herself from each of the plates.

"I'll be on the safe side. You forget all about me when Joy's here. Well, Andrew does; you're not so bad," she told Kenneth.

"Being adopted as an elder brother is all very well," the younger man exploded, as they walked home together through the woods, leaving the girls to get on with their arduous "business." "But it has its disadvantages. How am I ever going to make Jenny-Wren see it isn't a tomboy sister I'm looking for?"

His brother laughed. "Perhaps the tomboy will grow up. Good luck to you, old chap! But don't be in too much of a hurry. You'll only scare her."

"I'm adopted altogether too thoroughly for my taste," Kenneth said ruefully. "I'm one of the family. I don't count. I *want* to count, with Jenny-Wren!"

"You'll have to worry that out for yourself. I don't see that you've much to grumble at," Andrew said unsympathetically. "Perhaps she'll have time to think about you when we've gone."

Maidlin had been sitting at Joy's feet during tea on the terrace. It was her regular place, and Joy's hand would slip down to stroke her hair or caress her shoulder while she talked to Jen or Andrew. Not till her last night at home did Joy dare to break through the wall of reserve that Maidlin's silent misery had built up. But she could not go and leave the child without at least an attempt to comfort her.

She went into Maidie's room late that last night, and found her awake, as she had expected. Neither of them spoke easily of her deeper feelings, and in this case there was so little to say.

"Maidie darling, I'll come back," Joy whispered, and took her in her arms.

Maidlin sprang up to cling to her. "Joy—oh, Joy, don't go! It's such a long way! I can't live without you, Joy!"

"You'll need to, dear. But it won't be for very long. I'm not going to stay out there. Maidie, I'll be thinking all the time about coming home again. Promise me you'll be thinking about it, too."

"You know I won't think about anything else," Maidie gasped, and hid her face on Joy's neck.

"Yes, but I want to find you all right when I come home; well, and strong, and getting on well at school. You'll remember that, Maidie? Think how it would worry me if I heard you

were ill! You'll try to please me while I'm away, kid? If you mope and pine and let yourself be miserable, that will be forgetting what I asked of you. You wouldn't do that, Maidie."

"Oh, Joy, why must you go?" was Maidlin's only answer.

"Think how jolly it will be when I come home again!" was Joy's only comfort for her.

Maidlin lay in her arms and sobbed out all the repressed misery of the last three weeks. Joy hugged her again and again, and at last whispered a word which made Maidie clasp her in a convulsive grip of delight and gratitude, and then spring out of bed and grope for her slippers. Joy threw her dressing-gown round her and opened the door, and they ran together down the corridor like ghostly shadows, and slipped into Joy's room.

"I'll come back presently," Joy whispered, as she tucked Maidie into her bed.

She went along to Jen's room. "Jenny-Wren, do you love me? Quite a lot?"

"I thought you knew I did; sometimes," Jen retorted, making room for her on the bed. "What do you want me to do? Go to Andrew in the morning and tell him you don't want to be married, after all? For if it's that, I won't do it. I don't love you as much as all that."

"Don't be a goat! Were you coming in to talk to me?"

"I was thinking of it," Jen admitted. "But since you've come to me instead——"

"I'm not going to stay with you, though. I wanted a last pow-wow, too; we've had several, haven't we? But we'll have to do without it. I'm going to bed now, at once."

"Well, that's more sense than some of the things you do, considering to-morrow! I'll come and sit on top of you, and you can say last words that aren't meant for the general public—meaning Ros and Maidie."

"That's what you're going to do for me—give up our last midnight pow-wow. I've got Maidie in there," Joy confessed, "and I must get to bed or she won't go to sleep."

"Joy!" Jen exploded, in indignant remonstrance. "You know you never sleep well when you have her. That really is the limit! It's too bad. And you're being married to-morrow! You ought to have a good night's rest. Joy, I'm sorry for the kid, but you mustn't spoil your wedding to please her. I'll go and explain to her; she can come in here with me if she's too unhappy to sleep alone. But she mustn't keep you up all night," and Jen started for the door.

Joy put her back against it. "Jenny-Wren, it's no use. I'm going to have my way in this. It's the last thing I can do for the kid, and she's breaking her heart. Your turn will come afterwards. Don't be angry, Jen. I'll always be glad to remember I was good to Maidie this last night. I'm just glad I thought of it; so often I don't think of things. She jumped for joy when I proposed it. Be a dear, and say 'good-night and good luck to you,' and leave me and Maidie alone together, Jenny-Wren."

Jen looked at her. Then she put aside her scruples and surrendered. "It's a big thing you're asking, 'Traveller's Joy.' I'd looked forward to our last chat. But have it your own way; I suppose you're right. Good-night, dear; and God bless you. That's better than good luck."

She bent and kissed Joy, and Joy went regretfully back to her own room. She had meant to sound Jen on the subject of Kenneth Marchwood, but it was too large a question to be entered upon while Maidlin lay waiting for her to come. The question could not be asked now; Joy could only wait for the future to show the answer.

In her own room, separated from Maidlin's only by the connecting-door—which, for once, Maidie had closed deliberately—Rosamund sat up in bed and heard the murmur of voices through the wall.

"Joy's come to talk to Maidie. She'll never think I'd like to see her, too. She hasn't a glimmer of an idea that I really care. I'd like to tell her straight out that I care every bit as

much as Maidie. I've only hidden it all these weeks so that I shouldn't worry her. Why shouldn't she know, before she goes?" and Rosamund was out of bed, her hand on the handle of the door.

But something stopped her. The Rosamund of a month ago would have flung open the door and confronted Joy and Maidie, with hot reproachful words! "I care too! I care a lot! Why do you never think of me?" But a new and stronger Rosamund had grown of late; one who thought more deeply and saw beneath the surface, as the old Rosamund had never done. And the new Rosamund held the old one back.

"I can't. It's mean. They're saying good-bye. I can't spoil it by making a scene," and she turned and went drearily back to bed. "Just because I do care so much about Joy's going, I can't butt in between her and Maidie now."

She and Jen slept better than Joy and Maidie that night, for both were too healthy to lie awake, however troubled their minds might be. But Rosamund woke early and crept into Maidie's room, to cheer her up for the difficult day; and finding Maidie's bed tumbled but empty, she understood, and sighed, and went back to her own lonely room.

"She's had Joy to herself all night. Lucky kid!—Well, I *won't* be jealous! It's all right, of course. Joy has been like her mother for the last year; she's never tried to mother me! I'm glad I didn't make a scene last night. It would have been hateful to think of it afterwards; a row on Joy's last night at home! Maidie will be in a fearful state once Joy's really gone. I'll have to keep an eye on her. I can do that for Joy, anyway," and she sat up in bed, clasping her knees, and staring out of the open window at the sunlit creeper. "What a perfect wedding-day for Joy! She fits in with spring, and the first leaves, and flowers on the trees, and sun, and the smell of the country. That's what Andrew—bother him!—always says: 'The spirit of spring.' Well, she's got it for her wedding. The birds seem to know! But how weird it will be without her!"

She dressed, with no very clear idea of what she meant to do so early; but was glad she had done so when she saw Jen stealing across the wet lawn. Silent but swift as a cat after its prey, Rosamund was out, and downstairs, and after her.

"Jen, let me help, whatever it is! Nobody else wants me. I'd like to do something."

Jen gave her a quick look. "Come and gather white lilac and arabis and sweet alyssum, and ladysmock from the orchard, and we'll scatter them outside Joy's door, so that she'll remember she's a bride from the moment she comes out of her room."

"Topping! She loves 'milkmaids,'" said Rosamund, as they gathered ladysmock under the apple-trees. "I say, Jen! I wasn't trying to be pathetic. But it is rotten, you know. I can't tell her; but I care just as much as Maidie, in my own way."

"Yes, but you haven't Maidie's fearfully difficult temperament," Jen reminded her. "You can be calm and sensible over it. Maidie gets so desperately worked up; and she can't express it, and so she goes silent, and it's awfully bad for her. She needs help more than you do, Rosamunda."

"Yes, I see. But Joy doesn't know how I feel. She thinks if she says: 'Good-bye, old thing! See you later!'—that's all I want. And it isn't."

"I know. But she's going through a lot, Ros. It's a great wrench to leave us all, and her home, and go so far away. Don't ask her to carry one more load than she needs to," Jen said gravely. "She has a big strain on her already. You and I must hide what we feel, to make things easier for her. If we're all crying, and hanging round her, she'll have an awful time saying good-bye. I'm going to be so extremely happy and light-hearted and noisy and excited that

she'll never dream I'm feeling desperately bad. But how do you suppose I really feel, Rosamunda?"

"Yes, it's worse for you," Rosamund conceded. "All right, Jen! I'll play up, and be excited and happy too."

"You're a sport, old chap!" Jen said warmly, and they crept upstairs together to strew Joy's corridor with white flowers; and then went to forage in the larder for an unofficial wedding-feast to allay the pangs of six-in-the-morning hunger.

CHAPTER X

A NEW HOME FOR MARY

Joy's wedding-party broke up quickly.

Joan, the only guest invited to stay in the house, had left her baby for one night for the first time, and was in a hurry to get back to her, as if she feared some one might have stolen Janice in her absence. She left, to go home by car, almost directly after the bride and bridegroom had driven away; and took her mother with her for a visit to her Sussex home; and the Hall felt strangely empty without Mrs. Shirley in her usual place, although she was so tiny and quiet and frail.

Kenneth Marchwood and Jen had been everywhere at once, she wielding absolute authority as self-elected Mistress of the Ceremonies, he always at her elbow to help and carry out her ideas. They stood together by the last motor, saying good-bye to Cicely and her husband and to Miriam and Barbara.

"Fancy 'Traveller's Joy' really married!" said the President, not for the first time. "If you want to enrage her when she comes back, keep calling her 'my lady.' She goes pink every time."

"No, I won't. It's a sore point," said Jen. "It's the one thing she doesn't like about Andrew; she's told him so often. Says it makes her feel so silly."

"Sure you won't come home with me, Jenny-Wren? You'll feel awfully slack with just the kiddies," Cicely tempted. "Come and have dinner at Broadway End! You've nobody to talk to here. You know you want to talk it all over."

"There's Mary-Dorothy," Jen said instantly. "Besides, I'm needed here. Thanks, President; it's a kind thought, but it can't be done."

She waved good-bye to the car, with its load of Queens, and then turned to Kenneth. "You have been a brick! You've helped no end. Now I'm going to get into old cool clothes and spend the evening cheering up these forsaken children. I daren't face the thought that we've really lost Joy; it doesn't bear thinking of. Won't you go home and change, and be comfortable, and come back here to talk it all over, as Mrs. Everett suggested? Would your mother spare you? We'd be glad to have you."

But Kenneth had another idea, and they walked up and down on the terrace together while he unfolded his plan.

Jen listened, her face growing radiant. Then, with a joyous: "*All of us? Yes, rather!* You're a dear, to think of it!" she went flying to find Mary and the younger girls, while Ken laughed and went off by the woods-path to the Manor.

At the earliest possible moment, as soon indeed as Joan and Mrs. Shirley had gone and while Jen was still busy with the departing guests, Maidlin sought Mary, keeping shyly in the background, and drew her by the hand towards the staircase.

"Joy told me to show you—as soon as ever she'd gone—the first minute that was possible. Won't you come, Mary? Ros, you come, too."

"Where to?" asked Rosamund curiously. And both she and Mary went eagerly, to see what Joy's last wish for them had been.

Maidlin, her face very intent, led them to the west wing of the Hall, where Mary's new rooms were to be.

“Oh!” said Rosamund. “Mary-Dorothy’s private flat? Is it ready? Are we to see it at last? Nobody has been allowed in but Joy and Maidie, Mary!”

“Jen’s been in,” said Maidlin, and opened the door.

“Then I was the only one left out!” Rosamund said indignantly, but no one took any notice of her.

Maidlin watched Mary anxiously: she had orders to tell Joy every word Mary said and just exactly how she looked.

Mary stood in the first room and looked all round, her colour coming and going. “How did Joy know?” she whispered. “Oh—Jen, of course! It’s my dream-room, Maidie!”

“That’s what Joy wanted it to be,” Maidlin said earnestly.

It was indeed the room of which Mary had dreamed, and which she had planned so often with Bidy and Jen and Ruth, sitting before the fire in the London flat, at the top of the big office building. It was as homey as that room had been, but with a beauty of colour and arrangement which had not been possible there. Here were the green-tinted walls, deep green curtains and cushions, which were to be “the background for every kind of flowers,” the ideal of Mary’s dreams; at the moment there were white and purple flowers everywhere—lilac in the vases and bowls on table and mantelpiece. A complete change of flowers—a day given up to daffodils, or to crimson roses, or to lupins and larkspurs—would change the whole impression of the room, while its restful character would remain in the deep green setting. A big steady table stood at one side; a little folding table for tea-parties at another; Mary’s typewriter was in one corner, her desk stood near the window; there were easy-chairs, a big couch, an office-chair for typing, and a cabinet of drawers for filing manuscripts.

At sight of this Mary gave an incredulous cry of joy. “I’ve always longed for one, but never been able to afford it! Oh, but Joy ought not to have——”

“She said it was her good-bye present to you, because she’s so glad to think you’re here,” Maidlin explained eagerly. “The bookcase isn’t full, Mary, because there’s room left for the books you’re going to write yourself.”

Mary laughed unsteadily, as she looked at the shelves, and saw her own old favourites, with many new ones which Joy and Jen had chosen as being ones they, or she, had loved. Then she looked out of the windows, across the front lawn to the beech avenue, a view she had dreamed of when back in London after her visits to the Hall.

“You’ll be able to see every visitor who comes to see Maidie, and all the men who come to call on Jen,” Rosamund suggested. “Oh, I expect they will! But she’ll manage them all right. It’s a jolly sunny room.”

Mary’s eyes wandered round again. On the mantelpiece and the shelves and the tops of desk and cabinet, the ornaments were all the deep green jars and bowls which Ruth had given to her and Bidy on Valentine’s Day; one shelf held the beautiful blue vases and pots which had been Jen’s Christmas gift to Bidy. Against one wall stood a tall dresser, of dark wood to match the polished table, and on the shelves of this, all ready for Mary’s private tea-parties, were the cups and saucers, jugs and basins, of the green pottery-ware which Ruth had brought from Surrey as her great surprise.

“It looks topping all together like that,” said Rosamund. “Ask Maidie and me to tea soon, Mary! I’m dying to have tea off those dinky plates.”

“It looks lovely. I never dreamed of anything so pretty. I wish Bidy could have seen it,” Mary said wistfully.

“Oh, you’ll write and tell her about it; and about the wedding, of course.”

“Mary, Joy said you were to change things round as much as you liked,” said Maidlin. “And she said, don’t keep Bidly’s blue things in here if you’d rather not.”

“Oh, but I like them here! I shan’t want to change anything,” Mary said warmly. “Joy asked leave to take a few things out of my boxes to make this room homelike, but I never dreamed of anything like this. I can’t think of one thing I’d like different. If she’d seen inside my mind, she couldn’t have known more exactly what I’d like. It’s home! But it’s beautiful; we could never afford to make our rooms beautiful before.”

“Joy said she hoped you’d write lovely books in here,” said Maidlin eagerly.

Mary flushed. “I shouldn’t wonder. If I could do it anywhere, it would be here. I shan’t know how to thank her.”

“Now come and see your bedroom!” and Maidie, flushed and important and excited, dragged her to a door by which she could enter a second room without going outside.

“It has a door to the corridor, too,” Maidie explained. “But if you like, you can lock one of the outer doors, and then the other room would be much more private.”

But Mary was not listening, though the advantages of the plan dawned on her later. For here again was a room of her dreams, the room Jen had heard her plan so often. Here were the soft-tinted yellow walls, the golden window-curtains which gave the look of perpetual sunshine, the deep restful brown of carpet, cushions, hangings. The small table by the window had a dark brown cloth, and held a brown bowl lined with yellow and filled with golden buttercups; there were wallflowers in the brown and yellow vases, scenting the room. The toilet articles on dressing-table and washstand, the ornaments everywhere, were of the brown and gold pottery Mary loved, every piece different, each brown bowl lined with rich old gold, and every piece had been given her by Jen, during the last nine months. She had loved its colour in the London flat; but it had never looked its best till now, in a worthy setting. The room had a west window as well as one looking south, and the sun was streaming in.

Rosamund wandered round, exclaiming at the beautiful shapes of the fat jars, which cried out to be filled with pot-pourri, the slim curving jugs, the dignified candlesticks, the massive yellow tray under the looking-glass, the wide golden dish which held the buttercups, the brown toad with holes in his back through which the stems were thrust to keep them upright.

“Look at the owls on that bowl! Three faces—how awfully cute! And more owls, on jugs and basins; they’re the quaintest things I ever saw! What heaps you’ve got, Mary-Dorothy!”

“Look, Mary!” begged Maidlin. “Under your gas-fire there’s a ring for a kettle, just like we had at King’s last Christmas. You can boil water and make tea whenever you feel like it. Joy was sure you’d like that. And these are from Jen; she says it’s her housewarming present to you, because you’ve finished your book; she says she always gives you brown pots when you write something new,” and Maidlin showed a wooden tray with handles, with a tiny breakfast set, cup and saucer, minute tea-pot and cream-jug and basin, all ready for early morning tea.

“You know, Maidie, I got past words long ago!” Mary said desperately. “I shall have to cry, I think; there’s no other way of expressing my feelings! Oh, Jenny-Wren!” as Jen appeared excitedly at the door, after a wild hunt for them all. “How much of all this is your doing? How can I ever thank you and Joy properly? I never dreamed of such a beautiful home, all for my own.”

“Joy loved getting it ready for you. I didn’t do anything except give advice——”

“And remember every word you’d heard me say!”

“Joy wanted you to feel it was your home,” Jen said eagerly. “No one will ever come in without your invitation. But we’re all hoping to be asked to tea quite soon! Mary-Dorothy, Joy told me to say she knew it would have been nicer for you if she’d offered you a little house in the village, to be all your own, as she hopes you’ll live here always; you ought to have your own home. But she wanted you to live in the house, at least while she’s abroad; it seems really necessary. So she made this place as jolly as ever she could for you, and she hopes it will do for the present and that you’ll be happy here.”

“Do! Be happy!” said Mary, deep feeling in her voice. “It’s far too good for me. I never dreamt even Joy and you could be so kind. I’ll try to deserve it. And these, Jenny-Wren!” and she touched the tiny brown teapot, and the jug and basin with owl-faces on them. “It was like you to think of it, but there’s no reason for you to give me such a lovely present.”

“Oh, but you always give something when your friends first set up housekeeping! It’s like getting married, without the fag of a husband thrown in. It’s my offering towards your new house, Mary-Dorothy. Now, children!” and Jen crushed any further attempt at thanks from Mary. “I came to tell you a gorgeous plan. Everybody’s gone at last; we can do what we like. But we must do something; we’re all too tired and too much excited to sit still. I know I should fall asleep. So that dear Ken’s coming round in half an hour with their car, and he’s going to run us all down to Wallingford for an evening on the river. Fly, all of you, and get out of your posh frocks! Put on something that won’t hurt, in case I try to row and only succeed in splashing you all. Mary-Dorothy, if you’re ready before me, you might hurl a lot of food into a basket and we’ll picnic on an island. There’s stacks of grub lying about. Isn’t Ken a perfect sport? It was his idea; I could have hugged him.”

“Pity you didn’t try. I’m sure he’d have been pleased,” cried Rosamund, as she raced off delightedly.

Mary was the only one who went reluctantly. She would really have preferred to stay at home and gloat over her treasures. But that would have disappointed Jen, so she postponed the pleasure, and carried the thought of her green and golden rooms with her.

“Are you very tired, old thing?” Jen asked, as they floated lazily downstream. “You’re very silent!”

Mary smiled happily. “I’m thinking of my new home. I don’t know how to wait till we get back. I could hardly bear to leave it. May I move in to-morrow? And will you all come to tea with me to-morrow afternoon?”

“Oh, you must sleep there to-night! Joy hoped you would. The bed’s aired,” Jen assured her. “We saw to that. I put bottles in it myself.”

“You’ve thought of everything. I’d love to take possession at once,” Mary confessed.

“If you want to have Ruth to stay, or if Biddy comes for a holiday, there’s a camp bed in the house you can borrow and put up in your sitting-room, if you want to have your visitor all to yourself,” Jen explained. “But you’re to ask people to stay in the house whenever you want to, just as if it were your own, Mary-Dorothy. Joy’s very anxious that you should. She hopes you will ask your friends.”

“That’s more than kind,” Mary said warmly, and flushed.

“I shall invite Maidie to sleep with me to-night,” Jen said, in a low voice, glancing at the younger girls, who had both fallen very silent. “She’ll be lonely. Perhaps she won’t come, but I shall give her the chance.”

But when, all worn out, they reached home and made straight for bed, Maidie quietly but firmly refused any such consolation, in words which afterwards proved to have been

prophetic. "No, thank you. I don't want anybody. Joy told me to think about her, and I'm going to do it. I don't need anybody else."

"You'd better go to sleep and not lie thinking," said Rosamund severely, "for I'll tell you what you're going to do to-morrow. It's Saturday, and you and I are going to swot hard at the work you've missed all these weeks. You can't hope to get through the lot, but you're going to do as much as you can, or I'll know the reason why. If you don't, you'll come an awful cropper in the exams later on."

"Rosamunda, what a brilliant idea!" Jen exclaimed, as Maidlin closed her door resolutely. "Did you think of it for yourself?"

"Keep her from thinking," Rosamund said briefly. "She'll mope if she's left alone. Oh, I can think sometimes! Queen Jen doesn't have all the ideas!"

"You have some more as good as that one, if you can," Jen said with approval.

Mary, going towards her new room for the first time, paused and turned to Jen, with heightened colour.

"Jenny-Wren, will you sometimes come and talk to me at night, as you used to do with Joy? There'll always be room in here for you, at any moment; you know that, don't you?"

Jen fairly leaped at the suggestion. "I'm dying to come! May I come to-night?"

Mary laughed, and held open the door of the golden room. "Do come! I've had no time to get in stores, or I'd offer you coffee and biscuits. Next time you shall have them."

"We've been eating all day! I only want to talk. Wasn't the river heavenly? Just fancy Ken Marchwood thinking of it for us! Boating is the one thing we never get enough of here. I really feel he's related to us now, you know; for Joy has felt like my sister for years. I often forget she isn't."

"Yes, you must feel that," Mary said quietly, and turned up the little electric reading-lamp by the bed, in its golden shade. "What a pretty soft light! That's enough for talking by. How I love my room already!"

"I've a message for you from Joy," said Jen, making room for Mary on the cushioned window-seat beside her. "She said any time would do. You've had no time to think of yourself yet; it's been first Bidy and then Joy. Joy wanted very badly to fill your wardrobe with summer frocks, but she didn't dare, for fear you wouldn't like them. So she gave me orders instead. She knows you, you see; she knows you'll go and dress in navy blue, or gray, or brown, if you're left to yourself. It's very important that you shouldn't, she says; and so she deputed me to see that you get the right things. I was to tell you, you have to remember you're her representative now."

"I see the point," Mary admitted slowly, her colour rising. "What would do for the office in town wouldn't be right here. What does Joy want me to wear?"

"Pretty things; colours; and lots of white frocks. You know how often she wore white herself."

"Yes, but I'm not Joy Shirley!" Mary objected, her colour deepening. "With her vivid hair and colouring, white was lovely. But I'm dull and faded and brown, with my hair going gray. I can't go about dressed as Joy used to be."

"You can't go about looking like a city typist," Jen retorted sharply. Then she relented. "Mary-Dorothy, you look pretty in white. Don't be silly! You wear white for dancing, and look sweet. Wear it during the day too; that's all we want. You can have colours too; have a green linen frock for mornings; and a pale blue; and your favourite shade of amethyst. But *please* don't wear blue serge!"

Mary laughed out, and hastily promised to deny herself blue serge except in wet weather. "I don't know if you'll think me extravagant and silly," she said, flushing again. "There has hardly been time to think about it yet. But as soon as ever I had that offer for my story, and knew there was fifty pounds extra coming to me, I thought that one thing I would like for myself would be one of the Pixie's handwoven frocks like you and Joy have. She'll give me one in colours that will be suitable for me, and she'll know what will look best on an old person like me. Do you think it would be wrong for me to have one? It isn't really extravagant, for everybody says they wear for ever."

"Cheers!" Jen cried exuberantly. "Oh, Mary-Dorothy, you are coming out of your shell! Of course you must have one! And as for old," scornfully, "I suppose you realise you're at least ten years younger than you were this time last year?"

"I believe I am," Mary admitted. "It's all due to you and Joy. But you mustn't let me get too childish, Jenny-Wren! Remember my age!"

Jen's answer was sober. "My dear Mary-Dorothy, you've missed one whole part of your life. You've been asleep for fifteen years. You're going to make up for it now, so far as is possible. Folk-dancing was your first step, and your book was the second. Now there's a third before you; I'm not very sure what it is, but I'm certain this is the beginning of it. And pretty frocks are part of it. That's not silly; it's sense. You've never had them before; you've the right to them. You ought to care more how you look; there's no fear of your growing conceited! I want you to have all the things you've missed; to feel as you ought to have felt when you were twenty-one."

"Can one, ten years afterwards?" Mary doubted.

"You're going to!" Jen said, with conviction. "You're going to run up to town on Monday, to choose your frock from the Pixie, to begin with. What about to-morrow? How are you going to start on Joy's job?"

"I've the first step clearly before me," Mary said soberly. "After I've seen to Joy's letters, I'm going down to the village to talk to the matron of the children's home; she's in some trouble with her maids. And then I'm going to the girls' hostel to have another look at Nell Bell."

"Nell Bell?" said Jen, wondering. "Oh, is that the shop-girl Joy was worried about? I've only heard of her as Nelly."

"Nelly Bell; but the other girls call her Nell Bell, I find. Joy asked me to keep a very special eye on her. She's to stay till she's stronger; she's out of a job and hasn't very much put by to go on with, and she's very much run down and obviously anæmic, and needing a long rest. So Joy said she was to stay on at the hostel till I thought she was fit for work in town again; and I'm to make inquiries and try to help her to find something to do. So I'm going to have a chat with her to-morrow. The first thing to do is to make friends, so that she'll talk freely to me. Then perhaps I can judge how to help her best."

"Joy knew what she was doing when she put you on to this job," Jen said warmly. "Good luck to you with Nell Bell! But you won't forget your writing, Mary? One bit of each day is to be kept free for your own work, you know."

"I can't do anything till my story comes from the typist," said Mary, flushing. It felt so strange and opulent to think some one else was typing her manuscript, after all her years in the office. "The first thing is to correct it and send it off. And I can't settle to anything big till Joy has been to say good-bye and has really started."

“I feel like that too. We’ll all be unsettled till ‘Lady Marchwood’ has come and gone,” Jen agreed. “I’m not sure that it isn’t a mistake. It only prolongs the agony! I’m sure it’s bad for Maidie. To-day ought to have been the real good-bye. Joy won’t find it any easier to go when she’s seen us all again. And last night was *awful!* I don’t really want another last night!”

“I want to thank her for my beautiful rooms, though.”

“We’re all coming to tea with you to-morrow,” Jen reminded her, as she said good-night.

CHAPTER XI

MARY'S DREAM

Leaving Jen wrestling with neglected hygiene notes in one corner of the big hall, and Rosamund and Maidlin deep in French at a table in another corner, Mary came out from the study in which she was to transact Joy's business, and crossed the lawn towards the Abbey gate, that being much the quickest way to the village.

"Where's Mary going?" Rosamund demanded.

"Village; business; kiddies' home," Jen said briefly. "Don't chatter!"

"No, but I say! Doesn't she look nice to-day, in that lavender frock?"

Jen grunted, and scribbled in her notebook, but kept one eye on Mary's neat figure till she disappeared down the Abbey path. She, too, had rejoiced to see the summer frock.

"What luck with Nell Bell?" she asked at lunch time.

"I don't understand her," and Mary knit her brows. "I found her in the garden; that was wrong, to begin with. There are six other girls in the house, some down for the week-end and some for a week or fortnight; and they had all gone off for a picnic in the woods. Nelly hadn't cared to go; she likes just sitting in the sun—thinking, she says, but she looked half asleep. She ought to have been with the rest."

"Perhaps she isn't well enough; you said she wasn't very fit. Can she walk far?"

"Oh, she's fit enough for that! They weren't going far. I don't like the way she sits there, doing nothing. There was heaps to do; she could have been helping Mrs. Colmar. The flowers in the dining-room wanted doing, but Mrs. Colmar was flying round, cooking and cleaning, and had no time for flowers. And it hadn't occurred to that girl to offer to help. And in the garden, if she wanted the garden, there were little jobs that wouldn't have tired her; pansies going to seed that only needed snipping off; sweet peas to tie up; borders to be clipped. The man hadn't turned up this week. She could have done all that, but she sat there dreaming and never seeing the things that needed doing."

"I should have shaken her," said Rosamund.

"Perhaps she's more ill than they think," Jen suggested. "Has the doctor seen her?"

"He's given her a tonic, and says there's nothing really wrong. Mrs. Colmar says she's always like that, in a dream, and hardly ever wakes up and joins in what the rest are doing."

"In a dream!" Jen said sharply. "Have they any idea what she's dreaming of?" Her eyes met Mary's, full of meaning.

Mary stared back at her, a startled look dawning in her face. "I don't suppose so. I wonder if she'd tell me?" And then, so suddenly that even Rosamund stared, she changed the subject and began to tell of the troubles of the matron at the children's home, and her vain hunt for a suitable under-nurse to help her. "I shall write—no, of course, I can tell Joy when she comes to say good-bye. She said she'd be on Tuesday, didn't she?"

"I'm going to call her 'My Lady' all the time," said Rosamund. "I wonder if being married will make her any different?"

"She won't have time for anything when she does come," Jen remarked. "You'd better find the nurse yourself, Mary-Dorothy."

Mary turned to Jen, when Ros and Maidie had gone out into the garden, Rosamund insisting on a game of tennis; Maidlin had seemed reluctant, but had gone to satisfy her.

“Do you think perhaps that girl Nelly is dreaming as I used to dream?” Mary asked in a low voice of Jen. “Was that what your look meant just now? Could she be living that unreal kind of life, making stories for herself, as I did till you and Joy came along? She looked like that, only half awake.”

“Dear old thing, that’s what Joy and I felt about you when we saw you first. You’re as different as you can be now. You were only half alive,” Jen said gently. “You see that now, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. I know it’s so. That’s why I’d do anything to please either of you. No one could have trusted me with any work that mattered,” Mary said briefly. “I wasn’t reliable. I wasn’t any good, except for typing jobs. I couldn’t think; or rather I wouldn’t. You couldn’t have imagined me being asked to take on this work of Joy’s a year ago; she’d have laughed at the idea, and I couldn’t have faced it. I was terrified of responsibility. I’m still a bit terrified, but—well, frightening things are often a bit exciting, aren’t they?”

Jen gave a delighted laugh. “And you’re plucky and sporting, and so you enjoy adventures now, Mary-Dorothy! Oh, you’re a different person altogether! You’re even healthier, you know.”

“Oh, I’m stronger than I’ve been for years. I used to have frightfully bad colds and have to take sick leave and stay in bed. I *liked* staying in bed, and so, of course, I got colds,” Mary confessed, half laughing, half ashamed. “Bed was such a splendid place for stories; much better than the office! Now I don’t have colds. I don’t want them. There’s nothing to do in bed!”

“Mary, it was very bad of you! Thank goodness I blew in on you that day, and hauled you out of all that nonsense!”

“Thank goodness! And thank *you!*” Mary said fervently. “But about Nell Bell, Jen! Do you really think it could be that? I didn’t suppose any one else would be so silly.”

“Oh, my dear, you weren’t the only one!” Jen exclaimed gently. “There are heaps of others. Their dreams won’t be the same as yours, but the results will be the same; waste of time, no real interest in life, ill-health, and—you can’t deny it—poor weak minds that can’t decide things, and daren’t tackle difficulties, and collapse before problems. Isn’t it true? Mary, there are heaps of other girls wasting their lives. Perhaps you’ll be able to help some of them.”

“Oh, if I could!” Mary’s fingers twisted nervously together. “It would be almost better than writing! It would be repaying what you did for me, wouldn’t it, Jenny-Wren?”

“In the best possible way,” Jen said warmly. “Perhaps Nell Bell is your first case. You’ll have to tackle her; you’ll be more use than I should. How will you do it?”

“I shall talk to her,” Mary said slowly. “Then if I really think we’re right, I shall tell her all about myself, and ask her straight out if it’s so. She’s more likely to tell me if I confess first.”

“Mary, you’re a dear!” Jen exclaimed. “That’s the only way to get through to her, I believe. Will you really tell her?”

“I can’t ask her to tell me if I don’t play fair and tell her too. Besides, I don’t mind—now.”

“No, you’re so different. You needn’t mind,” Jen agreed.

Mary went thoughtfully upstairs to prepare for her first tea-party; and laid out the green pottery on the big table, and arranged cakes and bread on the green plates, with the problem of Nelly Bell before her eyes. The table looked delightfully fresh and inviting when she had finished, with a green jar of lilac in the centre; and the whole room, with more green vases set all around and filled with flowers, was an attractive and beautiful place. With deep thankfulness in her heart, she went into her gold and brown room to slip on a white frock,

resolving that, if she could manage it, tea in her room should be a continual treat to Maidlin and Rosamund, something to look forward to; if she could make them feel that her room was a homelike retreat and that it was a privilege to be admitted to it, that would be a real point gained.

Their raptures over the green and white table, in its beautiful setting, made a good beginning. They were still wandering round, examining each piece of the hand-made village ware with interest, when a maid came to the door with the afternoon post, and Mary brought in the letters and handed them round.

There was a big parcel for herself, at sight of which her colour rose and her eyes brightened. She looked at it longingly; then put it aside on her desk, and handed letters to Jen and Maidlin.

Rosamund shrugged her shoulders. "Nobody loves me! Oh, Mary, is that your story? Aren't you dying to look at it?"

Mary laughed. "Yes, but it will keep. It always looks quite different in type, you know."

At a low cry from Maidlin, Rosamund whirled round and Mary looked up quickly.

Jen broke out: "That Joy! How like her! Oh, Maidie, you've got a letter too! I say, you others, My Lady has decided not to come back to say good-bye. Says she can't bear it, and we must forgive her. Yesterday was her real good-bye, after all. They're going straight off to-day, to the south of France, and they'll join their ship at Marseilles. *Oh*, Joy Shirley!—Marchwood!"

The four looked at one another. Then Maidie hid her face against Mary's arm, for Mary had gone to her quickly to comfort her.

"It's better," Mary said forlornly. "Joy's right. We'd have found it very trying to say good-bye again. But it is a shock."

Jen pulled herself together. "It's a blow," she admitted. "But we've got to face up to it. They've started by now."

A stifled sob came from Maidlin. "We didn't say good-bye, because she was coming back. Her letter's to say good-bye."

"I'm glad," Rosamund said abruptly, with sudden energy. "Saying good-bye, and knowing it was good-bye, would have been simply beastly. Think how we'd have felt the last night! It's jolly decent of Joy not to come back and upset us all again. Now that we know she's really gone, there's nothing to do but settle down and put up with it. I hate farewells; you know you all feel the same. If she had come back for three days, we'd have had the good-byes hanging over us all the time. We couldn't have enjoyed having her here."

"Rosamund, my child, you speak sound common sense," said Jen, but drearily and without enthusiasm. "It is better for every one; we quite see that. But it's a little difficult to—to adjust all one's ideas to the new situation. Joy's started for Africa; we shan't see her again this side of Christmas, unless they change their plans very considerably. I suppose we may get used to the idea in time!"

"There's one thing we can all do for her," Mary remarked. "I have to write to her *at once*, to catch her before they leave Marseilles. Couldn't we all write long letters? She'd value them; she'll feel very homesick at first."

"Yes, we must do that," Jen agreed. "There was no need to write if she were coming back, but now—yes, long letters from each one of you, please! By Sunday night, in case you're too busy at school, Maidie and Ros!"

There was a forced cheerfulness over the tea-party which Mary felt but could not alter. "Too bad of Joy to spoil my first party!" she thought. "I must have another quite soon," and she gave up trying to make her visitors enjoy themselves, and allowed Maidlin to slip away before long, to begin pouring out her heart to Joy in the first real letter she had ever written.

Hitherto, Maidie's letters had been affairs of duty, stilted and painfully difficult in expression. This one was so different that Joy, in the hotel at Marseilles, read it through twice, with deepening wonder and appreciation, and then handed it to her husband. "Just see what really deep feeling has done for Maidie! You know how repressed and silent she is; fancy letting herself go like that!"

"Yes, from such a shy child, it means a great deal. How you've made the kiddy love you, Joy!"

"It's only fifteen months since she came to us," Joy reminded him.

If Mary's green room was the place for parties, the room in which her friends gathered gladly and found her a good hostess—and it soon came to be recognised as such—her gold and brown retreat was the place for confidences, and from the first Jen made full use of the right of entry accorded her. She came to the door continually at bed-time, and sat on Mary's bed, or on the window-seat, or lit the gas-fire and squatted before it, according to the temperature and her own condition of undress.

When she came in that night after the first tea-party, Mary laughed a little at sight of pyjama legs under a big kimono.

"Well, you don't mind, do you?" her guest asked haughtily. "I'm all legs, I know, but I didn't think you'd object."

"I take it as a compliment," Mary said hastily. "It's what you'd do if Joy were here."

"Of course. Let's have a spot of fire and be cosy. Coffee? Oh—topping! You do make one feel at home! But I want to see *It*, Mary-Dorothy!"

"It?" Mary paused in her preparations and looked down at the long curly-headed figure on her brown rug.

"Your story, of course. I knew what that flat parcel was. Have they done it nicely? Does it look very swish now that it's typed?"

"Very swish," Mary agreed, and handed her the parcel. "It's only an instalment, of course; that's two copies, and the manuscript."

"It does look nice!" Jen said wistfully. "You won't forget the dedication to me? I shall feel no end bucked when I see it in print."

"You'll have the first copy, of course," Mary promised.

When they had made coffee, and talked of Joy, Jen slipped away, and Mary sat dreaming over her fire. But her dreams were not of Joy, nor even of her story. All her thoughts were of the new responsibility which had come upon her; the many questions she had meant to put to Joy, the points she must now decide for herself—and how she hated decisions and tried to avoid them, even now! That was going to be one of her difficulties, and it must be faced and conquered. Her intuitive feeling prompted her to consult Jen in every emergency; she shrank from relying on her own judgment, but she knew it for a weakness which must be fought. Jen might have to rejoin her parents at any time; and in any case the responsibility of decision was not hers.

Thinking it over, and recognising whence this weakness in herself had come, Mary found her thoughts once more busy with the poor unhealthy London girl, Nelly Bell. And as she gazed into her little fire, she began to see the opening way before her; to look out for other

girls who were weak where she had been weak, to save them as she had been saved, to give them health, and new interest in life, by lifting them out of morbid dreams.

“If I could! It would be almost better than writing. My stories may amuse girls, and may even help a few, if they’re good. But if I could find these others, who are like I was, and pull them back to real life, so that they’d be fit for something and not waste their lives, that would be worth while! Nell Bell may be the first; but there may be others; and Joy’s home for working girls is the right sort of place to find them in. I do hope I can do it! I’d feel I was really some use in the world, after all,” and Mary dreamt dreams and saw visions in the fire, but unlike her former dreams and visions, these had purpose in them, and were full of promise for others as well as for herself.

CHAPTER XII

NOT A REAL GROWN-UP

"I'm going to do my duty," Jen announced sadly, coming down to breakfast on Monday morning in her short school skirt and jumper. "Having no longer any excuse for pretending I'm a grown-up stay-at-home lady, I intend to resume my career as a student, and pursue my domestic studies with redoubled ardour."

"Hear, hear! Most estimable sentiments beautifully expressed," Rosamund said mockingly. "As a really good beginning, you're late for breakfast, and you'll be late for school too, unless you hurry."

"In which case I shall have indigestion. Don't wait for me, my children!"

"We weren't thinking of it. As I've gone alone for three weeks, I'm quite able to take care of Maidie without your help," Rosamund retorted.

Jen risked indigestion, however, and caught them up before they had reached the end of the avenue. Cycling between them, she said: "I believe I have to thank you, Rose-of-the-World, for taking on my job while I've been getting Joy married. Haven't you been looking after the Sheila kid for me? Thanks awfully! You're a sport!"

"The school couldn't be left without a Queen at the beginning of the term. There are always new infants, who look shy even if they don't feel it. I've done the Queen stunt for a year, so I just carried on for you," Rosamund explained.

"Jolly decent of you, in all the circumstances of the case," Jen conceded. "You're a brick, and I thank you."

"The girls will be glad to have you back," said Rosamund.

Jen tackled her duties at once, and, feeling she had neglected Sheila Jessop, sought her out among the twelve-year-olds before school began, meaning to say a few kind words; she knew the school well enough to realise the importance Sheila would gain among the juniors when it was known that the Queen took an interest in her.

To her surprise, she found Sheila in tears, the centre of a sympathetic crowd.

"Why, what's the matter here?" the Queen towered above the circle. "Shee, I didn't think you looked the whiney sort! Are you a cry-baby? What's wrong?"

"Oh, Jen, haven't you heard?"

"Queen, she has something real to cry about! It's beastly for her!"

"That alters the case, of course," Jen looked down at Sheila, as the children crowded round to welcome her. "I haven't heard anything yet. What's the row?"

"She's a boarder, and they've got measles, and Shee doesn't want to take it."

"Measles! I hadn't heard. Of course she doesn't want it. But who wants her to take it? And—and why is she here, if they've got measles? Aren't they in quarantine?"

"All the rest are, the other boarders," Sheila choked back her sobs. "But Phyllis asked me for the week-end, and we've just come back, so I haven't been with the others; they found Mabel had measles last night. I've nowhere else to go, so I shall have to go and be out of everything, with the rest. I don't mind having measles, but I shall hate being out of cricket and things for weeks. It will be so awfully dull!"

"History repeats itself!" Jen said solemnly, her mind leaping back seven years, to the date of Joan's Coronation, when she had been one of Miss Macey's select company of twenty

boarders and had been in danger of infection and quarantine. Joy had come to the rescue then; it was for her to do so now; she knew Joy would wish it.

“What a mercy it didn’t happen last week!” she said cheerfully. “Cheer up, Shee! I’ll see you through. I’ll see Miss Macey, and if she’s sure you won’t develop it presently, well take you back to the Hall with us till all’s clear for you here.”

“Oh!” Sheila gave a gasp of joy. “Oh, would you really? To the Hall? Oh, Jenny-Wren!”

“I can’t take her back with me,” said Phyllis, “because we’ve got a baby, and Shee might begin to show spots presently.”

“I won’t! Oh, Jen, I won’t!” Sheila pleaded anxiously.

Jen laughed, and went to interview Miss Macey. “The Hall is almost empty; everybody’s gone, and Joy isn’t coming back. Sheila won’t be any trouble; and it’s what Joy and Joan did for me. The only trouble is, is Sheila likely to have measles herself?”

“I don’t think so,” Miss Macey said quickly. “Mabel’s infection has been traced to a case at her home, which developed just after she had come back to school. I was suspicious of her on Saturday, so made inquiries. It is only three weeks since the term began, so I feel sure she brought the trouble with her. So Sheila cannot have taken it at the same time; and as she has been away since Friday, she is not likely to have taken it from Mabel. I am sure she is safe. It would be a very great relief if you could take her off my hands, Jen. To tell the truth, I had thought of asking you. I obviously have to send her somewhere. It would be most unwise to take her back among the other children, who may themselves have been infected by Mabel now. At that rate, if they passed it on to Sheila in three weeks from now, we should have the thing lasting the whole term.”

“Then we’ll take Sheila home with us. I have to be careful, because of Ros and Maidie; we don’t want them down with it again. Maidie had a dose last summer.”

“And what about yourself?” the head mistress asked laughing, for Jen had forgotten she was at school and had allowed her grown-up side to speak.

“Oh, I shouldn’t take it! I’m a grown-up really,” Jen said gravely.

“Measles doesn’t always respect grown-ups, even such aged ones as you. But you are safe enough with Sheila. I will have some things packed and sent to you,” and Miss Macey dismissed the Queen, with thanks, and in much relief.

“Yes, we’re safe as regards measles,” Jen mused, as she went to break the news to Rosamund. “But I’ve a fearful feeling that we’re extremely unsafe as regards that annoying Dick. This will give him an excuse; I hope he won’t jump at it!”

Rosamund raised her eyebrows when she heard what had happened. “I’d heard about the measles; three of our form are boarders, and they’ve all vanished. I suppose you had to ask the kid. Right-o, Jen! I’ll do my bit. She’ll need some looking after, and Maidie isn’t the kind to do it.”

“Mackums let me ’phone to Mary, to break the news. I got her just before she started for town, so she said she’d give orders about beds and things,” and Jen went off to her own classroom, wondering what the result of this addition to their family would be.

Sheila caught her during the dinner-hour. “Your Majesty, it is topping of you! I’ll love to stay at the Hall, and I’ll be an angel. I shall write and tell Della what a sport you’ve been.”

“Don’t write and tell Dick,” was on Jen’s lips, but she kept the words back. She said instead: “If you’re an angel, Shee, you’ll be the first one in your family. Dick used to call Della a little angel, but he didn’t exactly mean it, and I relieved her mind on the point. She

was afraid she was turning into one; *Della!* What about the friends you were staying with in the hols?" she added. "Couldn't they have put you up?"

"They're in Italy; Della's with them. And it's too far; I'd have to motor every day. And I *want* to come to the Hall, Jenny-Wren!"

"Oh, I see! That's it, is it?" Jen said gravely, and went on to the cricket field, her bat under her arm, looking very long-legged in the gym tunic she kept at school, and very slim, with her crown of waving curls uncovered in the sunshine.

"Jen, you look a perfect sight!" laughed her old chum Nesta.

"Even seniors are allowed tunics for cricket, therefore I play cricket in a tunic," Jen retorted. "But I'm awfully rusty; my cricket's as much out of practice as my French. So come and bring me up to the mark, all of you!"

"Not as bad as your French, surely!" there was a mocking chorus from the other "Domestic Science students," as the seniors preferred to style themselves. "It couldn't be as bad as all that, Brownie!"

"It's a jolly name," said the brown Queen. "You'll please to criticise my bowling severely! What do they call you?" to a short girl, who had been the Queen before Barbara Honor, and had worn a gorgeous train of several colours.

"Stripey, always. Or Stripes," Beatrice said sadly. "I never thought of brown; but yours was pretty! And it's won you a pretty name."

"I didn't foresee the name," Jen admitted, going to the wicket to bowl. "I'd forgotten we were apt to be called after our robes. For any one as unlike brown as I am, it's a most unexpected name. Now, how's that?—*Oh!*"

"Rotten!" a laughing chorus told her.

"So I see. It wasn't meant to be. I shall have to look into this," Jen said with energy. "I shall practise with Rosamund, and something else will have to go. French, I think; or piano! But my bowling must be pulled up!"

"A grown-up *really!*" said Miss Macey, meeting her Cookery students returning from the field, "Brownie" towering above the rest. "Who would believe it? Jen, my dear child, you look a perfect object!"

"So they've been telling me. Not grown-up just at this moment, Miss Macey."

"Oh, Miss Macey, her cricket's rotten!" cried Nesta, laughing.

"It's going to be much better presently. You will soon see a vast improvement," the Queen said haughtily.

"I hope to see a vast improvement in your appearance before you come in to class," Miss Macey remarked, as she passed on.

"One for you, Brownie! Mackums doesn't like the length of your legs," said Nesta.

"I think it's her hair," "Stripey" suggested. "I never saw such a mop. Let's take her and brush her and comb her and dress her and tidy her up."

Maidlin eyed Sheila apprehensively as they set out for home, Sheila cycling with them in a state of wild excitement, a few necessaries packed in a case and strapped on behind.

"I went home standing on the back of Joy's bike, and Joan carried my suit-case," said Jen. "I was thrilled to the very limit. Going home with *two* Queens, I was!"

"Well, I'm going home with two Queens, too!"

"So you are," Jen agreed. "Rosamunda, you didn't warn me that I'd been dubbed Brownie. They never call me anything else."

"I know. I've heard them. I knew you wouldn't mind."

“Ros, what about Maidie?” Jen fell behind with Rosamund, as they wheeled their cycles up the long rise to the hills. “Is she all right? Does she say much about Joy?”

“She hasn’t talked about her at all. I think she’s all right, Jen. She’s quiet, but then she often is, when she’s got anything on her mind. She doesn’t say much. I fancy she’s thinking about Joy a good deal, but she doesn’t seem miserable. She’s not half as bad as I expected.”

“That’s all right!” Jen said with relief. “I thought we’d have an awful time with her. We’re getting off lightly! It will be good for her to have Sheila here. It will give her something new to think about.”

“Mary-Dorothy, what’s your frock to be like? And did you tell the Pixie all about the wedding? Tell us about her!” Jen demanded, when they were ravenously sitting down to tea, hunger having curbed even Sheila’s desire to explore the Hall. She sat in a happy dream, looking about her, scarcely able to believe in this astounding change in her circumstances. The Hall was a very great improvement on Miss Macey’s boarding-house!

“My favourite amethyst, shot with blue,” said Mary, flushing. “I chose a piece in the shop; I fell in love with it. But they’re going to weave patterns to go with it. It’s a most beautiful material. It’s quite different from yours, Jenny-Wren, though yours is blue, too. Mine is a turquoise; yours was saxe. And the Pixie says she’ll make it differently.”

“If it’s half as lovely as mine, you’re lucky to get it,” Jen told her. “There’s not another bit like mine in the whole world, for it was woven specially for me. How is the Little One?”

“Very well, and very busy. I sat in her workroom and talked; at least, she talked.”

Jen laughed and nodded. “She was mad that she couldn’t see Joy married. But she was out of town that day and couldn’t change her plans. And Madam couldn’t leave Roger, of course.”

“The Pixie had been at her van for the week-end, and was very full of it,” Mary said, as she poured out the tea. “She wants us to go and see it. It’s down in Surrey.”

“What kind of a van?” asked Rosamund, staring.

“A caravan,” said Jen. “I’ve heard heaps about it. She used to go touring in it, but now it’s anchored in a field among the Surrey hills——”

“On her own little bit of land,” and Mary smiled at the remembrance of the Pixie’s tone as she spoke of her quarter-acre of property.

“Yes, isn’t she jolly proud of that? She’s had the van taken off its wheels, and it’s settled down on a concrete platform, and she uses it as a week-end cottage. I’m going to see it sometime during the summer,” Jen declared resolutely.

She sought Mary alone after tea, and found her in her green study, laying out her manuscript in preparation for an hour’s correcting.

“I won’t keep you; you ought to work! But did you ask the Pixie what she thought about Nell Bell, Mary-Dorothy?”

Mary’s colour rose. “How deeply she’s interested in other people’s problems! I told her, and asked her advice. And before I knew it, I was telling her how I’d been like that myself, and how I’m longing now to help other people.” In her memory she saw again the quick interested look of delight the little Pixie had shot across at her as she said it. “I never meant to talk about myself, but it was out before I knew,” Mary added.

“I know. I thought you’d have to tell her,” Jen agreed. “She gets things out of people somehow. But she’d be kind about it, old thing?”

“She didn’t say much. She didn’t seem surprised,” said Mary, and Jen did not explain that the Pixie had known the whole story for a year. “She just seemed to understand and sympathise. And she understood my wish to help other girls. She thought that was very likely

what was the matter with Nell Bell; she says it's quite common—I had no idea of that. She could only advise me to talk to Nelly and try to make friends with her so that she'd tell me things; then, when I know, I'll have to see how she can be helped. But the Pixie's as sure as I am that the cure lies in doing things, in action. I've somehow got to get Nelly interested and busy over something, if I'm to stop her dreaming. It's no use telling her to stop, or talking to her about the danger of it. That's what she says, and I know she's right, from my own experience. Some big new interest has to take hold of her from outside and sweep all the rest away. It's the only chance, if she is living in dreams."

"Go in and win!" Jen said warmly. "You'll do it, if any one can, Mary-Dorothy! Good luck to you!"

"How did you like being back at school?" Mary asked.

Jen groaned; the schoolgirl came suddenly uppermost. "My dear! Such a shock! My cricket's rotten; I can't bowl for nuts. Of course, I haven't played for years, but I used to be fairly decent; the boys saw to that. But it's all gone, and to-day I made a perfect exhibition of myself. But I'm going to improve rapidly. Do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to ring Ken up, and bag him for an hour's cricket practice every evening he can manage. There's nothing like playing with boys for improving one's style, and he can't have forgotten all about it, in spite of years in British East Africa. If he can't coach me better than Rosamund, it's funny. Do you think he'll come?"

Mary looked down at her curiously. Then she said slowly: "I fancy he will. But—Jenny-Wren! It isn't cricket that Mr. Marchwood wants to teach you to play."

"That's what I'm very much afraid of," Jen said sadly, and gazed out into the garden.

"Don't you like him then, Brownie?" Mary had heard the new name at tea.

"Awfully much!—to play cricket with. But *not* anything else, Mary-Dorothy! I don't want him to be an idiot and think of silly things! I'm *not* a real grown-up yet, and I don't want to be. Mary, you don't think he means to be daft, do you?"

"I'd think he was very daft if he could be such good friends with you, and be content with that," Mary retorted, glancing at the curly-headed tomboy on the window-seat in the sunshine. "Of course he wants more, Jenny-Wren. How long he'll be willing to play cricket with you, I can't say; but not for ever. It depends on his patience and on how much he loves you."

Jen shot a startled look at her. "Mary-Dorothy! He doesn't——! A strange man *love* me? *Me*?" She grew red suddenly, and turned and stared out across the lawn.

"I should, if I were a 'strange man,' by which I suppose you mean some one outside your own family," Mary said stoutly, but anxious lest she should have said too much.

Jen stared into the garden and said nothing, her eyes still startled, the colour still in her face.

Mary quietly began to get the manuscript out from her desk, and to make preparations for an evening's work.

Jen rose at last. "I've seen no signs of it," she said defiantly, "and I hope I shan't. I don't want any of that nonsense for years yet. You're making it up, Mary-Dorothy; you've got stories on the brain, and now that Joy's gone you want to make me into one. Please don't be a silly old dear! I'm going to ring up the Manor this instant; and I'll come and tell you what Ken says!" She dropped a kiss on the top of Mary's head and fled.

Mary laughed in relief. "She's forgiven me. And she doesn't believe it. I don't think I've done any harm. He'll teach her himself, in his own way."

Within five minutes Jen was back, to put her head in at the door and cry triumphantly: “He’s coming. I said, ‘Hello! Is that Ken? Will you come round and coach me in cricket? My bowling’s rotten and my fielding’s worse. Do come and bully me into some sort of decent form!’ And he said, ‘Right-o! I’ll be round in ten minutes. You choose a decent pitch; we mustn’t spoil the lawn.’ Does that sound like being in love, Mary-Dorothy? Aren’t you a silly old romancer?”

“Oh, go away and find your pitch!” Mary said, laughing. “And don’t forget your tennis, Brownie! It’s a more grown-up accomplishment, and you’ll have to grow up some day.”

“I haven’t done it yet, and I don’t mean to,” the Queen said with dignity, and retired to the garden.

CHAPTER XIII

PROBLEMS FOR MARY

Four days later, Mary, crossing the garden to the Abbey gate, looked through the shrubbery fence into the meadow beyond, and found the cricket practice in full swing. It was not the first time she had seen it; Kenneth had obligingly turned up each evening, and Jen's bowling was improving. Rosamund and Sheila joined in the play; but Maidlin sat apart, looking on, her hands clasped round her knees, her hair in a black shower about her, her eyes on the game but her thoughts far away.

Mary looked at her, a little troubled. "She's taken Joy's going too quietly. It isn't natural. It's easier for us all than if she had cried for days, as we feared; but I've a feeling that might have been better for her."

"Doesn't Maidie want to play, Ros?" she asked, as Rosamund came flying up to the fence after a ball.

"No, she'd rather not. We have asked her, Mary; Jen and Shee and I have all tried to get her to play. But she says she'd rather be left alone."

Mary went on her way to the village, vaguely uneasy. Sheila's shout of "Play up, Brownie!" and Rosamund's remonstrating: "Jenny-Wren, what a disgraceful ball!" rang in her ears, but the picture of Maidie's absorbed little face remained before her eyes. What was the child dreaming of all the time?

She remembered an indignant remark of Rosamund's at teatime: "Only two out of ten for French? Maidie, I'm ashamed of you! After all my work on Saturday! But if you will go mooning about, what can you expect?"

And Maidlin's apologetic: "I'm sorry, Ros. I wasn't thinking about French," had not helped matters much.

"Thinking about the moon!" Rosamund had retorted.

Mary knit her brows and wondered.

She had no difficulty in finding Nelly Bell. "She's in the garden," said Mrs. Colmar, of the Girls' Home. "The rest are singing in the drawing-room," which Mary could hear for herself.

The words of the latest music-hall ballad came cheerfully through the open windows; then some one with a very long memory struck up an old favourite, and Mary turned to go down the garden with the words of the chorus ringing in her ears: "And he loves her as he's never loved before."

"I asked Nelly to bring me some rhubarb for to-morrow's tarts," Mrs. Colmar called after Mary. "But I think she must have forgotten all about it. If you could give her a word about being so forgetful, Miss Devine, I'd be really grateful. When she's staying here so long, I feel she might very well help now and then, but I simply can't depend on her for anything. If she's got any brain, she never troubles to use it."

"Or it's full of something besides rhubarb tarts," Mary said to herself. "Mrs. Colmar would have said the same of me eighteen months ago. My head was always in the clouds. I wonder if I can get Nell Bell to talk to me?"

Nelly, a fair, rather pretty girl, with a delicate frail look about her, was in the orchard; the suggestion of rhubarb had, at least, carried her so far. She had pulled an armful of crimson stalks and had carried them to the ash-heap in the corner, to cut off the huge leaves there,

according to instructions; Mrs. Colmar did not want the leaves “cluttering up her kitchen.” So far, Nelly had proceeded, before her dream had claimed her.

When Mary found her, she was sitting on the low brick wall which was supposed to keep the rubbish-heap within bounds, the rhubarb piled at her feet, the knife on the wall beside her, her eyes fixed dreamily on the great crinkled green fan she had cut off and thrown aside. The condition of her thoughts was shown by the fact that she had dropped the red stick of rhubarb after it into the ash-heap, and it now lay in beautiful contrast, a ruddy splash on the vivid green of its own leaf.

She did not hear Mary’s step on the path, and started violently at the sound of her voice. How well Mary knew that start!—the sudden jerking back to life!

“It is pretty, isn’t it? Are you planning an essay on rhubarb, or making up a poem?” Mary asked lightly.

“I—oh, I wasn’t thinking about the rhubarb, Miss Mary,” and Nell’s shy face crimsoned.

Mary sat down beside her, after a quick survey of the low wall, with her pretty new lavender frock in mind. But the brick was clean and sun dried; she took up the knife and began to behead the stalks lying on the ground.

“You pick them up for me to save me stooping. We’ll help Mrs. Colmar all we can. What were you thinking of, Nell? Won’t you tell me?”

It was not her first visit that week. She had carefully made friends and had established a certain confidence, and her intuition told her that Nelly was ready to respond.

The girl flushed again, and hesitated. “Only—just a sort of castle in the air, Miss Mary. I often do. It can’t ever come true, but it’s nice to think about it.”

Mary reserved her comment, and asked with interest:

“What is your castle like? I’ve had castles too. I lived in them for quite a long time. I wonder if yours is anything like mine was?”

“Oh, no!” Nell said swiftly; her tone implied that it was impossible. There was a note of interest in her voice, however.

“Tell me, won’t you?” Mary’s tone was completely casual, just merely interested and curious.

“It’s only—what was going to happen—and didn’t. It never will now. So I just dream it’s real. There’s no harm in that,” Nell said defiantly.

Mary cut rhubarb without looking up. This was different from her own dreams of romance, and perhaps had more excuse. “It sounds like a story, Nell,” she said at last. “Won’t you tell me more?”

“We were going to be married,” Nell said hurriedly. “It was years and years ago. He was with a good firm, and they sent him up to Manchester for a bit. Then he told me he was being promoted to head office and so we could get married; and we made all our plans for our little house, in Richmond. But before he left Manchester he took pneumonia, and he was gone before I could get to him. And since then, all these years, I’ve had to go on working, and I’ve been all alone; I told you I live in a big club for working girls; and though there are fifty of us it’s very lonely sometimes; there’s nothing to look forward to but book-keeping all one’s life, and no one to care. But I’ve been happy, because I’ve learned the way. I’ve found you don’t need to have real things if you can dream about having them. It’s not as good, but it’s heaps better than nothing. I’ve got my little home, down at Richmond, and he’s there; and I plan, and think what I’ll give him for supper when he comes home; and I furnish the rooms, and change the things about, and do the spring-cleaning, and mend his socks; all inside me, you

know. I can do without the real things, since I have to. And,” her voice sank a little and became reverent, “and there are babies, three of them, two boys and a girl. I could tell you all about them. The girl’s the eldest, and I’m glad, for she’ll be such a help. She’s beginning to help already, and she’s only—why, Miss Mary! You aren’t *crying*?” Nell’s voice rang out in astounded amazement.

“Only because I can’t give you your home, Nell. Yes, I know I’m silly. Tell me one thing!” Mary begged, tossing her last big leaf away. “You do all your work, and go about and live, with this dream-home and these dream-people more real to you than the people you meet? Do you know if other girls do that sort of thing? Have you ever met any one else who had a dream-life? It would be different from yours, of course.”

“There was a girl once,” Nell said slowly. “She had the room next to mine, and she used to come in and talk at night. In a big shop in the West End, she was. Her folks had put her in, as a kid; but she’d always wanted to be a children’s nurse. Loved little kids; she’d have been a good nurse. But there weren’t any kiddies in the shop or in the club; so she’d made up whole crowds of them, and in her dream she was matron of a home for kiddies. She’d talk for hours about them, and tell me all their names, and who had measles, and what their frocks were like, and what each one liked to eat. I thought it was rather silly; she’d just made it all up—there was no reason for it, like I had for mine. Mine ought to have been real. But I used to listen to Ethel; it did her good to talk. Poor thing, she wasn’t well, and at last she had to go away.”

“What became of her?” Mary asked, her voice low and strained. A sentence of the Pixie’s had come back to her suddenly: “No one can live two lives for ever. It’s too wearing. Something’s bound to crash.”

“She was taken ill,” Nell explained. “Her nerves were always bad, but they got worse, and she didn’t sleep, and then she went all to pieces; and her people came up to town, and took her away to live in the country.”

“Yes!” said Mary, and rose, and gathered up the great leaves, and tossed them on to the rubbish heap. “Bring the rhubarb back to the house, Nell; and thank you for telling me. I’d give you your home and family if I could.”

“Miss Mary, there’s nothing to fret about now,” Nell said eagerly. “You won’t go feeling bothered about me? I’m quite happy so long as I can have my castle in the air. I know it can’t be real. But a day-dream is next best.”

“I wish you’d do something for me, Nell!” Mary said with energy, scarcely understanding the impulse that drove her to speak.

Nell’s face lit up. “I’d like to; oh, Miss Mary, what can I do? You’ve been so kind, coming to talk to me.”

“You’re staying here longer than the other girls,” Mary said quickly, “and you don’t care about their singing, and games, and picnics, so you wouldn’t mind missing them sometimes. Couldn’t you help Mrs. Colmar a little, now and then? She finds the work rather much for her sometimes. I don’t like to ask the girls who are here only for a week-end, or a week or so; but if you would give her some help, it would be such a relief to me.”

“Why, I’d like to,” Nell said eagerly, her face brightening. “If she’ll tell me what to do! I don’t know the first thing about housekeeping.”

“Except in dreams!” Mary said to herself, as, after a word with Mrs. Colmar, she turned homewards. “It has never occurred to Nelly that she simply isn’t fit to run a house, nor strong enough to be married. No one would marry her; no man wants an unhealthy wife, who’d obviously need nursing all along. Any one can see Nell would collapse as soon as she had any

strain; like that other poor thing, the matron of the dream-home for dream-children! I'm up against a bigger thing than I expected. I've got to think it out," and she turned in to the Abbey on her way home, and sat in Joy's loved rose-window to face her problem.

Her first feeling was to run straight to Jen with her difficulty, since Joy, whose problem it really was, was out of reach; her second, to see the way through it for herself, and only to go to Jen when she had a solution to suggest. Jen had her own difficulties to face up to. Mary felt a sudden and quite new wish to tackle this adventure for herself.

"Nell was quite willing, even pleased, to help Mrs. Colmar, as soon as it was put to her," she said slowly, gazing into the broken tracery of the arch beside her, "but all this time it has never occurred to her to offer; she just hasn't seen that it was needed. Perhaps she was a little bit pleased that I had asked her, because I've been friendly. But things have to be suggested to her; she's blind—as blind to real things as I once was. It never occurred to me that I was running the risk of losing Biddy; not till the harm was done, and she'd almost gone from me. Joy and Jen pulled me up just in time. Nelly's happy, as I was; and as blind to what she's doing. I can't let her go on. That story of the other girl shows what would be the end of it; she's delicate and anæmic already. . . . But I don't believe it's any use talking to her about it. She knows it isn't right; at least, she knows it isn't natural! It was in her voice as she said, 'Where's the harm in that?' She expected me to argue and blame her. She'll only make excuses. What can I do?"

Slowly—for she still thought with difficulty; her dream-years had left their mark on her—Mary groped her way to understanding. "What's the cure? What did Joy and Jen do for me? They made me dance; and I began to wake up. But the dancing alone wouldn't have been enough; I always felt that. It led to work; from the very first time, the dancing made me work. And then I began to live. I might get Nell Bell to the country-dance class in the village; it would stir her up and be good for her?" Almost the very words Jen had used about herself, after their first meeting. "But what about work? Dancing isn't going to fill her empty life; it's only to fit her for it. She's craving for a home, and some one to mother; and never dreaming she isn't fit to do it! I can't give her a husband and children. Children!" and Mary sat up, her eyes ablaze. "Oh, but I can! I wonder if she'd do it? I wonder what Jen would say? Oh, if that could be the way out, for Nelly! If I could satisfy her and make her happy!" and, full of a new idea, she sprang down from her perch, and ran across the garth and through the garden to find Jen.

"Jenny-Wren, can you spare me five minutes?"

Jen looked up from her French translation gladly, and then looked again, eyeing Mary curiously. "What is it, Mary-Dorothy? I'll love to come. To your green room? Or is it serious enough for brown-and-gold?"

In her inner sanctum, Mary poured out the story Nell Bell had told.

Jen raised her eyebrows. "Awfully unhealthy and morbid, I should say. Is that what you're so excited about, Mary-Dorothy?"

"No, I nearly cried. But I'm excited at the thought of helping her. Jenny-Wren, I want to give her children to mother; we can't manage the husband. Do you think she'd agree to go as assistant in the babies' home?"

Jen's face lit up. "It would be the very place for her. But would she see that? Would she like to go as under-nurse, after being book-keeper in a big business? Wouldn't it seem a comedown?"

"It would be a step up, for her," Mary urged. "For she'd be looking after children instead of dreaming about them."

"We see that. But would she? You can't explain all that to her."

"I shall ask her to take on the job for a time, to get me out of a difficulty," said Mary, with a flash of wisdom. "I'll tell her I don't like to bring in an absolute stranger, and it's my first worry since Joy went, and I'm nervous, and anxious it should be a success, and will she mind acting as help for a time, while I look round for a suitable person?"

"Mary-Dorothy, you're a genius! I never really believed it till this moment, in spite of your book," Jen said, with conviction. "Once Nell Bell has been with children for a week or two, she'll never want to leave them, and she'll grow out of her dream-family as she grows into her real one, and you'll have her just as happy and healthy as—as——"

"As I am, thanks to you and Joy," Mary finished for her. "I shall go and see Nelly about it to-morrow. I'd like to go to-night, but I don't want to frighten her. I'm afraid of making too much of it. I want to seem quite casual; she mustn't dream I've any idea behind; not at present! Some day I shall tell her, for she'll like to know; but not yet."

"Mary-Dorothy, you're a dear, as well as a genius," said Jen fervently. "Now I'll tell you what happened while you were away all those hours. I think you'll have to stop at home to chaperon me! That Dicky Jessop turned up again. So we made him play cricket."

"Oh!" Mary sat down, and stared at her, and laughed. "He came, did he?"

"To thank me for being so jolly decent to Shee. She'd written and told him she was here. He brought chocolates, for her, *and* for me; and just wanted to say thank you, and so on. I hope he'll be satisfied now that he's said it. But I'm doubtful. He seemed to like our cricket."

"I'm doubtful too," Mary agreed. "But is it really the cricket he likes, Brownie?"

"It was cricket he got, anyway," Jen assured her. "He wanted me to take him to see the Abbey again; such rot! He doesn't care twopence for the Abbey. We made him field; we put him longstop."

Mary laughed again. "How did Mr. Marchwood like him?"

"Ken looked at him as if he were a puppy who was interrupting the game," Jen said airily. "I had a card from Joy, from Nice. You've got a letter from Biddy; I hope she's getting on well. Ros is dying to hear her news."

She sat on the window-seat, gazing out towards the Abbey, while Mary took up Biddy's letter and another, which lay beside it. "She's all right; she likes the work . . . and the place. Marguerite is being very kind. I wonder what this other one is? Oh! Oh, *bother!* Bother the girl!"

"Mary-Dorothy, that doesn't sound like you!" Jen turned to her in startled reproof.

Mary, flushed and annoyed, came and stood beside her, the second letter in her hand. "This is from a girl who is—was—in the typing-office where I worked for so long; Amy Prittle. I'll tell you, and you shall say what you think. I know what Biddy would say. I didn't see much of Amy at first, but suddenly she seemed to take a fancy to me, and then she began to haunt us. That's what Biddy called it. She used to come round at night, and sit and talk, and stop my work. Ruth used to tease and say, 'Here comes your shadow again!' I didn't like to be rude, and I thought perhaps she was lonely, so I put up with her, though often I wished she'd leave us alone. She got into the way of walking home with me, and asking me out to lunch, till I really didn't know what to do. I couldn't see any reason for such violent affection; I hadn't done anything for her. And it came on quite suddenly."

“When?” Jen asked thoughtfully. “Only during the last year? You’re much more worth knowing than you were, you know, Mary-Dorothy. Clever of Amy to have found it out!”

“Four weeks ago, just after I’d written to the office, giving up my job, I had a letter from her,” Mary went on, her worried look deepening. “She said a lot about how much she missed me in the office, and a lot of nonsense that I hardly liked to read; it made me hot all over to think of any one giving herself away in a letter like that, and saying such absurd things to me. And she begged me to ask Joy to find some job for her here, so that—so that——”

“She could be near you,” Jen finished for her. “Said she couldn’t live without you, I suppose? I’ve heard the girls at school talk like that about certain mistresses, but I didn’t know grown people in business kept it up. And it made you uncomfortable to know she’d got a craze for you, Mary? At least, you aren’t conceited, old thing!”

“I felt awful,” Mary said restlessly. “I know there’s nothing in me to have caused it, so she must be *very* soft. It made me uneasy, and ashamed, and unhappy. Of course, I wrote and told her I couldn’t possibly suggest such a thing to Joy. It was horrible cheek to propose it.”

“It was, rather,” Jen assented. “And what does she say now? It’s much better for her to have to live without you, you know.”

“She’d never see it was cheek. She isn’t that kind. Now she writes to tell me—it’s too ridiculous!” Mary broke out indignantly. “She’s got a job in Wycombe, not as good as the one in town, but good enough. And she hopes she’ll be able to see something of me soon.”

Jen whistled, and gazed at her. “She has got it badly! I’m sorry for you, old thing. You’ll have to smother her somehow, or she’ll give you no peace.”

“I don’t know what to do. I don’t want her. But I can’t be a brute, Jenny-Wren. I shall write at once, and say I think she’s been very foolish to leave town; but I can’t refuse to see her altogether.”

“It would serve her right,” Jen said bracingly. “It would be the best thing for her. You’d better move again, and leave her stranded. She can’t run all over the country after you.”

“I’m not going to leave here for anybody, unless I feel I’ve failed Joy,” Mary said sturdily. “I won’t be driven out by Amy. But I wish she’d stayed in town.”

Jen sat nursing her knee, and staring at her. “Of course it’s a sign there’s something wrong with the girl. Not that she should like you; I admire her good sense, and quite agree with her. But that she should let her liking run away with her, as if she were a schoolgirl. That’s wrong. It’s uncontrolled; want of balance. I say, Mary-Dorothy! If she wants to see you, make her come to that class you’re going to take in the village. It can’t hurt her, and it might help. If there’s one thing that teaches balance and control, it’s country-dancing. Get it into her feet and body, and you may get it into her mind too. Make her come to classes, and bully her into common sense!”

Mary laughed. “There’s a spark of hope in that idea. I will, Jenny-Wren!”

“If you’re looking for queer girls to help, I guess she’s another ‘case’ for you,” Jen remarked.

“There’s just one thing that makes it impossible for me to be quite callous towards Amy,” Mary said to herself, when Jen had gone back to her work. “And that’s the remembrance of how I felt at Christmas, when Jen told me she was leaving town and I couldn’t see her every week. I thought I couldn’t live without her. I pulled myself together, and found I could, very well; and now, though to have her here is the best and happiest thing in it all, yet I know I don’t depend on her. If I hadn’t had those three months, I’d be dreading every day to hear she had to go away, as if I needed her to hold my hand. I know what Amy feels, though it’s

ridiculous she should feel it for me. But if she does, I can't turn my back on her. She may be a 'case,' like Nell Bell; and I don't see my way to help her yet. But I can't refuse to try, because I've been helped myself."

CHAPTER XIV

THE MUSIC PRIZE

“Do talk sense to Rosamund, Brownie!” Barbara Honor turned at the school gate to call back to the Queen.

“Tell her to be a sport, Brownie! We can’t have Ros slacking!” cried another.

“Right-o!” Jen waved them away, and went on towards the playing-field for an after-school practice.

“Your bowling’s improved,” “Stripes” informed her. “Your play’s better all round, Jenny-Wren.”

“I’ve been swotting at it. I’ve engaged a private coach; a man, my dear!” Jen said solemnly, with a vision of Kenneth Marchwood’s long arms and legs, as, clad in flannels, he defended his wicket from her erratic balls.

“Honest? I say, that’s doing the thing handsomely!” Nesta exclaimed. “He’s done you heaps of good, Brownie! Is he open to any more engagements? Can’t we all come round some evening?”

“Might scare him. He’d be shy. Sometimes I have two of them,” Jen said airily.

“Swank! Oh, swank! If you’d only have a coach for your French and music, too, Mackums would be happier. She is worried over your French, Brown,” Nesta said severely.

“Talking of music,” said Molly Gilks, “*you* won’t dare to go in for Joy’s prize! But I suppose Rosamunda will? It would be fun if one of your crowd won it the first year.”

“The girls didn’t quite grasp who ‘Lady Marchwood’ was, till Mackums added, ‘Better known to you all as Joy Shirley,’ ” said “Stripes.”

“Ten pounds to spend on books and music would be topping to have. I begin to wish I was musical,” said domesticated Molly wistfully.

“Do you think Ros will get it, Brownie? Her music isn’t bad. We’ve no real musical prodigies at present; so she should have quite a good chance. Joy would be no end bucked if it went to Ros.”

Jen leaned back against her bat and gazed at them. “According to Babs and some of their crowd, Ros has said she isn’t going in for it. I don’t know what’s up, for last night she seemed quite keen. I haven’t had a chance to ask her about it yet. But they say she’s cried off. I’ve been asked to tell her not to be a slacker.”

“I should think so! Joy’s prize! She must try for it, Jen!” Nesta and Molly spoke together.

“What’s up with her? Is it sheer slackness?” “Stripes” asked indignantly. “It’s not such a lot of work, Brownie! You must talk her round!”

“It is a lot of work. But Ros isn’t one to funk that. I’ll talk to her, of course,” Jen promised. “But it does mean extra swotting. There’s the theoretical paper to answer, with questions on musical history and great composers, as well as the practical and sight-reading. It’s for the best all-round musical girl in the school. Ros would have to stay for the extra classes after school that Miss Bates has promised to give those who enter; and she’d have to work harder than she does now, when she’s supposed to be practising. I’ll talk to her; I don’t know yet why she’s backed out of it.”

Miss Macey met the cricket party as they returned to the school to change, and, with an amused deprecating look at the shortness of Jen’s tunic and the length of her legs and the

condition of her hair, bade her come to her study for a moment.

“When I’ve changed, Miss Macey?” Jen had seen the look, and spoke meekly.

“Come as you are. I will overlook it for once,” the head mistress said gravely. “Jen, my dear, I want you to use your influence with Rosamund—ah, some one else has asked you already?”

“Heaps of them! I haven’t had a chance yet, but I’ll speak to her to-night, Miss Macey. I haven’t an idea why she’s backed out.”

“She has a good chance of the prize, and Joy would be pleased if it went to her. Moreover, Rosamund has a big influence in the Fifth and Sixth, and many of the girls copy her. If she sets her face against the competition, it won’t be popular in the school.”

“I’ll go in for it, and make it popular, shall I?” Jen suggested helpfully. “They copy me even more than Ros. Of course I wouldn’t have an earthly chance of doing anything but making an ass—I beg your pardon, Miss Macey!—making a silly of myself. But I’ll have a shot at it, if you think it will help.”

“It will help more if you’ll make Rosamund take it up heartily,” Miss Macey said laughing.

“Right-o!—I mean certainly! I’ll do everything I can,” Jen said hastily.

“I never can remember which part of me’s talking,” she said mournfully to herself, as she hurried down to the cloakroom to change. “Mackums distinctly prefers the grown-up side!” and she joined her friends, who were all in various stages of undress.

“Why so pensive, Brownie? What has Macky been wiggling you about?” “Stripes” asked sympathetically.

“The same as the rest of you; Ros and her slackness. But I can *not* remember to be polite to Mackums! I say ‘Right-o,’ and talk about making an ass of myself; which is just what I’m doing, of course. And she doesn’t like it.”

“Poor Brownie! It isn’t always easy to come back to school and be a little girl again, is it?” Nesta teased.

“It’s gorgeous! I’m loving every minute of it,” and Jen threw her tunic over Nesta’s head and flung her plimsolls at Molly.

“There’s your car waiting,” Molly said enviously, as she wheeled out her bike a few minutes later. “Lucky you! Think of my miles uphill!”

“Cheers! Oh, Mary-Dorothy, how tophole!” and Jen sank luxuriously into the seat beside Mary. “Have you been shopping for Friday?”

“And for the days in between. Your Hamlet Club party isn’t the only one that needs feeding,” Mary tucked the rug round her. “I remembered it was your night for play after school. I’ve been seeing Amy Prittle, Jenny-Wren. I asked her to come to the party, as you’d said I might.”

“Oh?” Jen turned to her quickly, the schoolgirl “Brownie” falling away from her in a moment. “You decided to be kind to the Shadow, then?”

“I decided it would be brutal to be anything else,” Mary said gravely, without explaining the reason that had led her to the decision. “I met her at the office and took her out to tea. She looked rather as I felt, that day when you floated into our dingy place and gave me violets.”

“I didn’t take you out to tea, though. Shall I take you now, instead?”

Mary laughed. “You couldn’t very well, when you’d never seen me before. I was quite sufficiently taken aback by the violets.”

"It was decent of you to take the Shadow out to tea," Jen conceded. "But don't let her expect it too often, Mary-Dorothy! Was I right? Did she jump at the chance of coming to the Abbey?"

"No, you were wrong, quite wrong, for once," Mary said soberly. "But of course you hadn't seen Amy—it was only a guess on your part. I was sure you were wrong. She isn't that kind at all; she doesn't want to push. She's fearfully shy and unassuming; I could only get her to come to the party by promising she should watch from a corner and I'd let nobody speak to her. She hasn't one single thought of trying to push in among us here. It isn't that."

"Then I apologise to Amy," Jen said heartily. "I couldn't help thinking that might be what she was after. It's just simply that she's got a craze for you? It's unhealthy, of course, and silly; but it isn't vicious. Besides, I'm glad she appreciates you; she's got some sense! But she shouldn't go to extremes, and I call throwing up a good job just to be near you distinctly going to extremes. It's not as if you'd asked her to. Any one would do it to help a friend. But it isn't that."

"I've been wondering if it isn't to help herself," Mary said hurriedly, speaking under the impulse of strong feeling. "I mean—Jenny-Wren, I know what Amy feels. I never dreamt any one could feel it for *me*; but if she does, it's a thing I can't shirk, a real responsibility. I'd be a brute if I turned my back on her. Doesn't it mean that she feels I have something to give her? Unconsciously, of course; she hasn't thought it out. She's trying to hang on to me, and it's irritating and a burden. But—I once hung on to you—and Joy—for a time like that; and it saved me, and gave me a new life. I can't forget that. Perhaps I have something to give Amy, and by being friends with her I may be giving it without knowing I'm doing it. You didn't know half you were doing for me. I can't turn my back on another girl."

Jen turned to her, her face alight. "Mary-Dorothy, I'm going to be glad all my life that I ran into your office that day. I've been glad ever since I've seen what you were going to be, but I've thought of you as an author and as a good business woman, helping Joy when she was in a hole. I never *dreamt* you were going to turn out such a brick, in the way of helping other girls! It's downright sporting of you!"

"I don't see what else I could do. It would be abominable if I took everything from you and then turned my back on Amy," Mary said grimly.

"I won't say another word against Amy! I didn't quite understand," Jen acknowledged. "Do what you think best, Mary-Dorothy. But don't let her hang on too heavily and spoil your work. You were never a scrap of a nuisance to me! Now tell me about Nell Bell. Did you see her this afternoon? And did they consent to have her at the babies' home? How did she like the idea?"

"It's all arranged; she's going to start at once. And she'll come to the beginners' country-dance class on Tuesday evenings, though I can see she doesn't expect to enjoy it much. She's only coming to satisfy me," Mary confessed laughing. "I hope we'll soon convert her! She's coming to look on at your party on Friday, too. I shall make her look after Amy for me, and tell them they're both beginners together. Amy's coming to the class, of course; *she* just jumped at the chance!"

"Of being taught by you," Jen supplemented. "But what about Nell Bell and the babies, old thing?"

"She looked startled when I proposed it," Mary said quietly. "I had to ask her to do it, and make a lot of it being such a help to me. She wasn't very keen; I think she'd rather have dream-babies than real ones!"

"She'll find the real ones much more trouble," Jen remarked. "I only hope she won't try to run both lots! Did you warn Nurse? If Nell Bell wanders off with her dream kids, the real ones may suffer!"

"I told Nurse to watch her carefully at first. I didn't say more, except that I was afraid she might be a little absent-minded. You should have seen Nurse's face!"

"Poor Nurse!" Jen laughed. "But Nell Bell will pull herself together to please you, Mary-Dorothy. She won't want to fail you. Once she's singed the milk a few times and burned a few saucepans—I hope they'll make her clean them!—and let a few kettles boil over and has had to clean up the mess, and a few babies have fallen out of bed while she's been mooning about, she'll begin to wake up and take life seriously. If she doesn't, of course, she'll have to go. You can hold that over her. But she'll care more if she feels she's disappointing you."

"I'm hoping in a week or two she'll get so keen on the babies themselves that she won't be willing ever to leave them," Mary said hopefully. "Then she'll soon be cured."

"Rosamunda, what's this about you and Joy's music prize?" Jen opened fire as soon as she and Mary were sitting down to their late tea.

Rosamund looked up from the table by the window, where she and Maidlin were working—Ros steadily, Maidie continually recalled to her books by a word from Rosamund: "Do get on, Maidie! or we'll have no time for tennis." Maidlin's thoughts were very prone to wander, especially just now; and she would have spent hours staring out into the garden if left to herself. Sheila was sprawling on the floor with a girls' story-book; her days for home-work had not yet begun.

"What about it? Who's been talking to you?" Ros demanded shortly.

"Everybody. Babs and her crowd; Nesta and my crowd; Mackums herself. They say you aren't going in for the prize. What's up? You seemed keen enough last night."

"I've thought it over, and decided not to," Rosamund said briefly. "I changed my mind during the night."

Jen looked at her curiously. "Well, why? What's come over you?"

"I changed my mind, that's all."

"Well, if that's all, couldn't you change it again? Joy would be really bucked if you got her prize, and they all say you'd have a decent chance."

"I'm not going in for it," Rosamund said decisively. "I've made up my mind not to."

"But haven't you any reason?" Jen persisted, her face puzzled. "Mackums wants you to have a shot at it for the sake of the school. You set the fashion; you can't help it, having been Queen and always having been popular, and all that. The girls like you, and they'll go in in crowds if you're taking the extra classes."

"Oh, rot! It isn't true," Rosamund said irritably. "If it is, they oughtn't to be such idiots."

Jen leaned her elbow on the table and her chin in her hand, and gazed at her. "Honestly, I'm not pulling your leg, Rose-of-the-World. I think some girls may give up the idea of the prize because it means extra classes after school, *unless* you're going to the classes. It does make a difference. Can't you get over your objection, whatever it is, for the sake of the school?"

Rosamund sat staring down at her map, her lips pressed together, and said nothing.

Jen followed up her advantage. "Can't you tell us your reason, and let us talk it out? It often helps. I'm sure it isn't mere slackness, as so many of them think."

"It isn't slacking," Rosamund's voice broke. "I have got a reason. Oh, don't plague me, Brownie! I'm not a kid any more. I know what I'm doing. Now do leave me alone!—Maidie,

are you in a hole again? Parsing? Chuck it over here; I know you're hopeless at parsing. You'll sit and stare at it all night, wondering what part of speech 'an' is. Yes, I thought so! Now come round here to me!" and she gave rapid helpful explanations in an undertone.

Jen raised her eyebrows, and went on with her tea in silence. When she spoke presently, the subject of the music prize had been shelved.

"About our Wallflower Tea for the Hamlet Club on Friday, Rose-of-the-World! We ought to make up our programme to-night."

"Tell me when you're ready, and I'll come and talk about it," Rosamund agreed, obvious relief in her tone.

"I suppose I, as the Queen, will have to open the ball with Shee, as she's the newest member. I wish you'd have a reasonably grammatical name, infant! I always want to say 'with Her!'"

Sheila, lying on the floor, chuckled. "Then you'd want to say, 'Come here, Her!' and it wouldn't fit. It wouldn't be any better, Brownie!"

"Not a scrap. It's a most awkward nickname. I shall call you Sheel," Jen declared. "What can you dance fairly decently?"

"'Butterfly,'" Sheila said promptly. "Won't we look funny making arches, you and I?"

Jen groaned. "You would choose 'Butterfly!' It will be an extremely one-sided arch. Ros, take notice that I will dance the first dance with Her!"

Rosamund laughed a little. "Try It," she suggested. "Dance 'Butterfly' with It!"

"Brownie, she's rude!" Sheila said indignantly.

"My frock's torn. I'll get it; it only needs a few stitches. My work's just about done," and Rosamund rose. "Get on with yours, Maidie! You've your French to do yet. I'll hear your verbs while I do up my hem."

Jen rose and followed her, so quietly that only Mary noticed. She met Rosamund coming out of her room, her golden-brown dancing dress over her arm. "Ros! What's the trouble? Can't you tell me, kid?"

Rosamund turned hurriedly back into her room. "Come in here, then! But how you do tease, Brownie!"

"I want to know what's up," Jen closed the door. "You aren't a slacker. What is it, Rosamunda?"

"It's Maidie," Rosamund burst out, and her voice broke. "I didn't mean to tell you, but if you're going to keep on I shall have to. You'll understand. I'd like to try for the prize; it would be topping to be the first to win it. Joy would be pleased, and I'd love to do something to please her. And I hate to be called a slacker," her voice broke again. "I like to do all the things other people do, and all they expect me to do. I've always been in everything with the crowd, and I like it. And this prize is going to be the big thing this term. I hate to be left out. But can't you see that I can't do it? It means staying after school day after day for extra classes, and harder practising, and essays on musical history and composers, and heaps of theory and harmony; it means concentrating on music till the exam. is over. How can I? What's going to become of Maidie?"

"You mean you have to help her with her prep.?" Jen asked slowly. "I say, old girl, I apologise. Now, go ahead! Tell me all about it."

Rosamund swallowed a sob. "Maidie's all behind. She's always slow at school work, and she lost the first three weeks of the term. She couldn't afford to lose *any*. She's never been up to the rest; she didn't have a fair start; I've always had to coach her. Jen, it's all very well to be

an heiress, and it's romantic, and all that, not to have known you belonged to a good family until you were fourteen; but it has another side. It means that till a year ago Maidie went to poor kinds of schools, good enough for what she was then, but nothing like Miss Macey's. She's coming up against it all the time; things she doesn't know, things she's never heard of, that she ought to know. Of course we have other girls like that, scholarship girls from Council Schools; but mostly they don't mind; not as Maidie does. You know how she feels things. She can't forget she was brought up on a farm away in the country. If any one says, 'Don't you know *that*?' she looks unhappy and wants to cry. She's got on rippingly, and you'd never think she'd been a farm kid, to look at her and to hear her talk. But it makes her school work difficult, and I'm always having to stand by her. As for prep., she'd never get through it without me. You know how she sits and stares out of the window. I'm poking her up all the time. When I see she's really in a hole, I haul her out; but half the time she's simply not thinking, and I have to get her on the rails again. You can't get away from it; she depends on me, and I can't take on anything extra that she can't join in. It wouldn't be decent. I promised Joy I'd see her through."

"Couldn't I do it for a while, and let you have a shot at the prize?" Jen suggested, but without much hope that the offer would be accepted.

"It wouldn't be the same. She's used to me. It takes her ages to get used to things. She'd waste weeks if she changed over to you," Rosamund explained. "Where she'd be in the exams., I don't know. It's bad enough for her now; she can't quite make up those three weeks she missed. I'm helping her all I can, but I know she'll crash somewhere. I wish Joy had let her go to school as usual! No, thanks, Jenny-Wren. It's my job, and I've got to see it through. You mustn't tell people!" she added quickly. "I don't care what they say; not really. But you mustn't breathe a word about Maidie. She's fearfully proud, and easily upset. I'd never be able to help her again if once she was laughed at because of it."

"No, she mustn't know," Jen agreed thoughtfully. "But I shall tell Mackums, and you can say what you like, Rose-of-the-World. And to other people I shall say you've got a good reason, but it's your own business and they're to ask no questions."

"I don't mind that," Rosamund conceded. "I'm glad I told you, Brownie. I didn't want you to think I was funking the extra work. Now I must go and sew this thing and keep an eye on Maidie's French. She's awful at French; worse even than you."

"Ros, do you know you're a real sport?" Jen said warmly.

"That's better than being a slacker, anyway!" Rosamund retorted, and caught up her dancing frock and fled past Jen and downstairs.

"Now, who'd have thought *that*?" Jen said to herself, and went to seek Mary in her brown and gold room, and pour out her heart to her. "It sounds poetical, but it's intensely practical really—our rose is opening out into the flower it ought to be. There was a time Joy and I thought Rosamunda was all on the surface; jolly and healthy and good fun, but that was all. She's actually even risking her popularity and her wish to be 'in the swim,' for Maidie's sake! Or is it for Joy's? I believe it's more for Joy than for Maidie. Whatever it is, something is changing Rosamunda. She's deepening and widening and opening out; is she growing up? She's very much jollier, anyway. But—mercy me!—if the children begin to grow up, what about me? I shall have to be sober and respectable, too!"

CHAPTER XV

THE LAST WORDS OF BROWNIE ROBINS

The Wallflower Tea, to which Jen and Rosamund had invited the girls of the Hamlet Club on Friday evening, was the first festivity of the kind since Joy's marriage. The Club's country-dancing, with its happy, healthy comradeship, lay at the very heart of its life, holding present and old girls together in a common interest and enjoyment. It was the duty of the reigning Queen to see that dance-meetings were held, at school or out of doors, at her home or in Darley's Barn, where the first dances had been learned, when Cicely Hobart, the first and only President, had been a schoolgirl of fifteen.

So, on the invitation of new Queen and old Queen, the Club came to the Abbey after school, changed into dancing frocks of all colours, and went out to join the many "old girls" who had come to enjoy the dancing.

Jen had taken a half-holiday, and, with Mary's help, had arranged a long trestle table on the flagged path of the Abbot's garden, within the Abbey but outside the holy precincts, under the shadow of the high arched refectory windows. The girls sat all up and down the paved paths of the little garden among the old-fashioned flowers, on rugs and mats and cushions; and Ros and Maidie and Sheila, Mary and Jen, waited on them, bringing cups and cakes and sandwiches from the laden table.

Edna Gilks, Molly's elder sister, sniffed the scented air. "There are pinks, and pansies, and stocks, and mignonette, and roses," she observed, "but I can smell nothing but wallflowers. Why are they stronger than all the rest put together, Brownie? I don't believe it's only those in the bowls; have you scented the air somehow?"

The great brown bowls and the vases on the table were all filled with brown and golden wallflowers; but, beautiful as these were, they hardly seemed enough to overpower the lilies and roses and honeysuckle on every side.

Jen pointed to the plants growing here and there up and down the ruined wall above them. "See those? The whole Abbey's like that, a mass of wallflower. It's in every crack and on the top of every wall. I—er—arranged it so, on purpose for my Wallflower Tea; no artificial scents needed! You can smell the Abbey miles away. All done for your special benefit, my dears."

"Oh, Brownie, your story! We can see it after tea, can't we?" Babs Honor pleaded.

"You may look at it, and you may each have a bit to take away. But don't strip us quite bare! We aren't going to dance in there, though. Tourists might come; and anyway, there's the lawn. It's more suitable."

After tea and a peep at the festive Abbey, with its June-draped walls of brown and gold, the girls retired to the lawn under the windows of the Hall. Margia Lane brought out her fiddle, and Jen led Sheila to the top of a long line of couples for "Butterfly."

Mary shook her head in answer to an invitation from Maidie: "Later on, dear. Not this one;" and, leaving Maidie with Rosamund, she slipped away to see if her own particular guests had arrived.

She met them at the Abbey gate; Nell Bell knew this way into the Hall, and had had instructions to look out for Amy Prittle and take care of her. They were both shy, but Amy, a

little slight dark girl, was the shyer of the two; and Nell, whose maternal instinct was being stirred to life by daily work for babies, was encouraging her and taking care of her.

Mary led them to a quiet corner where, sitting half hidden by a honeysuckle bush, they could watch the dancing; and Amy caught her breath at the pretty sight of the lawn, bordered by flowering trees and covered with dancing girls in frocks of vivid colours.

"Nell, you know a few of them," said Mary. "The tall one in deep blue is the Queen, Jen Robins, Amy. The fair girl in bright brown, with yellow plaits, lives with us here; she's last year's Queen, Rosamund. The dark foreign child with her, in the yellow frock, is our Maidlin. The dance is called 'The Butterfly,' and it's very easy, but very jolly. You'll learn it as soon as you start. Watch carefully, for I want you both to come as soon as I start a new class. I'm sure you'll like it. Here's a list of the dances. I must run, for I've promised 'Gathering Peascods' to Sheila, the little girl in pink who danced with the Queen in that first one."

Enthralled, the two outsiders watched, and talked in the intervals of Mary, and found themselves drawn together by a common bond of gratitude.

"She understands you so well," said Nell Bell. "She came and talked to me; and somehow I told her things I'd never meant to tell anybody."

"I didn't like her at first," Amy confessed. "I was in her office, but only a junior. Miss Devine seemed so far away, and so quiet, and she kept so much to herself and never seemed to care about any of us. Then one day she was different; we all said it. We got to know her, and she took an interest in us. I'd been silly, going about with two girls and some boys that I didn't really like; they went to places I didn't care for, and I went along because I hadn't any other friends. But after I got to know Miss Devine, and she let me go to see her sometimes at night, I cut off from the other lot. I couldn't stand them after her; I couldn't be friends with that kind if she was willing to put up with me. I've been jolly glad ever since; and I'd do anything for her. She doesn't know, of course; not about them. But I came away from town so that I'd be near her. She'd saved me from trouble; I'd have got into a mess if I'd fooled about with them much longer. They were a fast lot, and not straight. I knew they were rotters; and I just hung on to Miss Devine for all I was worth. She got hold of me just in time."

"I should tell her," said Nell Bell. "She got hold of me too. She's given me a job to do for her; and I'm loving it."

"I wish she'd ask me to do something for her!" Amy said wistfully. "I'd do it, if it was ever so difficult."

"Here's a gentleman!" said Nell Bell. "Isn't he tall and handsome? But I hope he won't want to marry Miss Mary and take her away. Though I would, if I were a man."

"It's the blue Queen-girl he's talking to," Amy said hopefully, as Kenneth Marchwood came across the grass from his big car, standing in the drive, and Jen, hot after a romping set of "Goddesses," went to greet him and scold him for being late.

"You've missed three dances! I wanted you to see the whole party," she remonstrated.

"I'm sorry to say there's another intruder coming up the drive. I passed him at the gate," Kenneth said grimly. "I didn't offer—yes, here he comes!"

"Dick! Oh—bother the boy!" Jen cried indignantly, as Dicky Jessop's motor-cycle gasped its way into sight. "I didn't invite *him*! You'll have to entertain him; I'm not going to miss all the dancing!"

"Another man!" said Nelly Bell.

"No, just a boy," Amy corrected. "But he's about as old as the Queen; she isn't grown-up, though she's so tall."

“Oh, yes, she is. She’s Miss Robins, Miss Joy’s friend. Her frock’s short for dancing,” said Nell. “She’s leaving them together. Miss Rosamund wants her to come and dance.”

With Maidlin and Mary, the two Queens made a set for “Hey, Boys,” and discussed Dick’s intrusion while they danced.

“Wish I’d never asked Shee here!” Jen called to Rosamund, as she “gipsied” with Maidie.

“You and your young men, Brownie!” Ros teased, as they ran round one another.

“You can have Dick. I don’t want him,” Jen told her during “siding.”

“Thanks awfully! ’Fraid he doesn’t want me!” Rosamund “balanced,” crossed, and ran round in the ring.

“He’s an utter nuisance! Ken thinks so, too. I shall tell him not to come any more.”

“Don’t see how you can, if you have Shee here,” said Rosamund, as they armed together. “And you’ll have to stop Ken coming, too. That would be only decent.”

“I shan’t do anything of the kind!” Jen cried indignantly, as she caught Maidie’s hands and pushed her backwards.

“Then get engaged to him. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind. Then it would be silly for Dick to come any more. He wouldn’t want to, anyway, if he once knew you were engaged to Ken,” Rosamund said wickedly, as she ran round after her tall “man.”

“What rot you talk!” Jen “pushed and pulled” Maidie into place, “cast” to her left, and bowed to her partner.

“’Tisn’t rot. It’s common sense,” Rosamund told her, as the dance began again. “You can’t go on playing with two men for ever. And it isn’t fair to them. It isn’t sporting. You ought to let them know what you mean to do.”

“I don’t know myself!” Jen wailed.

“Then make up what you call your mind, and stop being washy,” Rosamund retorted. “You can’t play cricket for always.”

“Rosamund, you’re horrid! I won’t be your ‘man’ any more,” Jen said indignantly.

“You’d better be a ‘woman.’ You’ve got two men already,” Rosamund said hardheartedly. “You’ll have to settle it sometime, Brownie. You might as well get it over. Send them both away, and be done with them, and let’s be jolly again. I tell you, it isn’t sporting to keep two of them hanging round.”

“I don’t want them to hang round,” Jen said haughtily, and fled from Rosamund and Mary, to lose herself among girls who did not understand.

She danced every dance, laughing, excited, till Rosamund said darkly: “Brownie’s fey. She’ll be crying before night!” and Mary took pity on the two lonely men guests and went to entertain them.

“Mary-Dorothy, you’re a sport, and jolly decent. Oh, I am so tired!” Jen sighed, when after a big and impressive “Sellenger’s Round,” the Club had gone home to bed, and Kenneth and Dick had regretfully followed them. “I couldn’t ask any one to stay to dinner, because I know I shall fall asleep before we get to pudding. I hope your girls enjoyed themselves, Mary?” and she rolled into a chair and lay waiting to be fed.

“They loved it. They’re keen to start learning themselves. I’m so glad they’ve made friends; it will be much nicer for them both,” Mary said warmly.

“It’s only nine o’clock, but I’m going right to bed,” Jen announced, as soon as dinner was over. “I’m stiff and weary in every limb, and my eyes keep shutting in spite of me. So, good-night all! See you later!”

“Well, she didn’t cry. But I consider she’s very much over-excited,” Rosamund said virtuously.

“Why did you want her to cry?” Sheila asked curiously. “Brownie *never* does, Rosamund!”

“Little girls shouldn’t ask questions. Go to bed, infant,” Rosamund said regally.

Mary was wakened very early next morning by excited thumping on her door. She started up, sleepily conscious that she was stiff after the evening’s dancing; then, fully awake in a moment as she realised that something must be wrong, she sprang out of bed and ran to the door.

Rosamund, always an early riser, was there fully dressed; close behind her were Maidlin and Sheila, still in dressing-gowns and with tumbled hair, Maidie looking bewildered and frightened, Shee with excited, curious eyes.

“Mary, Jen’s gone!” Rosamund’s cry rang out. “I found this note outside my door, on the mat. She’s run away!”

“Run away? Jen?” Mary echoed, astounded. “What do you mean, Rosamund? How ridiculous! What does she mean?”

“Now you’re asking! I don’t know! Listen!” and Rosamund read the pencilled note aloud.

“DEAR ROS,—I’ve run away to sea, to be a cabin-boy. Don’t attempt to follow me. You’ll never find me. I shall return when I’ve been all round the world. If I never come back, you may have my handwoven frock, and Maidie my pipe, and Mary my best love. I’ve nothing else of value. Good-bye for the present!

“The last words of BROWNIE ROBINS.”

For one moment Mary stared at Rosamund, and Ros, Maidie and Sheila stared at her. Then Sheila’s eyes began to dance.

Mary’s common sense came to the rescue, and she broke into a peal of laughter. “Of all the absurd ideas——!”

“Oh!” said Rosamund slowly, her colour rising. “You think it’s a joke, Mary? Is she pulling my leg, because I ragged her about Ken last night?”

“She isn’t in her room. We went to look,” Sheila cried. “And her handwoven frock isn’t there, nor her hat, nor her little suitcase. She has gone, Mary; but that letter’s mad, especially the bit about the dress for Ros. We looked to see if she’d taken any clothes, and it’s gone, so she must have got it on.”

“She always says she’ll leave that frock to me in her will, because I love it so,” Rosamund said doubtfully. Then she pulled herself together. “Mary, what do you think it means? Where has she gone, at this unearthly hour?”

“I don’t know, but she’ll be all right. That letter’s only a joke,” Mary’s tone was matter-of-fact; she was not at all worried about Jen. “I can’t imagine where she’s gone, Ros, but she’s not angry or unhappy or out of her mind, so there’s nothing to fuss about. She’s able to look after herself. That letter’s absolutely natural and normal. She’s had some sudden idea, and she seized the chance of teasing you and giving you a shock. Perhaps she’s gone to Joan, or to Cicely. She evidently wanted to get away from all of us. She’ll come back and tell us all about it when she’s ready. What time is it? Only seven o’clock? You dreadful girl, did you get up at six? And after a country-dance party? We’d better have breakfast early, since we’re all so thoroughly awake, so suppose you go and see about it. Apologise to cook and offer to help;

lay the table or something. Get dressed, Maidie and Shee. It's Midsummer Eve; we'll have a picnic, and show Jenny-Wren we can get on quite well without her. You shall take me across the hills to the Whiteleaf Cross, where the Hamlet Club began; I've only seen it in the distance, so far."

"Cheers! Come along, Maidie!" cried Sheila.

"You do think Jen's all right, don't you, Mary?" Maidie asked anxiously.

"I'm quite sure she is, dear. It will feel odd without her as well as Joy, won't it? But we'll manage to have a good time alone."

"Horrid," Maidie sighed, with a quiver of the sensitive lips. "I don't want her pipe. I want her."

"I fancy she said the pipe was for you because it's the thing she loves most," said Mary, and kissed Maidie and sent her away to dress.

She went into her green study before going down to breakfast, to throw open the windows more widely, and to see if the flowers in the green bowls and vases and jars wanted more water; they were old-fashioned big pink roses to-day, and the whole room was scented.

With an exclamation of satisfaction more than of surprise, she ran to the door and picked up a note which had been pushed below it.

"My dear Jenny-Wren! I didn't really think she'd leave me wondering. How like her, to tease Rosamund but tell me!" And sure that the mystery would be solved now, she sat on the window-seat to read the message.

"DEAR MARY-DOROTHY,—Forgive me for fading away like this! And I hope Ros hasn't given you a fright; I simply had to pull her leg gently. Don't worry about me; I may be home to-night, or I may stay away for a day or two.

"I've gone to talk over my future with the Pixie. I was seized in bed, last night, with a sudden craving for her opinion. You know, we always do consult her, and she always helps. She's spending the week-end at her Van in the country—I had a letter from her two days ago—so I haven't got to go up to town. She may have other friends there, or may not have room for me; I don't know what kind of thing the Van is! But if she can put me up for a night, I shall stay. I'm taking a toothbrush, just in hopes.

"You know the address; if anything should go wrong, you'll wire at once, of course. I shall have the deadliest kind of cross-country journey, but it will be rather fun. *Don't* tell Ros where I've gone, there's a dear! Let her think my movements are wrapped in mystery. It won't hurt her.

"I've plenty of money with me, so I can't get into any difficulties. There's five shillings in the little brown owl-basin on my mantelpiece. You might treat the children and yourself to ices and strawberries in town, or any other form of stodge they prefer.

"I'll see you in a day or two,

"With love, from

"JENNY-WREN."

"I had last words from Brownie too," and Mary laid the five shillings on the breakfast table; for it had to be accounted for somehow, a fact Jen had overlooked. "She says I'm to treat the children to ices in town, and there's the money to pay for them."

“Three cheers for Brownie!” Sheila cried excitedly. “A strawberry one for me, Mary, please!”

“Did she say where she’d gone, Mary?” Rosamund demanded.

“She says nothing about going to sea. She does say she may be home to-night or tomorrow, so it isn’t very serious. But she sounds quite indefinite,” Mary said quietly. “We’ll take a morning train in to Risborough, and have our ices, and then climb up to the Cross, shall we? It’s much more interesting than having the car.”

“Oh, I love the car!” cried Sheila.

“I’d like the climb, though it’s more fag,” Rosamund agreed with Mary. “I’d rather climb a hill on my feet than in a car. Didn’t Jen say more than that, Mary?”

“It always feels to me more of a pilgrimage to go first to a place on foot,” said Mary. “We’ll be ancient pilgrims, and visit the Cross, as if it were a shrine. It’s the birthplace of the Hamlet Club, after all.”

“Aren’t you going to tell me what Jen said?” Ros asked indignantly.

“No. What she wrote was for me, and for no one else,” Mary’s tone was definite.

“You’re a pig, Mary!” Rosamund cried.

“All right. I don’t mind. But I would be really a pig if I showed you Jen’s private letters.”

“Jen’s a pig to write private letters!”

“You can tell her so when she comes back. Now all turn to and make sandwiches! We’ll have lunch beside the Cross.”

CHAPTER XVI

THE PIXIE'S VAN

It was barely half-past four when Jen rolled out of bed, and wearily put on her dressing-gown and slippers. In spite of her evening assertions of exhaustion, she had not slept, but she had rested, lying relaxed and limp, as she had learned to do during strenuous folk-dancing days at Vacation Schools. Her mind had been busy with the thoughts Rosamund's teasing words had suggested, and with the plan she had conceived the night before, and sleep had not come to her.

She had revived considerably, however, by the time she had crept downstairs, found a time-table, and verified her conviction that there was a train to Risborough at six-thirty. A stealthy visit to the larder, a drink of hot milk and some biscuits and cake, restored her spirits completely to their usual level, and she ran silently back to her room, hugging herself to think how Rosamund would rage when she knew she had missed the fun.

The spirit of adventure strong upon her, she packed a tiny case, dressed in the handwoven frock of amethyst and saxe-blue which she loved so much, covered it with a long grey coat, and pulled a soft grey hat down over her curls, and wrote her notes, pushing one below Mary's door and dropping the other on Rosamund's mat. Then she crept downstairs again, shoes in hand, and sat on the doorstep to put them on, chuckling because she felt so much like a schoolgirl out for mischief.

"Rosamunda's the head mistress! I'd tell Mary-Dorothy in a moment; but I will not be criticised by Rose-of-the-World! I hope my note will make the child sit up," and she let herself out by the garden door, ran across the lawn, and fled down the long beech avenue.

The short cut through the woods, which now reminded her always of her Queen's robe when she saw the ruddy carpet of beech leaves underfoot, took her to the little wayside station in half an hour; and before Rosamund had found her note, Jen was creeping towards Risborough in the train.

She had no doubts whatever of the welcome awaiting her; the Pixie could not be inhospitable, even to an uninvited guest, and most of all to one who came for help. But Jen had more than doubts of how to find her way; a caravan in a Surrey valley seemed rather like a needle in a haystack as an object for her search. She knew the postal address, however, and had a conviction that Guildford had been mentioned as a shopping centre by the Pixie; so to Guildford in Surrey she would go, and go by train, if it took all day.

"When you start at six in the morning, you can afford to have adventures!" she said to herself. "I hope the trains won't fit *too* well! I shall want meals occasionally. But I'm much more likely to have hours to wait everywhere. There's no question about the first step. I must get to Risborough, whatever I do after that. And as soon as I find a telegraph office open, I shall wire to the Pixie to expect me."

It was a cross-country journey, indeed, and left plenty of time for frequent meals. Used to the ease of Joy's car, which carried her from the door of the Hall to any place in town she wished to visit, Jen found the constant changes, the need to ask and plan her way, an interesting experience. She was very businesslike, and consulted maps and time-tables at every junction; and her amused enjoyment deepened as Risborough led her to Wycombe,

Wycombe—after a long wait—to Maidenhead, thence to Reading, and so at last to a Guildford train.

With tired relief, for the wakeful night was telling on her, she settled down to a slow journey through Surrey, and to the task of keeping her thoughts at bay.

Resolutely she shut her mind against Rosamund's suggestions; she was going to lay her problem before a sympathetic expert, and no good could come of struggling with it alone.

Guildford, with its radiating 'bus-routes, presented a more practical difficulty, which was solved by a few inquiries. In the motor-'bus—since *on* it was impossible, there being no outside seats because of the hills *en route*—Jen gave her attention to the beauties of the countryside and easily put troublesome thoughts away.

At a village with a pond, and ducks, and a big clock and a little figure of a man, who came out every hour to strike the bell with a hammer, the 'bus left her and rattled away on through the lanes.

Jen was looking round interestedly, seeking some one to answer her next question, when the Pixie herself came hurrying from a little shop, a big marketing basket on her arm.

"Here you are! We worked it out that this was the earliest 'bus you could catch. Uncle got down the time-tables, and we saw you'd wired from Wycombe at eight o'clock. Are you nearly dead? Have you had a dreadful journey? It is nice of you to come and look me up, Jenny-Wren!"

"Oh, Pixie, I've been half over England, in slow trains, this morning! I've been in *five* counties! Or four; I'm not sure if we really went into the fifth or not, but if we didn't we came along the edge of it. It is ripping to see you!" Jen said fervently. "Let me carry the basket; yes, to balance my case! That's better. I left the Hall at six o'clock, before any one was awake; I shoved notes under their bedroom doors. I've run away."

"What fun! Didn't they know?"

"Not one of 'em knew. I told Mary, in her note, that I was coming to you. I said to Ros that I'd run away to sea, to be a cabin-boy."

"You couldn't have chosen a better day. I've a party coming to-morrow, but I'm all alone to-day. You'll stay, of course? You couldn't go back all that way, Jenny-Wren!"

"I don't think I could, unless I had to!" Jen confessed. "I brought a nightie, just in hopes. But I've plenty of money; I could go to a hotel, if you haven't room, Pixie. Of course I'm *dying* to sleep in a caravan!"

"You may have to tuck yourself up a bit, as there's such a lot of you," the Pixie told her gravely. "But you can have a little bed, if you can get into it."

"I'll get into it, if I have to do it in sections," Jen said happily. "That's gorgeous! But I haven't told you why I've come."

"Oh, you haven't come just to see me and the Van, then?"

"I've come because I'm in a hole. You see, Pixie, there are two silly men."

"Two, Jenny-Wren?" the Pixie's eyes sparkled. "Isn't that one too many?"

"It's two too many!" Jen burst out. "I don't want either of them. But they will hang round; it's been going on since before Joy went. I've tried to show them I don't want to be bothered; I make them play cricket, and pretend I'm only a kid and care about nothing but my bowling average, which was disgraceful but is improving, you'll be glad to hear. But of course I *know* what they're after; and Mary-Dorothy's rubbed it in. And last night we had a country-dance party, and both the bothering men turned up; and Rosamund told me it wasn't sporting to let them keep on, and I ought to send them both away or get engaged to one of them. I don't want

to be engaged, and I've been awake all night thinking about it. So I thought I'd come and ask you what I must do."

"And who are the men, Jenny-Wren?"

"One's a silly boy: Dicky Jessop. You've heard about Dick and Della, years ago. He's as silly as he used to be, the absolute limit. I wouldn't marry him to save my life. The other's Ken Marchwood."

"I should send Dicky Jessop away, and marry Ken Marchwood," said the Pixie promptly.

"No, you wouldn't; not if you didn't love him," Jen retorted, with equal promptitude.

"Quite sure, Jenny-Wren?"

"Certain," Jen said firmly. "I like him quite a lot; and he's a jolly good bowler, and very nice and handy to have next door, if you want a man for anything. He was a dear over Joy's wedding, and no end of a help. But I don't want him any nearer than next door. And if he went back to Kenya, I should miss him for a week, but that would be all."

"Would you miss Dicky Jessop for a week, if he went to Africa?"

"Gracious, no! I'd be *glad!*"

"Then tell him not to come to see you any more. It isn't fair to let him come, if you're sure you'll never want him. If you funk it, you won't be sporting, Jenny-Wren."

"I suppose that's true," Jen admitted. "But what about Ken, Pixie? He lives next door. I can't send him away. Besides, he's good fun."

"Has he shown any signs of wanting to get beyond the cricket stage?" the Pixie asked seriously.

"Not a sign. He's rather an angel. He never teases."

"Then I should go on playing cricket with him. I dare say he's enjoying it as much as you are. But keep to cricket, and on the cricket level, absolutely, Jenny-Wren. Don't ever let him say you encouraged him to go beyond that, unless you mean something by it."

"I don't; not at present. But I want to wait; I don't want to be rushed," Jen confessed.

"You shan't be rushed. It isn't fair," the Pixie said soothingly. "But I'm afraid you're going to grow up, Jenny-Wren. But isn't it fun? Growing up is fun, you know."

"Is it?" Jen sounded doubtful. "I'm not keen on it, Pixie. I want to go on playing cricket."

"For ever? Oh, but you can't. You've got bigger things to do; much jollier things."

"Of course I see the advantages of marrying Ken Marchwood," Jen admitted. "He's jolly, and good fun. And I'd be Joy's sister. But I can't marry him just for that, any more than Joy could marry Andrew to get the Manor. And there are things against it, too. He'd want me to go and live in Africa, and I couldn't think of it. I could never go so far from Daddy and Mother, not for any man on earth. And it would be so far out of everything, all the fun of life! Joy didn't seem to mind missing lots of things; she said it was different if Andrew would be there. I don't feel like that about Ken. He wouldn't make up for all the other things. And he'd be sure to want me to go to Africa."

"You don't love him yet, Jenny-Wren. Don't worry about it, though! There's no need for that unless he teases you in earnest. Go on as you are so long as he's satisfied. If he seems to want more, tell him straight out you can't give it him at present; and let him stay away if he isn't content to play cricket. He's got to wait for you, you know. Now don't think about him any more! You've come here for a holiday from worries. We're going to take a taxi along to the bungalow; yes, it's twenty minutes' walk, and we've too much to carry. I've a sack of potatoes waiting for me at the place where we get the car; we can't possibly carry them home."

“This is very swish!” Jen, and the potatoes, and the suit-case, and the big basket, were all packed into a little car which a girl brought out for them and drove herself. “Is it really a taxi? Looks like your private car, Pixie!”

“I call this road the Flamborough hey,” said the Pixie, as they sped past the duck-pond and across the common and down a winding lane with high banks. “When my friends ask me how they can find the Van, I tell them to cast to the right and then three changes of the Flamborough hey; you see?” as they swerved round sudden bends. “Left! Right! Left! These are the bungalows; the last two belong to my people. And the Van’s in the next plot; this is my quarter-acre!” proudly.

“Oh, what topping little gardens!” Jen cried softly, at sight of the low brown-roofed white bungalows, surrounded by seas of flowers; pink and crimson roses hung from pillars everywhere, and great clumps of blue and yellow lupins made broad splashes of soft rich colour.

“You must see them properly after lunch. I’ve got to feed you first; you must be starving. This is my little place,” and the Pixie and the driver-girl hauled out the luggage, while Jen disentangled herself and looked eagerly, and then dazedly, about.

Her first sensation was of bewildered disappointment. In spite of warnings, she had expected to see a gaily-painted caravan, high on its wheels. The long narrow field stretching up the hill, with knee-high grass and buttercups and sorrel, had a kind of shed-arrangement at its higher end, on a little bank; it looked like a bit of fencing on an allotment, and Jen wondered seriously, if this were indeed the Van, what happened when it rained. She felt it would be rude to ask the question, however, and the sky suggested that the weather was set fair; so, puzzled but hopeful, she looked for the entrance to the field.

A tiny rustic gate bore a wooden name-board, “Robin’s Rest.” The path within it led down a bank to a single plank which bridged a swift little stream; an oak tree by the brook stretched its arms over the lower field and gave the only shade.

“We’re glad of that tree. We have meals under it, and the robins live in it,” said the Pixie. “Now, if you can manage your case——”

“Oh, are there really robins? I thought perhaps it was a compliment to me,” Jen said seriously. “I’m going to lug those potatoes up for you; *and* my case. I’m as strong as a horse. But as I’ve only two hands, you’ll have to take the basket. Now, don’t argue, Pixie! I’m going to take that sack. It’s as big as you; the sight of you underneath it would quite spoil my holiday. I tell you, I’m going to have it!”

“Of course, when any one speaks to me like *that*, I simply wilt,” and the Pixie surrendered gracefully. “Sure it won’t kill you, Jenny-Wren? I’d be sorry to have to bury you by the brook.”

Jen’s laugh bubbled like the brook. “Not this time! Where shall I put it? Oh, there’s the Van! I couldn’t make out where it was. Then that fence is just a screen; what a good idea!”

“It keeps the wind off, and makes an extra room. That’s the kitchen out there; I’ll show you round in a minute,” and the Pixie hauled the potato-sack into a corner, and began to empty her basket of parcels.

The caravan had no wheels, so seemed strangely low down, for a caravan. It was sitting on a broad concrete platform, its door open to the hillside, its back to the road down in the valley. The fence Jen had seen stood screening it from the road, so that it was invisible to any one approaching until the corner of the screen was passed. This extra wall was of rough wooden fencing, and stood several feet from the Van, the space between roofed in, so that there was

room for a wooden cupboard, a meat-safe, tables and shelves; jars and pails stood below, for storage or for washing-up purposes.

“It makes a dinky kitchen!” Jen said warmly. “It’s a topping idea! You store things, and cook, and wash up here, and just live in the Van?”

“I often sleep out here, too. I’ll show you later. Now you’re going to help me get lunch. I’ll put the potatoes on the ‘Beatrice’; I peeled them before I went out,” and she lit a small oil stove. “They’ll boil very quickly. There’s a tart my Aunty sent in from next door; she thought you’d like it.”

“How jolly of her! That was kind. You’ll let me go and say ‘thank you,’ won’t you?”

“Oh, yes, after we’ve washed up. I must fetch some water; the tap’s halfway down the field,” and the Pixie picked up two big cans. “You go in and look round.”

“Not much! And watch you carrying water? Am I a worm?” and Jen threw off her coat and hat, and annexed one of the cans. “Show me where the water lives, and I’ll carry all you need while I’m here. This is truly rural! Don’t you have a well? Or a pump? I’d love to pump.”

“Oh, no; Company’s water laid on! This track leads you straight to the tap. Here you are!” and they stood together by the tap beside the fence, while the big cans filled slowly.

Jen stood erect and gazed at the opposite green hills, and the woods up and down the valley. The air was very clear, and the colours were vivid: the restful shades of green, the blue above, the masses of colour in the bungalow gardens, the rich soft red-browns of their roofs, the white walls of the nearer one.

She drew a long breath. “What glorious air! Pixie, what a treat this must be after town!”

“Everybody loves it. My friends come and camp down there in the field; or come for the day on Sundays, and I give them hot water and cook for them. I’m going to lend you a pinafore,” the Pixie was eyeing her visitor. “You mustn’t spoil your pretty frock. What a lovely colour it is, Jenny-Wren!”

“Your doing; you had it woven for me. Mary-Dorothy’s going to love hers, too. I’ve heaps to tell you about her; and about Rosamund. You must be a godsend to crowds of people, if you let them come here for Sundays, Pixie; city and office people must love it,” Jen said soberly, as they carried the cans back up the hill.

“Some of the Kibboo Kift are coming next week-end. You know about them, of course. I’ve been teaching a group of them country-dancing. So they’re coming here to camp. Put that on, and save your frock, Jenny-Wren,” and the Pixie tossed her a yellow apron.

“I’m going inside to look round; may I? Do you suppose I can get in all at once?” and Jen stooped to enter the doorway.

“You may have to crawl. Couldn’t you take a tuck somewhere? There’s room enough for me! You do seem to fill it up, don’t you, Jenny-Wren?” the Pixie chuckled.

Jen subsided on the low bed that faced the door and curled her long legs up under her. “I think perhaps I’d better not move about,” she said cautiously. “Can’t we have lunch outside? You find things, and then I’ll come out and help. I simply daren’t move while you’re in here too, or I shall smash up the whole show.”

“Oh, no, you won’t! It can stand a lot. When men come to see me, they always want to come inside, but when they get here they feel just as you do.” The Pixie had raised a hanging table below one of the side windows, and was placing on it brown and green patterned plates she took from a corner cupboard behind the door.

“That’s a good idea; two good ideas!” Jen said with interest. “But the whole Van is full of good ideas; I can see that. It’s simply fascinating! I say, what heaps of places you have for storing things!” as her eyes gradually discovered them: shelves, and rails, and bars; and hooks, and nails, and pegs; brackets and little cupboards in unexpected places.

“If you want to unpack your case, put things in here. We haven’t room for drawers,” and the Pixie threw up the top of a broad seat which filled one side of the Van, and showed that it was hollow, with plenty of storage space inside.

Jen promptly opened her case, took out slippers and a comb and a parcel, and thrust the case out of sight into the box-seat. “That’s for you. It’s been waiting for weeks, since Joy and I ran down to Farnham to get some extra bits for Mary-Dorothy’s new rooms. I didn’t want to send it by her or any one else, so I saved it up till I’d see you myself.”

“What is it? Something to cook in? Oh, Jenny-Wren, *thank* you! Thank you ever so much! We’ll cook our dinner in it to-night!” cried the Pixie joyfully, as she unwrapped a casserole dish in the brown and yellow ware. “Just what I was dying for!” she said ecstatically. “And I do love the brown!”

“If you’ll go outside, I’ll hand those things to you through the window. But we can’t both move at once,” Jen remarked, sitting tidily on her feet on the bed.

“There’s more room than you’d think. You’ll soon get used to it,” and her hostess went outside to set up a folding table and chairs.

Then, as Jen was cautiously uncoiling herself, the Pixie came bustling in again. “It’s too hot out there. The sun’s too much. We’ll have lunch in here, with the door and windows open, don’t you think so? We don’t want to be scorched.”

“In here? If you think it’s safe!” Jen said doubtfully. “I’m sorry I’m so huge. I never realised it before.”

“The table goes so. You’ll sit on the bed, and I on the seat, so that I can run out and fetch things. Set the table, Jenny-Wren! You’ll find everything on that slab by the window. The knives and silver are in the cupboard.”

Jen moved about carefully, stifling a laugh when she bruised her shins and elbows on the table. “I say, Pixie, the Van’s getting bigger!” she said solemnly, through the window.

“It will get bigger yet,” the Pixie responded, testing her potatoes. “There’s plenty of room in it really. But it does expand in a wonderful way; everybody says so. You’re getting used to it, Jenny-Wren.”

“At first I felt the roof, and the walls, and all the things hanging up, were coming down on top of me. But now I can move about without smashing things. I feel quite bucked!”

“Do you mind me wasting your bread?” Jen was sharing her lunch with two robins and a chaffinch. “I have to feed these little people. Aren’t they tame? And the flowers! And the scent of that grass!”

“I’m going to have it mown. Do you get hay-fever?” the Pixie asked anxiously.

“Never in my life! The flowers in the fields, as I came along, were wonderful; banks of lovely things!”

“Yes, Surrey is beautiful. So is your county, Jenny-Wren, but Surrey’s wonderful.”

“What do you mean by *my* county?” Jen bristled at once. “We’re in Oxfordshire at the Abbey; and in Bucks when we dance in Wycombe; but I’m a Yorkshire woman through and through; and don’t you forget it, please!”

They took lunch lazily, enjoying the shade and the breeze through the open windows, and gazing out at the blazing sunshine. The Pixie asked many questions, concerning Mary, and

Nelly Bell, and Joy; and listened with interest to Jen's account of Rosamund.

"The child is developing. I expect she has been through some crisis, quite quietly, without any of you realising it; and it has given her something new. She'll be all the better for it, and you'll like her far more. What about Maidie?"

Jen knit her brows. "There isn't much to say about Maidie. She's taken Joy's going more quietly than we expected. She doesn't say much, but I fancy she thinks about Joy a good deal. Ros is being very good to her, seeing her through her school work; but she can't get Maidie to play as much as she ought to. Doesn't seem to care about it somehow. Even having the Sheila kid in the house hasn't made as much difference as I hoped. Maidie's changed in one way, though. She writes reams to Joy; and she never could write letters. Her epistles used to be the stodgiest things possible, and took her hours to put together. Now she sits and scribbles away to Joy by the yard."

"That's good for her. It will give her an outlet. Now you clear away on to the window-sill, and hand the things out to me, and I'll put on the other kettle and we'll have hot water for washing."

"I don't call this the simple life at all!" Jen said reprovingly, as she plunged her face in a refreshing basin of hot water. "Two and three-course meals; hot water at all hours! It's luxury, Pixie!"

"I don't believe in the simple life, if it means going without things you want," the Pixie retorted. "I do like to be thoroughly comfortable."

"You manage it," Jen said laughing.

Then, as they hung up the towels and set off down the hill, carrying a tart-dish which belonged to next door, she gave a delighted cry.

"Pixie! Look at *me*! Now look at those lupins! Isn't it clever of me to dress to match your garden?"

The Pixie looked from her purple-blue dress and yellow apron to the great banks of yellow and blue. "You do seem like a bit of the landscape," she agreed chuckling.

"Nothing will induce me to part with my pinafore now! I shall wear it as long as I stay here," Jen assured her fervently.

CHAPTER XVII

MIDSUMMER MORN

Jen, having been introduced to Uncle and Aunt next door, was personally conducted over their domain; admired every inch of the rock-garden up on the hill, saw the vegetables, strawberries, and lettuces, the seedlings in the little greenhouse, the motor-house, with its wide bridge across the stream, the pillar roses, the bush roses, and the standards, the herbaceous border, the fish-pond, and the would-be-old flags under the pergola, with their First-of-April inscriptions. She was shown over the bungalow, and sat on the seat at the top of the garden with the Pixie's aunt, looking over the valley and down upon the bungalows and caravan and gardens.

"It's simply wonderful how perfect you've made it in so short a time," she said. "And you've done every bit of the garden yourselves; that must be a heavenly feeling."

"When I build my bungalow, the Van's going to be the kitchen," said the Pixie. "The house will be along the bank right up to the Van, which will be where it is now, and I shall make it the kitchen."

"What a good idea! But are you really going to build one? When shall you start?"

"When I can afford it. Now come and get the tea. You've a lot of carrying up and down to do, Jenny-Wren!"

"But it's worth it!" Jen said happily, as, after many journeys up and down the slope, the tea-table was ready, close to the bubbling stream and under the shadow of the oak-tree. She sank into one chair and the Pixie into another, and a robin came and sat on a bough just above them and poured out a rippling song.

"You darling! Here, then! Here's your tea! Do they always come to tea, Pixie?"

"Always; they love to have us sit here. We'll give the men tea here to-morrow. You'll stay and help me with my party, won't you?"

"It's tempting!" Jen sighed. "Of course I ought to go home! There's school on Monday. But if I didn't go home, I couldn't go to school, could I?" she added happily.

"Oh, I think you deserve a holiday, after all that cricket!"

Jen laughed. "What do we do after tea? I'll wash up."

"I've a frock to finish, and then we'll take it to the post. It must go off to-night."

"Frocks! Do you mean to say you work here? But where do you keep frocks in the Van?"

"You'll see," and the Pixie swept the dishes together, threw the crumbs to the robins, and set off with the tray, while Jen packed up the chairs and table, and followed meekly.

"You sit on the bed; or outside, if you like," and the Little One delved into the recesses of the box-seat, and brought out a white bundle, which proved to be a nearly-finished hand-woven frock, wrapped carefully in a sheet.

Jen sat on the doorstep and watched, fascinated, as the final stitches were put in, loops and catches added, collar tacked in; the window-flap served as a table, and an iron was heated on the oil-stove for pressing; paper and string appeared, also from the interior of the "divan," the parcel was made up, and Jen found herself setting out for the post office before she had really grasped the fact that the dress was finished.

"You make me breathless!" she remonstrated. "Do you live in an endless whirl? And yet it isn't a whirl; you keep quite calm over it. But you do get through things at a terrific rate!"

“Oh, that’s practice. I know what I have to do. When we get back, we’ll make your bed, and I’ll take my things outside. I’m going to sleep in the kitchen.”

“Is that because I’m here?” Jen demanded. “If so, please tell me and turn me out! I thought we slept in layers, like in bunks in a ship. There’s a bed above the one I’ve been sitting on. I’ll sleep up aloft; or you may, if you’re afraid I’d come through on top of you. I’m sure you’d be crushed to death if I did; and I’d be sorry to kill you.”

“That top rail lifts off, and makes a very good bed outside. I often sleep out; I like it. You won’t sleep, you know; nobody ever does the first night.”

“Perhaps I’ll create a record, then, for I didn’t sleep last night. I never lay awake for *two* nights in my life! But I don’t mind if I don’t sleep,” Jen said happily. “It’s all so queer and new. I shall lie and think about it, and enjoy the quietness and the thought that I’m sleeping in a caravan in a field. It’s Midsummer Eve, you know. I feel the world’s bewitched. Everything’s standing still, and we’re just enjoying ourselves, and I’m not worried any more.”

“We go to bed early,” the Pixie explained. “It gets dark, you know.”

“No, does it? Now, who’d have thought it? What does it do that for? Can’t you break it of the bad habit?”

The Pixie ignored her. “And lamps are such a nuisance. I’d rather go to bed. But we’ll get up early, to make up for it.”

“Does it get chilly and dewy, as well as dark? Or have you any marvellous way of getting over that?”

“I haven’t done anything about the dew yet. But with the stove and lamp going and the door shut, the Van gets warm enough, even in winter. We’ll fill our bottles and then we shall be cosy.”

“Bottles! Pixie, do you mean to say——? Well, this *is* the simple life, and no mistake!” Jen gave a shout of laughter.

“Oh, you need a bottle if you sleep in a van. And I need one if I’m sleeping out. You’ll be glad of it by two in the morning,” and the Pixie filled her kettles, and put them on the stoves.

Refusing any lamp, Jen undressed in the half-dark and curled herself up in bed, and was not sorry to hug the bottle. She lay listening to the rustle of the trees, and an occasional night-bird’s cry; and thought of Joy, “on safari” with her husband in the African wilds, and wondered if her night-sounds were the cries of distant leopards and perhaps even lions.

“Pixie! I slept like a top!” her voice rang out exultantly next morning. “I have created a record! I never stirred once!”

“Good for you!” the Pixie appeared with a can of hot water. “It’s a perfect Midsummer Day, Jenny-Wren. It’s going to be hot. Oh, isn’t your hair pretty when it’s untidy!”

Jen made a dash for the looking-glass. “I do look a sight! Never mind; I’ll be very beautiful presently. Oh, what a morning!”

“That’s what the robins think. I’m going to get breakfast. We’ll have it outside, while it’s cool.”

“It’s quite the proper thing to have breakfast with a pixie on Midsummer Morn,” Jen called through the back of the Van, as she heard the bacon sizzling in the pan. “But you ought to feed me on dew and honey and rose leaves.”

“Shall I? Would you like rose leaves, really? I’ve a beautiful fresh egg for you,” her little friend tempted.

“I’ll have the egg and bacon. I’ve an idea rose leaves and dew wouldn’t be sustaining. And I need a lot of feeding, because there’s so much of me. Now, what can I do to help?”

“Set the table in the sunshine; there, on the platform. The ground’s still damp. You know where everything is, don’t you?”

“Everything! I can find all your treasures now. I’ve explored all the hidie-holes.”

“I don’t think you have!” said the Pixie. “And is the Van still getting bigger, Jenny-Wren?”

“Big? It’s a mansion! There’s room for six—if they knew how to move about carefully.”

“It’s rather a squash for six,” said the Pixie, bringing the teapot. “But it can hold quite a crowd in a sudden storm, if they pack in and sit down. Of course, they don’t have to move.”

They sat out in the early sunshine, bareheaded and enjoying the freshness of the morning, the Pixie in a blue cotton frock, Jen insisting on wearing the yellow pinafore over her purple-blue dress.

“I like to feel like a lupin. I shall go to church in it,” she said.

“We’re rather far from church. And I have to cook for those men who are coming from town. They’ll walk over the hills, so they’ll arrive starving and need a lot of feeding. You can go in and talk to Aunty while I’m busy.”

“Oh, can’t I help? I can do potatoes. Pixie! I’m a Domestic Science student!” Jen said with dignity. “Let *me* get the dinner for the crowd!”

“Not if I know it! I don’t want your Domestic Science stunts getting in my way. I know where everything is and just what I want to do, and I’ll do it more quickly in my own way, thank you.”

“Oh, well! If you’re going to whisk round as you did with that frock last night, I shall retire,” Jen said laughing. “Why don’t you wave a wand, and be done with it? I believe you do, and everything leaps into its place,” and she withdrew into the safety of the Van and stood leaning on the lower half of the door and gazing up and down the valley.

“It’s a good thing you don’t want my help,” she said dreamily, “for you wouldn’t get it now. I’ve a pressing engagement with those trees down in the hollow; I can’t take my eyes off them. The way they’re changing is fascinating. They were misty grey when we were having breakfast, and now they’re deep blue with shadows.”

“That’s right! You look at trees and feel poetical,” said the independent Pixie encouragingly, and went on with her cooking in her usual quiet steady rush.

But when she started for the tap with the cans, Jen was after her, like an indignant whirlwind. “You little—you little rotter! Why didn’t you call me? Now, as penance, give me a job to do for you. Make use of me while you’ve got me! Shall I peel the potatoes? They’re done? When did you do them? I’ll shell these peas, then,” and she sat on a cushion on the bank, just outside the “kitchen,” a basin in her lap, her eyes roaming up and down the valley while her fingers were busy.

The Pixie glanced out at her continually, as she worked, and called remarks through the wooden screen. Her sympathies were strongly with Kenneth Marchwood, whom she had known as a boy, but had not seen for some years; and she hoped some day he would get his heart’s desire. But what was to awaken Jen to the graver and yet happier sides of life, she did not know.

“I’ve got a new name, Pixie! Everybody at school calls me Brownie, and they’re adopting it at home, too.”

“Oh, but you’re *not*, Jenny-Wren!” the Pixie remonstrated.

“I know I’m not. It’s absurd, but they will do it. It’s after my Queen’s train. I was the Brown Queen, with a train the colour of the beech carpet in our woods, decorated with yellow dancing flowers and leaves. So I’m Brownie Robins now.”

She brought the bowl of peas, and, being refused another job, retired to the Van again, to sit on the door-step and resume her meditations on the distant trees.

"I'm being thoroughly lazy! And I am enjoying it," she proclaimed dreamily.

The Pixie, coming round the corner of the Van, glanced down at the road, and gave an exclamation.

"Here's a big car stopping at the gate. I hope it's a mistake! I'm not expecting anybody with a car. Are you, Jenny-Wren?"

"I? Goodness me, no!" Jen came flying to look. Then her face filled with amazed indignation. "It's the Marchwood car, from the Manor. *Oh!* Oh, I never thought Mary would give me away! Oh, what cheek of him to come! Pixie!" and she turned quickly, her face flushed with annoyance. "This is going to spoil everything. Won't you go and send him away? I don't want him here. And—and *talk* to him for me, Pixie darling!" and she went into the Van and banged the door.

The Pixie, looking grave, went down the path through her field, quite forgetful of the carving-knife in her hand.

Kenneth, striding across the plank and up the hill, saw it, and laughed to himself; and Jen, peeping out of the window, laughed too, in spite of her annoyance. She laughed again as they stood talking together, for beside Kenneth's height the Pixie looked tinier than ever.

"I ought to take down a chair for her to stand on. Or he might sit on the ground; it would be only kind! She wants me; oh, bother! I hoped she'd send him away."

The Pixie was calling: "Jenny-Wren! Come here, Jenny-Wren!"

Reluctantly, and not looking at all pleased or welcoming, Jen went to join them. Then suddenly she ran, for in Ken's hand there was a letter. It had not once occurred to her that Mary might have sent him.

"Is that for me? Ken, what is it? Is anything wrong?" her voice was sharp with anxiety.

"We hope not. But this came late last night, marked 'Urgent,' and Miss Devine rang me up this morning to ask my advice. She couldn't wire you, as the village office wasn't open. She wanted me to get through to you somehow; but I thought it would be quicker to bring the letter to you."

"It's from mother—but an *English* stamp! But they're in Paris! They can't——" Jen tore open the letter. "They're at home; Sheffield. They *can't* have come home! They'd never come without telling me! I was to join them in town. What can it mean?"

She sank down in the long grass to read the letter. The Pixie and Kenneth looked at one another, and waited anxiously.

Jen looked up, her face bewildered and frightened. "They are home. They decided to come quite suddenly, and went right through without stopping in town. Mother wants me, as soon as ever I can go. She—she says she has something to tell me, something she can't write." Her voice had a note of terror in it. "I must go at once. Pixie, what can it be, that she can't write? And why have they come home in such a hurry? It must be something about daddy." Her voice broke, and she stood up, white and frightened, but collected and resolute. "Ken, will you take me home? It will be much quicker than trains. I'll get my things; I won't be five minutes. Mary'll help me pack, and I can start to-morrow morning, unless there's a night train."

The Pixie hurried up the hill after her and disappeared into the kitchen, while Jen, in the Van, flung her belongings into her case and changed her shoes at express speed. As she came out in her coat and hat, the Pixie met her with a cup of hot milk and a couple of biscuits.

“Now don’t argue, my dear. It isn’t wasting time. You’ve had a bit of a shock, and you won’t get lunch till late. I’d offer to come with you, but there’s no need; you’ll be all right with Kenneth. Don’t make up your mind it’s bad news, Jenny-Wren. You don’t know yet. It may be some quite simple change of plans.”

Jen was no baby, and in the few moments she had pulled herself together. She looked down at her little friend bravely. “I’m afraid it’s more than that, dear. Mother wouldn’t have written so urgently if that had been all. I’m afraid he must be very much worse than I knew, and they haven’t told me. Mother’s wanting me very badly. My sister-in-law, who has been with them, has gone back to Glasgow, and they’re all alone. And they want me.”

“Of course they do. Well, my dear, remember that we all love you.”

“I know. I’ll not forget. Good-bye, Pixie!” and Jen’s lips quivered for an instant as she kissed her. “Thank you for a very happy time. I’ll never forget your Van, or this Midsummer. It’s been like a dream. But it was too happy to last.”

“Good-bye, Jenny-Wren! And God bless you!”

Jen leaned out of the car, waving her hand, till the little blue figure on the plank bridge was cut off from her sight by the first loop of the winding road. Then she lay back in her corner, thankful that Ken, driving himself, was so far away on the front seat, and could not expect her to talk.

He knew better than to tease her; and they flashed through villages and across Surrey and Berkshire in silence, by a much more direct route than Jen’s railway journey had taken. How long ago that journey seemed! Yesterday morning? *Yesterday?* The face of the whole world was changed; and yet the world did not seem to know it. People were going to church, and setting out for picnics, and starting off in cars for the day, as if nothing had happened.

Jen never spoke all the way home. It was only as they ran up the beech avenue to the door of the Hall that she woke from her anxious thought. Then she leaned forward hurriedly.

“Ken, I am a brute; I’ve never said a word of thanks, and you’ve spent hours racing about the country to find me. I am grateful, more than I can say. And I do thank you for bringing me home. I’d have gone crazy if I’d had to wait about at junctions, as I did yesterday.”

He longed to say so much, and dared to say so little: “Sunday trains are awkward. You had a trying journey. I’m glad I was at hand and able to come—Jenny-Wren, give me the right to take care of you always!”

But that was not said aloud; it was no time for that.

“I’ll always thank you. You’ve been a brick,” Jen said again, as she jumped out of the car.

“I shall be at home all day. You’ll ring me up if there’s anything I can do, of course. And if you’ll let me run you up to town to-morrow, I’ll be glad to do it, as early as ever you like,” Ken carefully kept his voice to everyday normal levels. It was necessary to be matter-of-fact and businesslike; if he had once allowed his heart to speak, even in sympathy, he must have said too much. He knew she could not listen now.

“Thanks awfully. It’s ripping of you. But we have Joy’s big car here, you know. But if we need help, we’ll apply to you. I’m jolly glad you’re so near. Thank you again, ever so much!” and Jen nodded and ran into the house.

“At a crisis, big brothers are useful!” Kenneth said to himself, as he backed the car. “I suppose it’s better than nothing. But I want such a lot more!”

CHAPTER XVIII

MIDSUMMER NIGHT

Mary had come running downstairs at sound of the car.

“Jenny-Wren, I knew you’d come. I’ve sent the children off to church, but I felt I must be here. Is it bad news, dear?”

“I have to go home. There’s something the matter; I don’t know what. Read the letter, Mary-Dorothy, and tell me what you think,” and Jen dropped exhausted on a settle.

Mary glanced quickly through the letter. Then she said quietly: “I’ll help you pack. You’d better take all your things; they want you at home now. Jenny-Wren, your mother’s in trouble; it looks to me as if she might be needing you to help her. You’re strong; you must let her lean on you. Remember all these months she’s borne without you. She may have been more anxious than you’ve known. It’s probably time now for you to help her. That will help you too. You won’t fail your mother. Now, dear, we can talk later. Help me to think. I’m coming with you, of course. You can’t take that journey by yourself. How can we arrange it? We can’t leave the children alone. I think to-morrow morning is the earliest we can go.”

“Mary! Oh, Mary, will you really?” For the first time Jen nearly broke down. “I didn’t like to ask you, but I was dreading the journey. Not the travelling; I could do that all right; but the loneliness, and the thinking, with no one to speak to. Oh, Mary, can you come? It will be such a help to have you!”

“I wouldn’t let you go alone; I couldn’t. But I mustn’t be away longer than is really necessary. In the meantime, some one must come here, for one night at least. Whom shall we ask, Jenny-Wren?”

Jen pressed her head on her hands and struggled to think clearly and quickly. Presently she looked up. “Joan and Mrs. Shirley were coming on Thursday. We’ll write to-night, asking them to make it Tuesday instead. We mustn’t let Mrs. Shirley feel she’s being hurried; to be wired for would frighten and upset her. Then we’ll ring up Miriam at once; she’s just outside Wycombe; and ask her to come for Monday night—oh, she isn’t on the ’phone!” despairingly. “Well then, we’ll send the car over, with a note; Ros and Maidie and Sheila could go this afternoon. They’d like the drive, and it would get them out of the way. I suppose,” wistfully, “we couldn’t go this evening, and get the night train, Mary? There’s sure to be a midnight or ten o’clock from town. I don’t know how I’ll wait till to-morrow! But could you be ready?”

“I could do it, if we could get your friend here to-night. But it seems hardly fair to ask her to come right back, with no warning; she’ll have to arrange something about her baby. And what time would a midnight train arrive? Would it be any use?”

“I hadn’t thought of that. We’d get to Sheffield at four or five in the morning, and there’d be no connection, and they couldn’t meet us. And it wouldn’t be fair to Mirry. I see that,” Jen said wearily. “I’ll hold out somehow, Mary. Here come the children. Will you tell them, and tell them what we’ve planned? I’ll go up and have a wash; it may make me feel better.”

Maidlin looked dazed when she understood. “Won’t Jen come back, Mary? Everybody’s going away,” she said piteously, characteristically seeing first her own loneliness.

Rosamund looked at Mary with knitted brows. Then she said energetically: “Why on earth don’t you ask Ken to run you through? He’d get you there by midnight, or early morning, and no bother about trains.”

Mary stared at her. "I never thought—do you think he could?"

"Could! Hasn't he found his way about Africa?" Rosamund said derisively. "I'll ask him at once, before you say anything to Jen. You know he'll do any mortal thing for her."

She went briskly to the telephone and demanded the Manor. Kenneth, just arrived from the garage, came himself to answer the call.

"Is that Ken? I'm Rosamund. I say, Jen's frantic to get home, and there are no trains till to-morrow morning, none that fit. It's near Sheffield, on the moors somewhere. It isn't really far, unless you go through London, and, of course, you wouldn't. Couldn't you take her home this afternoon, Ken? She won't sleep, so she might as well—yes? Oh, cheers! I knew you would! Thanks awfully! When will you come round? I say, she doesn't know I've asked you. But you're the only one who could do it; we wouldn't trust her with our man; he's not too good at finding the way, and he might wander into Wales or Cornwall by mistake. But you won't do that. When can she be ready, Mary? Three o'clock? She needn't pack everything; you can send her big trunk after her. But she must take a few things."

"Say four," said Mary, a little dazed by this prompt handling of their problem. It was not in her nature to be matter-of-fact and businesslike to this extent.

"That's fixed up! Now may I go and tell her?" Rosamund turned eagerly to Mary.

"Yes, that's only fair. You thought of it."

Rosamund raced upstairs and hurled herself into Jen's room, without waiting for permission to enter. "Brownie, it's all right! You haven't got to wait. Ken's coming round at four with his car, to take you home. You'll be there long before trains could do it."

Jen stared at her incredulously. "Ros, what do you mean? Ken? How?"

"I rang up and asked him. He was awfully bucked to think of doing something to help. He's delighted, really, Brownie. But he says he'll be ever so careful, and go quite slowly, because he doesn't know the roads. It will be much better than waiting all night."

Jen's face lit up in excited relief. "Ros, do you mean it? I couldn't believe it! Oh, that's topping! How awfully good of him! And how decent of you to think of it! But I must speak to Mary. There's not a minute to lose. Mary-Dorothy!" and she whirled out excitedly, and ran into Mary at the door.

"I'm here. Lunch is ready, Jenny-Wren. Come and talk things over while you have something to eat. I won't let you go unless you've had a good meal."

"You'll come too?" Jen demanded, as they sat down. "Please, Mary dear! I want you just as badly. Think of all those hours in the car, and nobody to speak to! Ken will have to worry over roads and corners. I want you, Mary! You can come back by train in a day or two."

"But how can we both go?" Mary began.

Jen quickly outlined the plans already proposed, for Rosamund's benefit.

Rosamund sat with downcast eyes, playing with a bit of bread. Her colour rose, and she did not speak at once. But presently, as Jen and Mary eyed her anxiously, she faced them bravely, with heightened colour.

"I know I've done things sometimes that might make you feel you couldn't leave us alone for a night. But none of them have been very lately. If Miriam can come, and bring the baby, and stay till Mary gets back or till Joan can get here, of course it will be very jolly, and we'll love to have her. But if she can't come till to-morrow, or if she can't come at all, there's no reason why you shouldn't go, if only you'll trust us. Jenny-Wren, you can depend on me at a time like this, can't you? Honestly, I'll do just exactly as if you were here, in everything, and anything extra, in the way of locking up and looking at windows and doors, that you tell me.

And we wouldn't be the least nervous, not a scrap. Couldn't you stop worrying and just go and leave us? Don't you know that we'll behave? Not one of us would worry you now."

"I'm sure of it," Jen said warmly. "Mary, couldn't we leave them and not bother Mirry? Ros will look after the others."

Rosamund's face lit up. "If you put us on our honour, we'll be sporting and play up. The thing that makes people mad is having a watchdog put over them; then they feel they're expected to fool about, and so they do it," she said. "It's always like that at school. If a junior mistress is left in charge, even seniors try to see how far they can go and what she'll do. But they're quite all right if they're left to themselves; I know I am! But if you'd feel happier to know there was somebody here, we won't fool about, since you're feeling bad, Brownie. Just fix it as you think best. But if Mirry can't come, don't worry. We'll be quite all right."

"Ros, you really do talk a lot of sense sometimes!" Jen commented. "Thanks ever so much! I'll go away and take Mary with me, feeling easy about you now."

"But we'll be quite pleased to have Mirry and the baby!" Rosamund added.

"We'll ask them to come, if they can," Mary said quietly. "Not at all to be watchdogs over you three, but just in case you should be lonely at night. I know you don't feel the need of company just now; but things have a way of seeming different at midnight, and you couldn't send for friends then. I think Joy would like to feel her friend was here."

"I think'!" Jen murmured. "Mary, you're dreadful! You *know* Joy would like Mirry to come!"

Mary laughed, relieved at this flash of the old Jen. "I know I'm going with you, anyway. Won't you tell us about the Pixie? I told the girls where you were, after Mr. Marchwood had started this morning. We knew he would bring you back; and I thought it would save explanations when you arrived."

"We're all panting to hear about the caravan," Rosamund burst out eagerly.

The storm of questions which rained upon Jen was the best thing for her and helped her greatly. She tried to answer and describe all she had seen and to tell of her cross-country journey, and was forced to put her anxiety aside. It remained a shadow in the background while she and Mary packed during the afternoon, and only came forward to confront her when the good-byes were over and they were slipping along through country lanes in the luxurious car.

About three o'clock, the telephone bell rang, and Rosamund, just setting out to take Jen's note to Miriam, went flying to answer the call. Then she shouted up the stair to Jen.

"Brownie! I say, Ken's frightfully sorry, but he's overhauling the car, and putting in one or two new bolts, or screws, or something, just in case you're on the road all night. There's nothing wrong, but he wants to be on the safe side. So he won't be here quite by four. In fact, he's afraid it will take him a couple of hours to get her absolutely right."

"How good of him to take so much trouble!" Mary said warmly.

Jen agreed, but without enthusiasm. She would have preferred to start earlier and risk a possible breakdown.

The waiting time was hard to bear. She had packed all that she meant to take at the moment. When the girls went off in Joy's car, Jen wandered about the garden unhappily, and then went into the Abbey, and spent her last hour of suspense there.

Mary called her to come in to tea, and met her with the news that Miriam would come during the evening, as soon as she had made the necessary arrangements for leaving home;

and that she sent all loving sympathy to Jen, and hoped she would not find matters as bad as she feared when she reached home.

Jen's greeting to Kenneth was as brief, but as heartfelt, as her farewell to Maidlin and Rosamund.

"Good-bye, dear kids! If I don't come back, write to me often. Tell the school how sorry I am to fade away like this. I've been a very bad Queen. But I know every one will understand. I'll write to Miss Macey. Ken, you're a brick! Thank you more than I can say. I'd never have dreamed of asking you a second time in one day. But it's the thing I want most in the world just now."

"Then it's the thing I want most, too," he said heartily. "Let's get away, shall we? I'm so sorry to be so late. Is Miss Devine coming, too? Splendid! I hoped she would. She'll be company for you. I'm afraid I shall have to attend to my route rather closely. It's all new to me. I shall enjoy the run."

"When shall we get there?" Jen's thoughts were all on the journey's end.

"With luck, about midnight. But it may well be later. What shall we do if it's two o'clock? Won't we give them rather a shock?"

"That might be bad for daddy," Jen swiftly put her craving for her mother into the background. "We don't know how bad he is; but I'm sure he's ill. We mustn't do that. Ken, if we can't get there by ten or eleven, I think you'd better have a breakdown, so that we'll get hung up somewhere till the early morning. I don't want to frighten them."

"I'll keep that in mind," he promised gravely. "We'll try to avoid a breakdown, but if we seem likely to be too late, we'll stop somewhere about nine, for a meal and a rest, and then push on slowly."

"I think we ought to do that," Mary put in emphatically. "Mr. Marchwood will find it a strain driving on unknown roads by night, Jenny-Wren. We mustn't ask too much of him."

"I've a precious cargo. I don't mean to endanger your lives," said Kenneth. "I'm sorry we're not starting to time, but I felt I'd better overhaul the car before another long run, especially a night journey, and it took longer than I expected."

It was, in fact, after seven before they left the Hall, and Mary was glad she was there, for she felt sure they could not reach Jen's home on the Yorkshire moors by midnight.

Jen would not yet admit a doubt of it, but gradually she came to realise it would be impossible. She was not surprised when, as dusk found them passing through a big town, Kenneth drove more and more slowly, and at last drew up before a big hotel.

"We'll have something to eat here, and then go on easily," he said. "I'm sorry, Jenny-Wren. I've tried my best, but it can't be done. Unless you want to get them all up before sunrise, we'd better make for five or six in the morning. Perhaps you'll find you can sleep; the car's very comfy, and you'll feel you're on your way. It won't be so bad as if you were still at the Hall, with all your journey before you."

"That was what I couldn't bear—to be doing nothing. So long as we're moving, even if we only crawl, I can bear it. I can't thank you enough," Jen said gratefully. "But what about you? Mary and I are all right and more than comfortable; but you won't get any rest."

He laughed. "I'm enjoying myself. You can be easy about me. I like it! Now for dinner. This place looks all right."

As they set out again, he said quietly to Mary: "You'll find a hamper under the seat, with sandwiches and a flask of hot coffee, Miss Devine. Look after Jenny-Wren and give her

something when she's ready for it, won't you? There are plenty of rugs. Two o'clock in the morning's a chilly, hungry time, unless one's sleeping."

"You've thought of everything," Mary said gratefully. "We shall be more than comfortable."

"We're in the lap of luxury, Ken," Jen said warmly. "How I'd be enjoying it, if only——! But part of me is enjoying it, even now, you know."

"I'm glad of that," he assured her gravely. "Now I'm not going to drive too fast, as there's no point in it. We'll take things easily, and you'll still be there by daybreak."

Jen crept close to Mary, as they left the town behind. "I'm so glad you're here, dear. I'd have been fearfully lonely. I know Ken would have taken care of me all right, but he couldn't have taken much notice of me. I'd have felt I was all alone. It's so jolly to have you!"

Mary spoke from the depths of her heart. "Jenny-Wren, I've taken help from you, and leant on you, for so long! I didn't think I could ever have anything to give you. If I have, I'm glad and grateful."

"Oh, but you have, *lots!* You're just holding me up; I should collapse and go all to pieces without you. Did you lean on me? I never knew! I say, Mary! You're quite different from what you used to be, aren't you?"

"A different person," Mary said grimly. "But don't talk about me just now! Or *do*, if you want to!" hastily. "Whatever you want, Brownie dear."

"I want to talk about anything, rather than think. Thinking doesn't help just now," Jen said wearily. "It won't be very long now till we know. Mary, you used to hesitate, and be afraid to make up your mind. I loved the way you said, '*I'm coming with you!*' and bullied me into planning it with you. A year ago you'd have said, 'I think I'd like to—don't you think, perhaps I ought to—wouldn't it be a good plan if—would you mind if I came with you?' Now, wouldn't you?" as Mary laughed shamefacedly.

"I'm sure I should, just like that! I hadn't an ounce of character or decision in me."

"Oh, yes, you had! But it was asleep. Tell me, did you get my letter on Saturday in time to save you from a shock? Or did Ros get hers first?"

"Oh, she was first! We all had the shock. She was in my room before seven, fearfully worked up about you. She didn't see it was a joke. I had to assure her of it."

"Good for you! I wanted to give her a shock, but I didn't want you to have one, too. But I had to put your note into your green room, because I knew Ros would go straight to your bedroom, and I didn't mean her to see it. You saw it was a joke, then? You didn't believe I'd really go away without telling you?"

"I knew it was a joke after the first moment, long before it had dawned on Rosamund. For a moment, I was a little frightened," Mary admitted. "But as soon as I thought, I knew it was all right, though I didn't know you'd left a letter for me. Even if you hadn't, I shouldn't have worried; I knew you too well for that. But it was jolly of you to tell me all about it."

"You *are* different!" Jen said again. "A year ago you couldn't have pulled yourself together like that. Writing that book has done you a lot of good, Mary-Dorothy! I was sure it would."

"Please, what would I have said a year ago?" Mary asked meekly.

"Oh, you'd have wrung your hands and looked distraught, or swooned like a Jane Austen heroine."

"I laughed," Mary said with dignity, "and Rosamund stared at me most reproachfully. Can you tell me what the Pixie said to you, Jenny-Wren? Or is it private? Rosamund still hasn't an

idea why you had to see her so suddenly and in such a hurry. I didn't give you away; I just said you wanted to see the caravan."

"That was topping of you! Oh, she told me to send Dicky Jessop away and to marry Ken," Jen said simply. "But when I explained that I didn't feel that way about him at all, she saw I couldn't. So she told me to go on playing cricket with him. Mary, don't you feel somehow awfully satisfied about being so different? Doesn't it feel tophole? Do you often think about it?"

"I'm thankful every day—and to you." And then Mary added, with a shy effort at confidence: "I have the strangest feeling of pride when I do anything practical! It's so unlike me. I want to stop and look at myself, and say, 'Is this really you, Mary Devine, thinking and planning, and running Joy's house and all her interests, just like any ordinary sensible person?' I was a slacker and a dreamer for so long that I can hardly believe I'm doing real things successfully at last. I never did anything that needed thought and planning before. I typed letters and manuscripts, but that was routine work. And I saw that we had enough to eat and wear, though I often forgot to get Biddy's supper ready, and I always put off the thought of new clothes till the last possible moment, because it meant planning and thinking, and facing up to practical questions. I never did think if I could help it. You'll understand my astonishment at myself now!"

"I'm very proud of you," Jen said quietly. "If I don't see you for a while, you're to write that next book, or I'll be disappointed. And you have Nell Bell and Amy to see through their troubles."

"Mary!" she said, after a pause, "when we get home, I shan't think of anything but mother and daddy for the first few minutes. You'll understand that and forgive me, I know. But you'll stay? You won't think I don't want you, and go away home again? I shall want you badly as soon as I've talked to mother. I want to tell you what the trouble is. So don't run away, Mary-Dorothy. Wait till I'm able to talk to you! I want you to stay with us for a day or two, you know."

Mary thought the matter over, and then said definitely: "If you really wish it, I could stay one night. I must get home to-morrow. There are Mrs. Shirley and Joan to think of. But everybody will want to hear about you. So—one night, if you think you'll want me, Jenny-Wren! You won't need me, once you're with your mother."

"I shall *want* you, though!" and Jen lay close to her, and at last allowed her frightened thoughts to have their way, because she could no longer hold them back.

"It's one o'clock," she said restlessly, one time. "Isn't Ken a brick, driving on and on like this? Midsummer Day's over, and I feel as if all my summer might be over too. Things seem a bit wintry, Mary-Dorothy!"

"But summer always comes back. After the jolly summer you've had, you aren't going to be in despair at the thought of some wintry weather, Jenny-Wren?"

"N-n-no! That would be cowardly," Jen admitted. "I will buck up, Mary! It won't be so bad once we know what it is that's wrong."

"We're nearly there now. Let's have some coffee, and give some to our kind driver," Mary said practically, and called to Kenneth to stop for a few minutes for an early morning picnic.

Jen woke from a sleep of utter weariness some hours later, to find the car creeping along an unfenced white road that crossed wide brown moors. She sat up, pushing back her hair. "Have I been lying on you, Mary? How brutal! I'm three times your size. Why didn't you pinch me? There's the heather; we must be nearly home; and it's five o'clock, and bright

sunshine. Oh, there's the reservoir!" as a long shining lake came into view. "Yes, I know it doesn't look like one; but it is." She leaned forward to give directions to Kenneth, as they crept through an old gray village on a windswept ridge.

"Do you live in this wind, Jenny-Wren?" Mary talked to keep up Jen's spirits, for Jen had awakened to the thought that she would soon know the worst, and was white and tired and nervous. "How high up are we? We seem to have been climbing for an hour."

"Nine hundred feet. But the house is under the ridge, and a bit sheltered by trees," Jen was not thinking of houses and trees, however. "In here, Ken! This is the gate. Thank you, beyond all words! You've brought me home a day sooner than the train could have done. I'll never forget!"

As the car drew up before the big gray house, she sprang out and flew up the steps, to tug and tug at an iron handle, and to hammer with all her might on the great door. They would forgive her for startling them, when they saw who it was!

A frightened maid in a dressing-gown peeped out. "Eh, Miss Jen!"

But Jen was past her and away upstairs to her mother's room.

CHAPTER XIX

THE PLUCK OF JENNY-WREN

Mary went forward to speak to the maid, who was staring bewildered after Jen. "Miss Jen has asked me to wait till she has time to see me again. I'll come in, in just one moment," and she went back to the car to speak to Kenneth.

"What will you do? I'm sure Jen will want you to stay too. She'll be upset if you don't come in. She hadn't time to think, but she'll want you to have breakfast and a rest, Mr. Marchwood."

"I can get both in Sheffield," he assured her. "There's trouble here, Miss Mary. I'm not going to add to their work. Jen needs you, but I'm going to start for home at once. I want to get back; I've been away for two days, and there are things to do. I'll call at the Hall and tell them you are safely here."

"Tell them to expect me home to-morrow night," said Mary, as he carried in the suit-cases. "Are you quite sure——?"

"Quite! Give my love and very best wishes to Jenny-Wren!" he called, and re-started the car and rolled away.

Mary turned to the maid. "We've taken you by surprise, and you aren't ready for visitors. But we've been travelling all night. If you could show me some room where I can rest and wait till I'm wanted, I won't be in your way. Or could I wander about the garden?" for the sight of the quiet sunlit lawns was restful and attractive.

The girl led her to a small library, and opened the shutters and the glass door leading to the garden. Then she left her, with a soft-voiced apology, and ran upstairs to rouse the rest of the household.

Mary sank down thankfully on a couch, and lay resting and gazing out at the garden. But presently she rose and stepped out on to the dew-wet lawn, breathing deeply the wonderful tonic air of the moors.

"I've heard of this, but I never smelt or felt anything like it before!" and she wandered up and down gravel paths among beds of low bush roses, and at every turn found the garden bordered by a line of pines and firs, which broke the force of the gales and gave it its air of sheltered peace. The air was full of honey from the gorse and opening heather on the hills beyond, and there was a fresh bracing quality in it which uplifted Mary and made her forget the troubled night.

It also made her very hungry, and at sight of a blue-clad maid at the library window, she hurried back to the house, and rejoiced to see a table spread with eggs and butter and honey and coffee and farm-house bread.

"Miss Jen sent her love, miss, and said, would you excuse her a wee while, as she's with her father?" The soft North-country accent was fascinating to Mary.

"Please ask her not to trouble about me! Is Mr. Robins very ill?" Mary asked anxiously.

"I think he be pretty bad, miss," and the girl looked troubled. "If you'll ring when you're ready, miss, I'll show you your room."

She came back presently, and led Mary to a sunny bedroom upstairs. Mary thankfully lay down to rest, and fell asleep at once.

She was roused by a kiss, and found Jen bending over her. "I'm so glad you've had a nap! I feel such a pig for running off like that, Mary-Dorothy; but I knew I should think of nothing once I got home. Do tell me what became of Ken? I suppose the silly man thought he ought to go? And I wanted mother to see him! She's so grateful to him and you, for all you've done."

Mary, still only half awake, told how she had begged Kenneth to wait, and gave his message.

"I hope I'll see him again sometime," Jen said wistfully. "But it's more than likely I shan't, for I won't leave home again. And he'll go back to Africa. I think, perhaps, I shall miss him more than I thought. Mary, lunch will be ready in a few minutes; I came to warn you, and to have just a word with you. Afterwards, will you amuse yourself somehow? I'm going to talk to mother. Go in the garden, or for a walk on the moor; or go to sleep again. You and I will talk to-night. I wanted just to tell you this much now; but don't speak of it to mother! They've come home because the doctors can't do anything more for daddy. They've tried everything, and it's all failed. I didn't understand. There's nothing more to do, but—wait. You'll understand I couldn't be away from home for a single second now. I'm glad I came at once," and she fled.

Mary changed, and tidied her hair soberly, her heart heavy. It was indeed a grievous burden to which Jen had come home. How would she face it? What strength had her happy years given her for a time like this?

Mrs. Robins's greeting was quiet but full of gratitude. She had met Mary more than once in London, and they were able to talk of friends, of Joy's hurried wedding, of Joan's baby, of Jen's crowning, of the kindly help of Kenneth Marchwood, and to avoid successfully the deeper subject, which was uppermost in all their minds.

Full of thoughts of Jen, Mary wandered out alone through the garden on to the moor, and spent the afternoon among sandy tracks and cushions of brown heather, with the first purple bells showing in sheltered nooks. Tired still with the night's travelling, she sat in the sunshine on a springy bed of ling, at the highest point she could reach, and gazed in wonder at the wide spaces all around, the open brown moors sweeping up to high rolling uplands, among which Jen's life, apart from school, had been spent. So it was these great open stretches, with their wide views and distant horizons, and their wealth of wind and sunshine, of free health-giving air, which had gone to the making of Jenny-Wren! There was nothing cramped or shut in or small in Jen's home-country; was that why her nature was so generous, her heart so large and sunny, knowing nothing that was petty or mean or unhappy? Surely the constant sight of distance and space might have had their influence on a child growing up among them, Mary thought. As for the days of storm, they did not shake the moors; nothing moved those. When the storms were over and the sun shone again, they were there, as strong and generous as ever. And Mary believed Jen would have strength for the storm that had broken upon her now.

It was after tea that Jen slipped her arm round Mary's shoulders and drew her out into the garden. "Come and talk, Mary-Dorothy. Must you really go home to-morrow? I know we aren't doing anything for you, but you understand; you'll forgive that. It's jolly to feel you're here. Couldn't you stay for a few days?"

"I don't want things done for me; not here," Mary said quickly. "I'd be perfectly content to stay for a week and spend every moment out on your moor. I never saw a moor before; I've always longed to. I love the feeling of space, and the wind, and the loneliness; and the stretch of sky; and the distant hills. If you tried to entertain me, I'd feel you were wasting time I might be spending more profitably out there."

"I'm glad you like it. I love it. But then I've had it always; for even when I'm down south, this is in the background, as home," Jen said wistfully. "Can't you stay, Mary-Dorothy? I like to feel you're here."

"You must know how I feel when you say that," Mary said, deep feeling in her voice. "But I'm needed at home, and you've got your mother. How about it, Jenny-Wren?"

Jen pushed her into a garden seat, and dropped on the grass beside her, and buried her face in Mary's lap.

Mary's arms went round her tightly, and for a long moment Jen was silent, breathing deeply, as she fought for self-control. Then she spoke quietly.

"Mother's wonderful. We had a great talk this afternoon. I never quite understood her before, though I was always very fond of her. She didn't seem to sympathise in things that mattered a lot to me, or to understand how I felt. But I suppose I was childish and silly. When it's things that matter, she's wonderful; and so brave. I suppose mothers often are wonderful! She's been afraid, for quite a while, that this would be the end of all her trying; that the doctors were losing hope. She's struggled so hard to save daddy, and done everything they could think of. She wouldn't tell me; and she wouldn't have me with them in Paris, because she knew it would be decided there. Paris was the last hope; if that failed, there was nothing more to do. So she let me go to the Abbey and be happy with you all; and bore it all without me. But once they were home, knowing there was no more hope, they wanted me; and they're grateful beyond all words to you and Ken for bringing me so quickly. Mother knew I'd come, but she thought to-night was the earliest possible moment; she nearly cried, and held on to me so tightly, when she found she'd got me before breakfast. Mary, I feel mother's going to need me badly for the next few months."

"You won't fail her, Jenny-Wren," Mary said pitifully.

"I hope not. But fancy my being any use! It's what you said; she's stood it all alone so far, but now she needs me to help her. Alison, from Glasgow, is a dear, but not her own daughter, you know."

"No, she wants you. How is your father, Brownie?"

"Call me that sometimes still. I like it. It will always remind me of this happy summer, before I knew what was coming," Jen said wistfully. "Daddy's just a wonder, Mary-Dorothy. He knows, of course; he said at once, 'So you've come to say good-bye, Jenny-Wren.' We're all facing up to it; I'm so glad of that. It would be awful if they couldn't bear to think of it, and we all knew and let it haunt us in the background, but no one dared to speak of it!"

"Oh, I'm sure it's wiser, and braver, to face it!" Mary said quickly.

"Yes. For it's quite certain; it's just a question of time," Jen caught her breath, and her head dropped in Mary's lap again for a moment. But presently she went on steadily: "I've hardly had time to get used to it yet. Don't think I'm a baby! I'm going to be brave too, but I've only known for such a little while. Daddy wishes he could go at once, because it will be dreadful for mother and me to have it hanging over us, he thinks. But he doesn't want to leave us. We talked about it quite quietly; he's not a scrap afraid. He's as sure as anything that he's going to something better, and he's very tired; he's had a very bad time lately. I never heard any one talk in such a quietly certain way about what dying means. It's just as if he *knew*."

"That's a wonderful thing. You must be very thankful for that, Brownie!"

"I am; it's the greatest possible comfort. If he were afraid, it would be a hundred times worse. He's only sorry to go away from us. But I want time to think it over; his certain way of speaking has rather stunned me. Of course, I've had no experience; everything's been jolly

and happy all my life. They thought I was going to die once; but I knew nothing about it. It certainly didn't worry *me*; it was very bad for them! I thought people said vaguely, 'We must have faith,' and indefinite things like that. But daddy looks straight ahead and says he isn't at all afraid; and you can see it's true. It will be a little while before I can quite take in what that means."

"You will, though," Mary found a strange feeling growing in her that this which had happened to Jen was not all unhappy; it might have been tragedy, but it seemed likely to be lifted from that to a higher plane by the attitude of her parents. She began to be deeply thankful that Jen's parents were what they were.

"Afterwards I talked to mother about daddy," Jen went on quietly. "She made me see that we've got to help him by not being unhappy either. In some ways it's harder for us; if he's so sure he's going to something very good, he can look forward happily. But we're going to lose him. Mother says it's up to us not to cloud his last months with thoughts of our loneliness. We've got to make him forget that, and make things as easy for him as we can. I said—like Joy's wedding; I told the children we mustn't be miserable about losing her because it would spoil her happiness. And mother said—exactly; because we loved Joy we put our own feelings away; and now we've got to do the same for daddy. I'm glad she put it that way. It makes a definite thing to do for him, and that's what I want just now. By the way, you might send me my pipe when you get home. I didn't bring it; I thought I wouldn't want it here. But he loves it; he said, 'You'll pipe to me, Jenny-Wren?' It's a real thing I can do for him. He loves tunes and old music. He wants me to sing too. It won't be easy, but I'll do it."

Mary's arms tightened round her. "That's plucky, Jenny-Wren! What a joy you'll be to him!"

"I wish I thought so. I shall try, of course. I was very wicked, Mary! I said to mother that it was cruel of God to have let this happen; that daddy had always been so good; why should it happen to him?"

"Yes," Mary whispered. "But you had to ask that, Jenny-Wren, or you wouldn't have been human. What did your mother say?"

"That there were times when even the cleverest little child couldn't understand its grown-up father; but it didn't turn round and say he was unkind, if it had any sense at all. It remembered all the years and years he had been very kind; and it said, 'I'll wait, and later on I shall understand.' And that there are times when we have to wait; we can't expect always to know the reason for everything. But we've got to remember the happy years, and trust that there's a good reason for everything, because of them. And it's true; we have had happy years. It isn't fair, the minute things aren't just as we like, to turn round and say, 'Unkind! Cruel!' It isn't playing the game, Mary."

"No," Mary said quietly. "I like your mother's way of putting it. You'll think that over, too, Brownie? Let it soak in and become part of you!"

"I shall. I'm not going to grumble. But it isn't easy, Mary-Dorothy."

"Tell me one thing!" and Mary voiced a fear that was in her heart. "Does he have pain, Jenny-Wren? That's the worst of all."

"A little. They—they think it may get worse," and Jen hid her face again. "If that happens, he says we're to have a nurse. Mother says she won't, but he says she must. She wants to do everything, but he won't let her. He says if she tries she'll break down, and then it will all come on me, and he won't have that. But we haven't got to decide that yet."

“He’s right, though,” said Mary quickly. “You must help him to persuade her. I’d like to stay, Jenny-Wren, but it’s far better I shouldn’t. You have all the help you need, with a father and mother like these. You want to get to know your mother more and more. I should only be in the way. I’ll go to-morrow; but I’ll write often, and you must write too. And if you think of anything we can do, you’ll tell us at once, of course.”

“I’d like to have one of the girls to stay,” Jen said wistfully. “But I fancy it will be better not.”

“I’m sure you’ll find it will be better not,” Mary agreed.

She left next morning, laden with messages for everybody and with thanks from Mr. and Mrs. Robins. Jen, in the car, took her to Sheffield, and put her into the London train, and kept up a brave face and cheery talk till the last moment, when she closed the carriage door hastily, kissed Mary through the window, and fairly ran to bury herself in the car.

“She’s got all the pluck she needs,” Mary said pitifully to herself, as the train started. “But she’ll need all she’s got; poor Brownie! She’ll have a hard time for the next few months; I hope it won’t be too long. But her mother is going to help her,” and she did not open books or papers, but sat thinking of Jen all the way to town.

CHAPTER XX

KENNETH MAKES GOOD

“We can’t hope to have Brownie back, that’s evident. So what are we going to do about it? The Queen, I mean?” Nesta asked.

Rosamund had called a meeting of the Hamlet Club after school, to give Mary’s report of Jen and to make plans for the future. She had sent Maidlin home in the car with Mary, who had been in town, shopping, and seeing Amy Prittle; and Maidie, though a member of the Club, had made no objection and had not even asked questions. It was evident she did not care very much who was chosen to be Queen in Jen’s place.

“We’d better have another Queen,” said Molly Gilks. “It’s only July; there’s almost the whole year yet. It’s quite worth while choosing some one else.”

“Well, who?” Rosamund demanded.

“Couldn’t you carry on, Ros?” asked Barbara Honor, the Queen who had crowned Rosamund. “Perhaps Brownie will come back. A year’s a long time; anything may happen. If her father dies, she’ll want to go somewhere, and she’s most likely to come to you at the Hall. We don’t want to put anybody in her place. It was so topping to have her for Queen!”

Rosamund knit her brows. “I could, of course, as I did at the beginning of term. But wouldn’t you all rather have a real Queen?”

“Who is there we could have?” “Stripes” asked doubtfully. “There doesn’t seem any one suitable.”

“Maidlin is Rosamund’s maid. We’ve often chosen one of the Maids of Honour,” Barbara began.

“Oh, not Maidlin!” Nesta said ruthlessly; then glanced round hastily.

“It’s all right. I sent her home. I knew you’d want to discuss her,” Rosamund said briefly. “She doesn’t want to be Queen, by the way. Don’t think she’ll be disappointed. She’s sure she wouldn’t be good enough. She’d be scared if you asked her.”

“I agree with her,” Molly said bluntly. “She wouldn’t be good enough. She couldn’t rise to the job, Ros.”

“That’s what I think,” Rosamund assented. “At one time I thought she would. She seemed to be quite all right,” her vocabulary was limited on points like this. “But lately—I don’t know! She seems so dreamy sometimes. I’m sure she wouldn’t make a good Queen. The very idea would scare her stiff.”

“You’ve said just what I feel,” Nesta said eagerly. “I’ve nothing against the kid, but she is dreamy, and she does moon about. We want a Queen who’s all there!”

“Maidie couldn’t do it,” Molly said decisively. “She’ll have to wake up a lot before she’ll be ready to be Queen.”

“You’d better carry on, Ros,” Barbara said again. “Girls, I propose that the Rose Queen be asked to act for Brownie *pro tem*!”

The suggestion was acclaimed unanimously, and the matter was settled. “The Club likes you, Rose-of-the-World,” Nesta said, as they went to fetch their cycles. “They always did; but you’ve got more hold over them lately. I don’t know how you’ve done it, but I’ve heard them talking; and if they can’t have Brownie, they’d rather have you than any one else. You’re more reliable than you used to be, and not quite such a giddy goat. And they like you better.”

“Perhaps it’s with living so long at the Hall. She’s picked up some of their niceness,” said Barbara. “All the Queens from the Abbey have been jolly.”

Rosamund listened, and knit her brows again. “I don’t know anything about that; but I’ll do the best I can,” she said; and from a feeling of loyalty to Maidlin, did not repeat even to Mary, nor in any letter to Jen or Joy, the criticism that had been expressed.

Kenneth Marchwood came to have a long talk with Mary as soon as he heard she was home again. He came to the point without any loss of time.

“Can I go to see Jen, Miss Mary? You know how I feel. She’s in trouble, and I want to go to her. But she has her own people. Is there any room for me? Or shall I only worry her? Is there anything I can do?”

For a moment Mary had a wild desire to run away. How was she to give advice on love affairs, she who had dreamt of knights and heroes but had never known love in real life? All her love story had been in dreams. What if she said the wrong thing, and ruined Jen’s happiness?

True to her habit, she would have shirked the crisis, if she could. But to shirk often meant to lose chances of helping; she had realised that at last.

She pulled herself together, and answered thoughtfully: “I should go to see her, but not too soon. Give her a little while to get over the shock; two or three weeks, at least. By that time she’ll be used to the new ideas she’s had to face, and she may begin to feel a little lonely. You ought to go, Mr. Marchwood, because her parents have the right to know what you feel for her. Her father will want to see you, if he is able. I didn’t see him, but he might make an effort to see you. Jen is well enough provided for as regards money, but she may be very lonely presently, for her mother is not strong and has had a very severe strain on her for months. It would be the greatest comfort to Mr. and Mrs. Robins to know Jen has found some one to love and care for her.”

“But if she doesn’t want me?” he put in abruptly. “You know,” ruefully, “she likes to play cricket with me!”

Mary’s face softened. “Jen is growing up. We all have to, whether we like it or not. If we don’t, we miss the best of life. Isn’t it possible, as she awakens to the serious things, she may discover the happier ones, too?”

“You think it was only that?” he asked eagerly. “Merely that she was still a child; not any prejudice against myself that I have to overcome?”

Mary laughed at the idea. “She likes you. She says she’s going to miss you more than she thought. Yes, she said it! But she was unawakened. In her heart she knew it; I’m sure of that; and she was trying not to wake. She wanted to be care free for ever; to play cricket and pipe and dance. But she’ll find now there are bigger and happier things. She’ll still pipe and dance and play, because she’s Jenny-Wren; but those things won’t be the whole of life. Mr. Marchwood, give her time to adjust herself to the new conditions; she’s had a shock and she’s a little stunned. But I’m sure she’s coming through all right. You’ll find her changed in some ways, but you’ll love her all the better for it. Go presently and see how she welcomes you, and act accordingly. You’ll probably find her ready to go walking on the moor with you; she won’t want cricket at present. But cricket would be very good for her; get her to play, if you can! Nursing is wearing, and to see her father suffer will hurt her badly. Don’t tease her with talk of herself or the future. She isn’t thinking about herself. But teach her to feel she likes to have you there, to turn to you when her mother doesn’t need her. The rest will come later. And tell her parents what you feel for her. It will help them all.”

“Thank you a thousand times!” he said gratefully. “That’s real help, and I’ll act on every word of it.”

“You know how heartily I wish you every happiness and success,” Mary assured him warmly.

His opportunity came ten days later, when a letter came from Jen, begging Mary to pack and post her brown and yellow Queen’s train. “Daddy knows all about ‘Brownie,’ and often calls me that. He wants to see how I look dressed up. Of course, they have the big photograph that is always sent to the Queen’s mother; but he wants to see the colours.”

So Mary ’phoned to Kenneth, and packed up the robe and train, with a box of Abbey wallflowers, and Kenneth carried them home to Jen, rejoicing in the service.

After that, his visits were frequent, and he made nothing of the very early start and the very late return, for the sake of an afternoon on the moors with Jen. At first her father welcomed him, because with his escort Jen could go for longer tramps than was wise alone in that lonely country, and both he and her mother felt the importance of change and exercise and interest for her in this difficult time. When Mr. Robins understood, after an earnest talk with Kenneth, one day when he felt stronger than usual, the welcome was heartier still, and Ken was always greeted warmly when he arrived, unexpectedly or by arrangement.

On one never-to-be-forgotten day, he appeared with Ros and Maidie in the car, and they saw the heather in its purple autumn glory, and spent one happy night with “Brownie.” More than once Mary made the journey, staying only one night, but able in that time to give Jen more detailed news and more cheer and comfort than in many letters.

On one such visit late in October, when the Abbey trees were ablaze with bronze and russet and yellow, and the moors were draped in the old gold of dying bracken and the rich velvet brown of withered heather, Jen met Mary at the station; for by Jen’s request, this time she had come by train.

As they drove home in the car, Jen took off her gloves to untie the knot on a parcel Rosamund had sent.

Mary gave a little cry. “Brownie! Oh, I am so glad!”

Jen bent over the parcel. “What? Oh, that ring? It’s Ken’s. He seemed to want to put it there— Oh, *Mary!*”

“He’s been such a dear,” she explained later. “And daddy and mother like him so much. But I like him a little better even than they do! I had to send for you, Mary-Dorothy. I couldn’t write about it. I wanted to talk about him! And I knew you’d like to. You must tell the others for me.”

So next day Mary carried that happy news home to the Abbey.

“Then Jen will be Joy’s sister!” Rosamund exulted. “She’ll really belong to us at last! I do hope Ken won’t take her away to Africa!”

“She’ll go if he asks her to. I’m sure of that,” Mary said.

CHAPTER XXI

JEN COMES BACK TO THE ABBEY

“Ros! Maidie! Come and hear!” cried Mary, at the door of her green study, one November morning. “Here’s a letter from Jen. She’s coming back to us at last!”

Jen wrote briefly:—

“DEAR MARY-DOROTHY,—Daddy left us last week. Mother says I’m to go away for a while. She’s going to Glasgow, to be with the family there, but she thinks I ought to go somewhere else, as we’ve been so much together for the last few months. And she knows I’d rather be with you than anywhere else. She’d rather I came to you, too. So will you have me at the Abbey for a while? I shall love to be with you all again. Ken will run me down to-morrow, if it’s quite convenient.

“With all best love to everybody,

“From your Brownie,
“JENNY-WREN.”

“You’ll wire, Mary?” Rosamund cried eagerly. “And I’ll ring up the Manor; though, of course, Jen’s sure to have written to them. I do hope she won’t want to go off with Ken into corners all the time! Do you suppose she’ll be as bad as Joy was when she was engaged?”

“Jen’s had time to get used to being engaged,” Mary reminded her. “And she’s very different from Joy. I don’t think you need worry. If she’s changed, it won’t be because of her engagement.”

Jen arrived next evening, to their great joy. She dismissed Kenneth at the door, bidding him come back in the morning to take her to see his mother; and allowed Rosamund and Maidlin and Mary to drag her in to the warmth and welcome of the fire-lit hall.

Rosamund pushed her gently into a big chair. “You must be nearly dead. You poor dear, aren’t you glad to get back to us again? Not half as glad as we are to have you, though,” and she pulled off Jen’s little hat. “You haven’t let your hair grow; oh, cheers! I was afraid you’d come back with a big fat knob on your head, and not look like our Brownie any more. I’m so glad you’re not any different,” and she patted the waving curls.

Maidlin unfastened Jen’s gloves. “Let us see your ring, Jenny-Wren! Is it diamonds? Nothing else is good enough for you.”

“I wouldn’t have them. Ken wanted me to. Diamonds are cold and brilliant; I wanted something with colour, warm and beautiful,” and Jen showed an opal ring. “Did you ever see anything more lovely? Look how it changes! It’s never the same for two minutes. There’s fire in it; and blue sky; and trees; and gold; and the sea. I love it!”

“But—Jen! Opals?” Rosamund remonstrated.

Jen laughed. “They’re beautiful. And I’m not superstitious one scrap. If they did bring bad luck, the love they were given with would outweigh it. Don’t be a silly babe, Rose-of-the-World!”

Mary was unbuttoning Jen’s big coat. “You must be starving. Come and have something to eat. You’re going to be taken care of now, Jenny-Wren.”

“I shall love it!” Jen said warmly.

As they led her in to dinner, their eyes were on her curiously, for she wore the patterned blue and amethyst handwoven dress in which she had gone away. She saw their look, and presently said quietly, "Daddy hated black and made me promise not to wear it. I hate it too; not black itself, but the idea of wearing mourning to advertise one's feelings. If he'd wanted me to wear it, I'd have done it, as being the last thing I could do for him—except, of course, looking after mother for him. But I know how he hated it. I don't care if people think I'm queer. Mother said I could do as I liked, but for herself she hadn't the heart to wear colours and she doesn't suppose she ever will again. I don't feel like that at all. It was far better for daddy that he should go; and he came to want it so badly. The time to wear mourning was last summer, not now."

"I'm awfully glad," Rosamund said warmly. "I hated the thought of you in black—as a sign of mourning, I mean. Of course, you'd look topping in it."

Mary had been watching Jen closely. Now she said with decision: "I shall ring up the Manor to-night, and tell Mr. Marchwood not to come here till to-morrow afternoon. You must go to see his mother, of course; but you're going to have a long morning in bed first, Jenny-Wren. You're to take things quietly for a few days."

"I am tired," Jen admitted. "Things haven't been easy lately. But I'm going to have a good rest now that I've come back here. It is jolly to be with you all again!"

"I'm coming into your brown room, just for ten minutes before I go to bed, Mary-Dorothy," she said, when Rosamund and Maidlin had gone off reluctantly at last.

"I hoped you would. I've something waiting for you there," and Mary turned away, a touch of colour in her face.

"Did you have a very bad time, Jenny-Wren?" she asked, as Jen settled down before the little gas-fire with a sigh of content.

Jen took the cup of coffee offered to her. "How often I've dreamt of being here again! It is jolly! Yes, dear; it was very bad. We had a nurse for the last few weeks, as I told you in my letters. It was better for everybody; daddy kept being afraid he was being a trouble to us. We were glad when he went; he was so very tired, and so eager for his 'something better.' He often spoke of it."

"We wished we could help you, Brownie."

"Oh, but you did! Your letters did. I had a lovely letter from Joy, written as soon as she heard—from you, I suppose—how serious his illness was. And Ken helped; and of course, mother. And I had to help her, and that helped me. And I had a dream that helped, Mary."

"A dream! How did it help?" Mary asked curiously.

"It was only a bit of a dream, but I couldn't forget it. I was walking along a road, enjoying myself and quite happy. And daddy was walking along the same road, but on a higher level; you know how our hill roads sometimes double back on themselves and run parallel, but a lot higher up? He was on the upper level, and I on the lower one. I couldn't see the curve, where his road and mine joined, but I knew, as one does in a dream, that it was the same road, and that in time I should go along where he was now; I hadn't any doubt of that. And—this was the strongest impression left with me—I wasn't worried because he was farther on than I was; I wasn't trying to catch him up, or fussing, or wishing I could talk to him. It was all quite all right, and we were both going happily along our bits of road, knowing quite certainly that we'd meet again at the proper time. That was all; but it was quite vivid. It seemed to mean such a lot that I felt ever so much happier. I asked mother if she thought it could be right to get

help on such a point from a dream; and she said why not? People did in the Bible. So I think, perhaps, the dream was sent to make me happier about him; it did it, anyway.”

“I’m glad,” Mary said soberly, sitting on the floor and nursing her cup. “I’m sure it was meant to be a message.”

“I want to know,” and Jen changed the subject abruptly, “if your new story’s finished, and if you’re going to let me read it, Mary?”

Mary flushed and laughed. “I wish you would. I want criticism. It’s just finished. And—oh, Jenny-Wren! I must tell you! You remember Nell Bell?”

“The girl with the dream husband and family? Yes?”

“She had the offer of a post with her old firm, and she wouldn’t take it. She says she’ll never leave our babies’ home, and she’s happier than she has ever been. She’s ever so much stronger, and almost pretty, with beautiful colour where she used to be so pasty, and a glow in her eyes, when she looks at the babies, that lights up her whole face. One day I asked her if she liked real babies or dream ones best, and she simply laughed; and then she told me that she never builds castles in the air now, and she’s forgetting all about those day-dreams, because she hasn’t time for them; there’s far too much to do!”

“Cheers! Oh, Mary-Dorothy, you’ve saved one girl! And I expect there are others. What about the silly one—Amy?”

“Oh, Amy! She’s in France with Biddy.”

“Mary! How ever did you manage that? But I thought she’d got a craze for you?”

“Biddy wrote begging me to find some girl who would be willing to go abroad, as they were enlarging the business—she rather implied it was because she had joined the firm!—and they wanted an English book-keeper; because Biddy had been such a success, you understand! I had a talk with Amy, and showed her what a good job it would be for her; and then I asked her definitely to take it on, because I would be so much easier about Biddy if she were there. It was true; there are girls and girls, and it mattered a lot to me what kind of girl went out to join Biddy. They’ll be together a lot; and there are girls who wouldn’t do Biddy any good; she’s only seventeen, after all. But Amy won’t do her any harm; and Biddy’s so matter-of-fact that she may do Amy a lot of good. Amy’s too sentimental. And Amy went; I didn’t really think she’d have the backbone to do it, but she did.”

“Because you’d asked her to. She wanted to do something for you; and you’ve found, and given her, the job that will be the making of her, as you did with Nell Bell. You’ve done a wonderful thing for each of those girls, and I love you for it, Mary-Dorothy.”

“It just happened,” Mary said quickly, colouring under the praise. “It was just a bit of luck that Biddy’s letter came; and that I thought of asking Amy. And it was just good luck that we had room for Nell as a nurse, and I could really say we needed her.”

Jen swept this aside. “Good luck! Good luck’s always there for those who look for it. You had your eyes open for ways to help those girls, and so you found your chances. You, who used to see nothing at all, Mary-Dorothy! I tell you, I’m proud of you!”

“I don’t feel you’ve much reason to be. But this is what I promised you, Jenny-Wren!” And flushing again, Mary handed her a parcel. “It was made up ready to post to you, when your letter came yesterday.”

Jen gave the little cry of joy with which, as a child, she had been wont to greet her friends, and seized it. “Oh, Mary! Is it——? Oh, I can’t wait to open it!” and she tore the paper across, and hugged Mary’s first book to her breast.

“The first copy had to be for you,” Mary stood looking down at her happily. “I’m glad it didn’t come a week ago, when you couldn’t have looked at it.”

“I *am* proud!” Jen had found the dedication and was feasting her eyes on it greedily. “‘To my fairy godmother, Jen.’ Have I really been that to you, Mary? What are the pictures like? Who drew them? What kind of cover have they given it? I like the print. I say, what a fat book it makes! Aren’t you simply bursting with pride?”

“I feel rather happy about it,” Mary acknowledged laughing.

“I guess you do! *I’m* bursting with pride! I shall be so haughty that Ken will wonder what’s the matter. Next time he wants to kiss me, I shall say, ‘Just remember that I’ve had a great fat book dedicated to me! I’m fairy godmother to an authoress!’ He’ll have to treat me with proper respect. I must make him realise my importance now. Mary, it does look nice!”

“It’s not so bad,” Mary admitted, gazing at her firstborn with adoring eyes.

“I’m going to take it to bed with me and read it all through straight away. It looks quite different in print,” Jen exulted. “Oh, that’s the chapter I nearly cried over. And here’s the funny bit; one of them.”

“Biddy hasn’t seen it yet. I haven’t shown it to any one outside the house. But if you read it to-night I shall be sorry I showed it to you,” Mary said severely.

“Well, may I have it beside my bed?” Jen pleaded. “I want to feel it’s there.”

“You baby!”

“Yes, I know. But I’m going to order a dozen copies and give them away; and perhaps another dozen, and another. I’ll soon send your sales up!”

“Go to bed, and don’t talk rubbish, Jenny-Wren!”

“I want the new one too. I shan’t give you any peace till I get it,” Jen warned her, standing with the new book clasped lovingly in her arms. “And you’ll please to treat me with due regard to my new importance! A dedication *and* an engagement-ring! I’m two feet taller than when I was here before!”

“Please don’t grow any more! It’s getting serious,” Mary told her laughing, as she drove her off to bed.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PROBLEM OF MAIDIE

“Mary!” There was a sharp strange note in Jen’s voice, as she closed the door of the green study behind her, a few days later, and stood gazing at Mary, who sat writing by the table.

Mary looked up in dismay at her tone and at the omission of the usual “Dorothy.” “What’s the matter? Why, Brownie, is there something wrong?”

“Maidie. Haven’t you seen? How could you and Rosamund be so blind?”

Mary rose, staring at her. “Jen, what’s wrong with Maidie? How have I failed?” her voice was tragic.

“Of course you’ve been with her all along,” Jen conceded. “You couldn’t possibly see it as I can, coming fresh to her after all these months. It’s always outsiders who see changes most plainly. I’m not blaming you, Mary; don’t look so scared. But it’s happened under your very eyes; that’s why you haven’t seen it, of course. You saw it at once in Nell Bell, but then you came fresh to her.”

“Nell Bell?” Mary said, stunned by the suddenness of this attack. “Jen, I don’t understand! Nell Bell, and Maidie? How do you mean?”

Jen came to the table, and faced her across it. “Mary, that child has drifted into dreams, a whole inner life of dreams, before your eyes. She’s built up a complete castle of romance, and she lives in it night and day; and her real life is suffering at every point. You know how quiet she is, and how different from what she used to be? Wait a moment. I noticed it, because I’m a new-comer; I saw how she sat and stared straight in front of her, instead of doing her prep., until Ros poked her up. I saw how Ros has to be shoving her, making her get a move on, all the time. Ros is a little brick, and she’s done it for months faithfully, trying to keep Maidie up to the mark; but Ros doesn’t know how deep the trouble lies. She’s normal and sensible, like your Biddy. She could never understand this thing and the danger of it. You couldn’t explain it to her; she’d be bewildered, or more likely she’d think you were making it up. But you and I know. Of course, it isn’t half so serious in a kid of Maidie’s age; they always dream; it’s natural. But they don’t do it to the extent Maidie does; and it mustn’t go on. We’ve got to get her out of it, and quickly, you and I.”

Mary stood with bent head, her whole bearing showing that she had received a blow. “Are you sure? Isn’t it just natural girl-dreaminess?”

“I thought so at first. But I asked Ros why Maidie hadn’t been chosen to follow me as May Queen; as a Maid of Honour, she was one of the obvious candidates. Ros—bless her!—said casually that the Club thought Maidie would be too dreamy, and said they wanted a Queen who was *all there!*”

“Rosamund never told me that,” Mary put in quickly.

“She’d feel it was like criticising Maidie, at the time. She’s got over it now, and told me without thinking twice about it,” Jen said, with instant understanding. “I asked her about Maidie’s work, and her place in class, feeling more and more sure there was something really wrong. Ros looked worried at once, and owned both were bad; said she had tried desperately hard, but Maidie wouldn’t work. Ros thinks she can’t, beyond a certain point; that the farm-child side of her is hindering the educated side—you know poor Maidie’s theory that she’s really two people, and they’re at war inside her! I don’t believe for a moment that she’s

incapable of good work; but Ros does, and has given up in despair, after doing her best to make Maidie stick to it and go ahead. I felt there might be another explanation; I'm convinced Maidie's brain is keen enough, if she'll only apply it. So I followed her into the Abbey, and tackled her alone."

"Yes?" Mary questioned anxiously. "I *have* failed Joy, after all! And I've tried so hard. But, try as I will, I'm blind on some sides still. I can't see all round. Even now, I'm not wide awake as you are. It's a result of my own wasted years; though I try and try, things escape me, and I find I've missed chances, and never seen plain duties, and been blind to obvious facts. I just don't see. Joy oughtn't to have trusted me. But that I should fail with Maidie!"

Jen put her arm round her and drew her down on the window-seat. "Don't be daft, old thing! You've done wonders. You couldn't do everything. We'll soon put this right. But I must tell you about the kid. She was sitting in the pulpit in the refectory, where Joy found her once before; she likes Joy's rose window best, she says, but it's too cold in winter. I got her talking about Joy; it's the only subject that will unlock Maidie's heart and open the oyster! She was ready enough to tell me, so long as she might talk about Joy; she hasn't the shadow of an idea there's anything wrong in it. When Joy went, she told Maidie to think of the time when she'd come back. Maidie has built up a whole castle of dreams, of which the centre is Joy, here again with us. All day, and in bed at night, she dreams of Joy—what they'll do together; what Joy will look like; what she'll say and wear: every tiniest detail is planned out. Probably when Joy does come, poor Maidie will be so shy that she'll run and hide. But for the time being, she's happy in dreaming about it; and her work and health are suffering. Her mind's standing still; she isn't growing. She's sixteen; she ought to be developing in every way; but she's just where she was last May. If she could have been Queen, she'd have had to come out of her shell and live in earnest, do real things for other girls, use her mind to think and plan and organise. It's a thousand pities they didn't insist on having her! As it is, nobody's asking any effort of her, except just to do her prep., and she shirks that. I tell you, she's gone back instead of forward in the last six months. And she isn't well; she gets out of games and gym. and dancing whenever she can, Ros says, and is looked on as a slacker at school. Of course she shirks them; from her point of view they're waste of time. She'll be pasty and delicate and anæmic, like Nelly Bell was, in a few months more. Her eyes have lost their brightness and are dull with dreams; her hair's heavy, and she's pale. I'm going to put a stop to it, Mary; it's gone on long enough."

Mary looked up, hope in her face. "I have failed! But can we put it right? Can you see what to do? Could we ask the Pixie's advice?"

"We could," Jen frowned at a green bowl filled with tawny autumn leaves. "But can't we solve the problem for ourselves? Isn't it time we stopped running to the Pixie in every difficulty, and stood on our own feet? We know she'd help; I'll love to tell her about it afterwards. But I'd be better pleased if we could see it through for ourselves. Perhaps I've grown up a little since last summer! I feel like facing up to my own difficulties. And you've been solving problems; you've been ripping about Nell Bell and Amy Prittle. Can't you and I see Maidie through? Then we'll go and tell the Little One all about it."

Mary's eyes kindled. "But can we?" she asked doubtfully.

"Don't be so—so beastly humble! Have a decent opinion of yourself!" Jen exploded.

"I haven't any now," Mary put in hurriedly. "Perhaps I was beginning to have, but I've lost it again."

"Rot! Don't be a goose! Now, how did you help Nell Bell? How did I help you?"

"You taught me to use my dreams in real life," Mary said at once. "I thought that out long ago. I dreamt romances; you bullied me till I began to write—not my old dreams, but new healthier stories."

"To use your dreams. Yes!" Jen nodded. "You've hit it. And Nell Bell dreamt of a home and family, and you gave her a much bigger home and heaps of babies. Using her dreams again; in you, your imagination; in Nell Bell, her mother-feeling. And Amy dreamt of hanging round you in a soft sentimental way; you sent her to France to keep an eye on Biddy for you. Mary-Dorothy, you've got hold of the secret. To use the dreams, to make them practical and bring them into everyday life, but in a healthier form. We've got it! We don't need the Pixie; cheers! We *can* think things out for ourselves! Now how about Maidie?"

They gazed at one another, both thrilled with the spirit of explorers in sight of an undiscovered country, or scientists on the eve of the solution of a problem.

"She dreams of Joy," Mary ventured.

"Of course, it will right itself when Joy comes home; at least, I hope so! But I'd rather pull Maidie up now, and have her more her real self before Joy sees her. And perhaps, if we let her dream too long, she'll have got the habit of it, and when Joy comes, the dreams will simply change their subject. I'm sure it would be better to wake Maidie up," Jen pondered the matter slowly.

"Could we help her to do something for Joy?" Mary asked hopefully.

"Yes, that's right. But what? It must be something definite. . . . Joy's keen about Maidie's French; but that's nothing new. Couldn't we find something new to interest Maidie; something for Joy? Joy—Maidie—French? Is there nothing else? Joy; what does Joy care most about? Andrew? The Hall? The Abbey? Music? Mary, what about music? Mary!" with a little cry of joy. "Maidie's voice!"

Mary gazed at her, bewildered. "Her voice?"

"Joy's sure Maidie will have a voice, but she's been waiting till Maidie was a little older, before beginning to train it. Maidie loves music; she always loved to hear Joy play. If we could interest her and get her to make a start, she could sing to Joy and Joy could play for her, when she comes home. We want to help Maidie to put her singing, for Joy's sake, into the place she's been giving to Joy in her dreams; don't you see, Mary-Dorothy? She'll want a centre for her dreams still; but it must be something she can express, something active, to do for Joy; not mere idle thinking of what she'll do when she has Joy with her again," Jen's voice was excited and triumphant.

"I'm sure you're right," Mary said eagerly. "How will you set about it?"

"Tell Maidie frankly it's time she began to think about a surprise for Joy. Joy's sure to come home by Easter; you know what she told me in her last letter!" and Jen's eyes lit up. "She'll want to come home now. Maidie ought to start at once. She won't need any persuading; she'll be keen enough. I shall see Miriam and get the address of the singing-master she's been going to since her marriage. She always had a beautiful voice, but it was untrained; but her husband made her go for lessons, and it's ten times better now. Her master lives in Oxford; we'll arrange for Maidie to go there in the car. She must have really good training from the first; and I know this man's very good. Maidie's too young yet to do much, but she can begin, and the breathing exercises will be as good for her as the new interest. Mary, I do believe we've solved this problem too!"

Mary's face was much happier, in its relief. "I really believe you have, Jenny-Wren. I'll be more grateful than anybody if you can undo the harm my carelessness has done."

“I shall begin throwing things at you again in a minute,” Jen observed. “And *now*, having solved the problem, I want to go up to town to tell the Pixie and ask her if we’re right. I want to be congratulated on our brilliant idea! Mary-Dorothy! You’re going to have a holiday. You’re going to town for a day. I’m going to give Ros and Maidie a treat, to celebrate my return. And my engagement, too! Ken shall take us all to town,” and she whirled away, to ’phone to the Manor and then ring up the Pixie, and to break the news to the girls.

“We aren’t so very grown up, after all!” Mary said laughing.

“Ros! Maidie! Which day could you best spare from school? To-morrow? The next day? I’m sure you deserve a holiday. We’re all going to town with Ken, to celebrate our engagement. He’s going to take us out to lunch, and then take you two to a matinée or the pictures, while Mary and I do some shopping. Then you’ll meet us, and we’ll take the Pixie out to tea. We must go to see her, for—I’ll tell you a secret—I’m going to treat each of you to a handwoven frock as a Christmas gift. It’s months since I spent any money, and I’m rich. And it’s time Ros, at least, had a more grown-up frock. Rose-of-the-World, I don’t say you’ve got to put those plaits up over your ears for a few months yet; but you’re seventeen, and you’ll soon have to. So you’d better have a really beautiful frock to fit the occasion.”

“Of course you know it’s the dream of my life to have one of the Pixie’s lovely dresses, Brownie,” Rosamund said breathlessly. “But I don’t feel you ought to give me one.”

“As a little token of my affection and esteem, my dear! And Maidie will want one to swank in when Joy comes home. But half the fun’s in the choosing, so I can’t present them to you ready-made. We’ll descend on the Pixie and demand patterns; you can be thinking about colours. And she shall congratulate me and Ken.”

“That’s what you really want to go for,” Rosamund told her mockingly. “We’re frightfully much obliged, Jenny-Wren! Make a pretty curtsey and say thank you to the kind lady, Maidie! As for celebrations, Brownie, I hope you’re not going to forget the Club? No Queen ever got engaged during her reign before. You ought to give a party, at least.”

“I won’t forget the Club. I’m coming to school to-morrow, to see everybody, and to tell Mackums I want you to have a holiday. On my way I’m going to see Mirry; I want a talk with her. But we’ll wait a little while before we talk about parties,” Jen said, with decision. “A Hamlet Club party means dancing, and though I mean to dance again quite soon, I don’t feel ready for it yet, Rose-of-the-World.”

“I’m sorry. I forgot,” and Rosamund subsided. “The girls will love to see you, Brownie. They’re frightfully thrilled about your engagement.”

“Very jolly of them! I’m sure they are,” Jen agreed.

When Kenneth and the younger girls had been sent off to the theatre, Mary and Jen, under plea of shopping, went straight to the Pixie’s West-End workroom, to sit on the floor among heaps of beautiful materials, and fill in the six-months’ gap in their friendship.

The Pixie’s eyes swept quickly over Jen. She made no comment on the lack of mourning, except to say: “I do like to see you in that pretty frock, Jenny-Wren! Isn’t it a lovely colour? I like it more every time I see it. And how well it’s wearing!”

“Daddy loved it so much that he made me wear it every day. I shall soon come to you for another one. Now, Pixie, listen! This is important!” and Jen plunged into the story of Maidie’s trouble, their own perplexity, and the way in which they hoped to help her.

“She likes the idea of singing lessons. She’s really awfully keen; I think she’s dreaming already of how pleased Joy will be.”

“That’s all right. That’s healthy, because she can turn it into action. You’ve got the idea, Jenny-Wren. Let me know how you go on. I expect you’ll see a difference in her quite soon.”

“She’s brighter already, with the thought of it,” Mary said hopefully.

“The new frock will help,” the Pixie added. “A new frock always does, you know. I’ve seen it act like a charm ever so often. Let me know if I can help. But you’re handling it for yourselves; that’s far better. And now tell me all about that ring, Jenny-Wren! How do you like being engaged? He’s a lucky man. And you’re a lucky girl. But you’ve had to grow up just a little, haven’t you? And isn’t it fun, as I said? You aren’t frightened of it any more, are you?”

“Do you know, I rather like it!” Jen said seriously. “Pixie, somebody else has grown up too. Mary’s a mother; isn’t that grown-up! Here’s a copy of her first child for you. And—*look!* You can guess how proud I feel!”

“So you ought to,” the Pixie looked at the dedication, and examined the book eagerly. “Oh, *thank* you, Jenny-Wren and Mary!”

“I say, with a dedication *and* an engagement-ring——!” Jen began. “I really do feel grown-up! And Mary’s being a fairy godmother to other girls now, Pixie; lots of them.”

“Ah! That’s the most grown-up of all! I knew she would!” the Pixie said warmly, with her quick glad little glance up at Mary.

Jen leaned forward. “There’s one thing I must ask you! Pixie, do you believe in dreams?”

In her intense earnestness, she did not realise the sharpness of the look her little friend shot at her. But when the Pixie spoke, after a moment’s consideration of her stitches, it was only to say quietly: “How do you mean, Jenny-Wren? Of course I believe in them.”

“Because I had such a jolly one, while daddy was ill,” and Jen gave a sigh of relief. “I want to tell you about it. But some people say dreams don’t mean anything. I wouldn’t like you to laugh.”

“I won’t laugh. I’d like to hear it,” the Pixie spoke slowly, almost as if she were weighing her words. “I’m sure dreams have meanings, Jenny-Wren.”

Eagerly Jen told her dream of her father and herself on the winding road. “I felt sure it meant I’d see him again sometime; and that I wasn’t to worry in the meantime,” she finished.

It was a moment before the Pixie answered. Again she seemed to be choosing her words carefully.

“That was a beautiful dream, Jenny-Wren,” she said gently at last. “And it brought you a beautiful message. I’m sure you were right to listen and learn from it. I’ve had lots of messages from my dreams; they help me all the time. The right dream always comes at the right moment; you can be sure of that.”

“I’m so glad you approve!” Jen said warmly. “I’ve been quite happy about it; but I felt I’d like to know what you thought. Mother said it meant that too.”

“When are you going to get married?” the Pixie changed the subject.

“Oh, not for years and ages! I couldn’t leave mother all alone!”

“Poor Kenneth Marchwood!” said the Pixie, laughing. “What does he say about it?”

“That mother’s got the boys, who are married and living in this country, and their wives and families; and he thinks he ought to be allowed to have *me!*”

“Quite true. And are you going out to the *shamba* in Kenya? Shall you miss him for a week, if he goes without you?”

“I might; even for a fortnight, perhaps! We haven’t decided all that yet,” Jen told her, laughing.

“If you let me know the date in time for me to be at the wedding, I’ll lend you the Van for the honeymoon,” said the Pixie, with the usual twinkle.

“Oh, we *will!* And we’ll put the wedding off till Midsummer! I’d love to have another Midsummer Day in the Van!”

“With Kenneth! I shan’t be there,” the Pixie assured her hurriedly.

“But would there be room?” Jen asked anxiously. “He’s big, Pixie; and I’m not exactly little and neat.”

“Just room for two. Any size will do, so long as they’re married,” said the mistress of the Van seriously.

As they all went out to tea, Mary fell behind with the Pixie, letting Jen go on with the girls and Kenneth, to hear about the afternoon’s show.

“Brownie is very happy with Mr. Marchwood,” she said fervently. “I do feel so glad for her!”

“Oh, isn’t it fun to see them? It’s lovely to see them together! This is her real playtime,” said the Pixie, with deep, understanding sympathy. “Just engaged, and just awake enough to be no longer a schoolgirl, but able to enjoy life from a deeper point of view. She’s happier than she has ever been. And so are you; so is Joy; and so are the President and Joan with their babies! And those children waking up; Maidie to music, and Rosamund finding out that you can give up things for other people’s sake and be all the happier for it; finding it out for herself; that’s always the best way! ‘Losing her life to find it,’ and proving for herself that it’s true. She’s never going to be content with second hand knowledge; no one ever should be. *Isn’t* life interesting?” and the Pixie gave a sigh of deepest content. “And aren’t people the most interesting of all? *You* know that, with your books! I’m never tired of watching and learning. And I think it’s just wonderful, the way all you Abbey people are coming on. You must keep me up to date, for I really am interested, and you’re all changing and growing so fast. I love all the lot of you!”

“I’ll let you know how we all go on,” Mary assured her warmly. “And if we get into difficulties, we’ll come to you to be put right.”

“I’ll always help. I’ll love to. But you won’t have very bad difficulties; you’re all too sound and healthy. You’ll have problems, of course; but those are what makes life so exciting,” said the Pixie.

[The end of *Queen of the Abbey Girls* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]