

OXFORD — ADVENTURE FOR TWO — OXENHAM



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ADVENTURE FOR TWO

By

Elsie Jeanette Oxenham

Illustrations by

Margaret Horder

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*To
my dear Father*

JOHN OXENHAM

*With all happy thoughts
of love and gratitude*

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PART I
PROBLEMS FOR TWO

CHAPTER I

RAINBOW CORNER

'There she is!' Daphne dropped her mop into the washing-up bowl and dashed to the door. She flung it open with a shout of welcome. 'Irina! You are late this morning! Was it super-marvellous? Oh, you're just off! Good luck! All the best!'

The tall dark-faced girl at the door wore hat and coat and carried an attaché case. 'Good luck to you too. It's a great day for both of us, Daphne Dale.'

'It may be,' Daphne laughed nervously. 'We'll know if it really is when we meet at night. Haven't you time to tell me about Sadler's Wells?'

'It was a jolly fine show. I got a front gallery seat.'

'Oh, good luck! And did you like *Checkmate*?'

'It's magnificent! I wish you could see it,' Irina exclaimed.

'Perhaps if I pass to-day's exam. I might manage the gallery, if Elsa would come too. I don't want to go alone, and you'll be busy now.'

'Perhaps!' Irina said grimly. 'I'm not accepted yet. I must get along. I'll tell you all about it at night. Good luck again! I hope you pass brilliantly.'

'I hope I have a good crit. I'm scared now that the day has come,' Daphne confessed.

'You needn't be; you're jolly good. Remember to smile and curtsy nicely to the examiners! And be careful of your arabesques; you're sometimes a bit shaky. But you'll pass all right; your sense of rhythm is so good. A great day for us both, Daphne Dale!' and Irina turned away.

'Make the most of your big chance, now it's come at last,' Daphne called after her. 'Captivate M. Antoine so that he not only takes you into his *corps de ballet* but makes you leader right away.'

'Ass!' Irina said laughing, as she reached the corridor.

In the little flat of two rooms, which was shared by Daphne and Elsa Dale, Elsa was looking wistful, as she washed spoons and forks and put plates up in the rack. There were no great days in her life, only masses of very ordinary ones. The commercial college at which she was learning book-keeping and shorthand had no thrills, and at times she envied Daphne and the girl who lived next door.

They were both dancing students, but with a difference. Daphne, at seventeen, had been training for years, at home in a West Country town, and for the last year had been working at Madame Roskova's well-known London school. She had passed her Elementary Examination with flying colours and a great future had been foretold for her, if she worked hard; to-day she was to face the examiners for a second time, and she hoped to pass Intermediate equally well.

Irina's real name was Irene Jones, but she had become Irina Ivanovna for professional purposes. She was eighteen and within sight of her Advanced Certificate, which meant that as a dancer she was very good indeed. Unlike Daphne, she had worked in Town for years, and had danced in pantomimes and small ballets at suburban theatres since she was twelve and old enough to have her licence. It had been necessary that she should help to pay her way, and there had been no chance of waiting for the best jobs; she had been thankful to find jobs at all. Now her great chance had come—the chance of a place in the *corps de ballet* with a first-class company at a London theatre; the height of her ambition, until a possibility of solo parts appeared. Madame Roskova, working with the great Georges Antoine on a new ballet, had

promised to find some girl dancers among her students, and to-day Irina was to go to the theatre for an audition. If M. Antoine approved she would be given a place in *The Goose-girl*, and it seemed the fulfilment of her highest hopes.

Daphne was very envious and full of admiration. But her exam. must be passed, and Madame had refused to suggest her to M. Antoine, even if she were successful. 'You are not yet ready to dance in public, my child,' she had said, when Daphne's wistful face showed her hope that she also might be chosen.

Now that the day of the examination had come, even Daphne felt that Madame had been right. The excitement was as much as she could bear. She would go to watch Irina dancing in the ballet, and next time perhaps her chance would come.

It was all very thrilling, and Elsa entered into her feelings and Irina's and was conscious of their suspense, and envied them just a little. She was a year younger than Daphne, a few months over sixteen, but it was not on that account that the family plans had always been centred in the elder girl. The aunt who had brought them up, a teacher of music herself, had been convinced of Daphne's possibilities as a dancer from her earliest years and had strained every nerve to give her the best training, so that her gift might be developed to the full. Elsa, it was agreed by everyone and most of all by herself, had no special talent, but she was likely to be extremely useful as a companion to Daphne.

'Useful, but not ornamental!' was her own description of herself. 'So, since that's settled for good and all, I'll jolly well be as useful as I can!' And her training in shorthand and book-keeping, at the college round the corner, was a step in that direction.

She looked up as Daphne came back to her work. 'Are you really keen on Irina, or is it only because you're both dancers and at the same school?'

Daphne stared at her. 'What an odd question! I've never thought about it. I like her; she's interesting, and she's been through the mill, in a way I haven't had to do. She knows all about stage work, from pantomimes and revues upwards; she's had jobs ever since she was twelve—at intervals, of course. The one thing she hasn't done is to dance in serious ballet, and she's going to do that now.'

'If M. Antoine approves of her,' Elsa remarked.

'Oh, but he will; she's jolly good. I wish I felt as sure that the examiners will approve of me!'

'But all that only means that you find Irina useful and interesting,' Elsa persisted, bent on diverting her sister's mind from the ordeal that lay before her. 'Are you really frightfully keen on her, Daph?'

Daphne considered the matter as she hung the breakfast cups on their hooks. 'I don't know that I am, now that you've made me think about it.'

'I feel she might be an uncomfortable sort of friend, if you were terribly fond of her. If you don't care an awful lot then I suppose it's all right. She strikes me as cut out for tragedy parts; she could act the jealous villainess beautifully. But if she happened to be jealous, in private life, or to quarrel with a friend, I think she might be rather awful.'

Daphne laughed. 'What wouldn't she give for the chance to act jealousy and hatred! Yes, it would suit her; you're right there.'

'She's half Welsh and half Russian,' Elsa reflected. 'Her mother was Russian, wasn't she? It's an odd mixture.'

'A bit fiery, perhaps,' Daphne agreed. 'I won't rouse her evil nature. Don't worry!'

‘Don’t get too fond of her,’ Elsa advised. ‘I believe she has hidden depths which might be uncomfortable if they were stirred up. What time have you to be at Holland Park?’

Daphne glanced at the clock. ‘My hat! If I’m late——’

She rushed to the bedroom for her coat and ready-packed case. ‘Wish me luck, old girl!’

‘You know I do. I wish I could come with you. I shan’t do much work to-day. Hurry home to tell me all about it!’ Elsa pleaded. ‘Don’t worry, Daphne. You’re sure to pass; I heard Irina say so.’

‘Irina might be wrong for once,’ Daphne groaned. ‘Will my hair do? Oh, well, it won’t show! Good-bye! Keep on wishing me luck all day! I can’t tell you just what time I shall be needing it.’

‘I shall be wishing you luck all afternoon, hours after you’ve passed in triumph.’ Elsa opened the door for her and waved good-bye as Daphne ran down the corridor.

She laughed, as she turned back into their rooms, at Daphne’s anxiety over her hair. Her own brown mop was cut short, with a slight natural wave which made it easy to manage, but Daphne’s long corn-coloured locks, thick and beautiful, were the distress of her life. At home their aunt had helped her to care for it and had refused to allow it to be cut, so Daphne at school had worn two neat plaits; but she had declared her intention of cutting these off as soon as she came to Town. Unfortunately, from her own point of view, she had put off the drastic action till after the first day at the dancing school, and seeing Madame Roskova’s eyes on her plaits had said hastily—‘It’s all right, Madame! I know it looks fearfully old-fashioned, but I’m having it cut off to-morrow.’

‘My child, no!’ Madame had exclaimed in horror. ‘You must not do that; you shall not! It is beautiful, and it will be of great use to you later on. When you are a leading dancer and appear in the classic ballets, in costume—in *The Fire-Bird*, or *Petrouchka*, *par exemple*—here is your hair all ready, and you need not wear a wig. Oh, certainly, you must keep your hair, my dear!’

Daphne had been very mutinous; she would much rather wear a wig; her hair would be a nuisance when she danced. But Madame had been obdurate. ‘You can swathe your head in a net or a bandeau, as most of our girls do. You must plait your hair closely round your head. But you must not cut it,’ she had said firmly.

Daphne had been forced to give way, greatly against her will. She wore her plaits wound round in a neat crown and covered them, for dancing, with a silk band; as she had said, her hair would not show much in the examination room.

For a year Daphne and Elsa had been very comfortable in their little house for two—a flatlet at the end of a passage leading off a long corridor, in a hostel for working women and girls. There were a number of these little passages, which jutted out like the teeth of a rake, and each held three small dwellings of one or two rooms. Downstairs were big dining-rooms and kitchens and offices, and most of the residents had the custom of taking at least one meal every day in the refectory; but each flatlet had a stove for cooking light meals, and breakfasts and suppers were often taken at home.

The Dale girls, being two, had secured one of the larger flats, with windows looking out to the street, and a bedroom, as well as the kitchen-sitting-room, which had a curtained alcove to hold a second bed. The other two rooms in their passage, one on each side and looking out over the courtyard, were single flats; Irene Jones had one, and in the other lived a half-French girl, Michelle Barker, who worked in a dressmaking establishment close at hand. Michelle was six years older than Daphne, being twenty-three; she was quiet and a little shy, and if she

did not add much to the hilarity of the community, she at least did not object when Daphne and Irina put on Irina's gramophone and practised dances or did exercises out in the passage.

These four, all so different, in the three flats of their corner, had become a sort of family group, apart from the wider friendships of the hostel. Officially their addresses were Flats 29, 30, 31, Corridor II C, but to all the girls 'C' was home—C being the short passage within which they felt cut off from the rest of their world. To increase the sense of being at home, Elsa, the youngest of the group, had one day pinned a post-card on her door with their names neatly printed on it, and below—'The Blue House. Corridor II C.'

'Why blue?' Irina had demanded. 'It's a jolly idea to have names, but why blue? It sounds gloomy.'

'Not a bit. Look!' Elsa pointed in triumph at her deep-blue curtains, to windows and alcove, and the cushions to match.

With a whoop Irina dashed into her room and found a card, and announced her dwelling as 'The Red House.'

'My curtains are red enough, and ever so much more cheerful than yours,' she said.

'Now, Michelle! Won't you join in?' Daphne shouted, thumping on the third door. 'Your curtains are green; we'll be called Rainbow Corner!'

Michelle, with some amusement, allowed her flat to be labelled 'The Green House,' and admitted that it sounded more homelike than Flat 31.

When Daphne had gone to face the examiners, Elsa found herself alone in 'C'. Michelle had been called away some days before by the illness of her mother, who had returned to her home in France after her husband's death. A hurried note had told the other girls that her mother had died and that Michelle would be coming back to the Green House in a few days.

'I don't suppose she has friends in France. There'd be no reason for her to stay,' Elsa said to herself, as she put the Blue House in order, before going off to classes. 'She's lived in London for years', I know. She'll miss her mother terribly, but it will be better for Michelle herself, in some ways. She only saw her mother once a year, when she had her holiday, and I'm certain she was pinching and going without things to send money to France. She ought to get along more comfortably now, but it won't make up for having no home to go to, and Michelle will feel that. She won't want to think that a room in a hostel is the only home she has in the world. I know I shouldn't like it.'

Her face was sober as she went to make Daphne's bed. 'I hope *our* home is all right! It hasn't occurred to Daph that there might be any difficulty, but then nobody could call Daphne practical. I feel a little worried, and I shall do until that letter comes from the lawyer. Suppose Aunt Mary didn't leave enough for us to stay on here! Daph would break her heart if she had to give up her training now. Or suppose the house at home had to be sold! I couldn't bear that; I simply couldn't!' She looked round their small domain with troubled eyes. 'This place is quite jolly, but I shouldn't like to feel the Blue House was our only home. Oh, no! We must have home to go back to, when we want it.'

Their aunt at Sandylands, the seaside town on the Somerset coast, had taken their mother's place for as long as the girls could remember. Their father had been lost at sea shortly after Elsa was born; their mother, a singer, had struggled on bravely for a few months, just managing to keep herself and her little girls by giving singing lessons. On her death, her elder sister had adopted the children and had done her best to be father and mother to them. When the moment seemed to have come for their education to proceed on specialized lines—and at the same time to conceal from them her own failing health—she had sent them to London, to

this hostel recommended by a friend: Daphne already half-trained as a dancer, Elsa to study business methods. Now, a month ago, news had come of her death, following a sudden operation; the shock to both girls had been severe, but they had accepted their lawyer's advice that they should stay in Town and go on with their work, till they heard from him again.

Daphne had plunged into preparations for her Intermediate exam., regretting deeply that her aunt had not lived to rejoice in the success for which she hoped. Elsa, less absorbed in her work, had thought much, during the last few weeks, of home and Aunt Mary, and of the lawyer's letter. Was there a hint of possible difficulties in that sentence—"Till you hear from me again"?

She knit her brows as she recalled it now, and during the day it kept forcing itself between her and the thought of Daphne and her critical exam. Between these two haunting anxieties her work stood little chance and she did nothing very well.

She raced home at the earliest possible moment and flung open the door of the Blue House. 'Daphne! Are you back yet? Oh, Daph, you've passed!'

Daphne let the blue curtains which shut off her bedroom fall behind her and stood, a slim white figure in ballet dress, as she had faced the examiners some hours before. She held her short frilled skirt lightly and sank to the ground in a beautiful curtsy.

'I've dressed, because I must discuss some points in my crit. with Irina and I shall want to practise. Yes, passed well, my dear. They were awfully nice to me; they said all sorts of pretty things, but it boiled down to—"Go on working. A good start—a great future, if you work." I couldn't have hoped for more.'

'I am so thankful! I've thought of hardly anything else all day.' Elsa dropped into a big chair. 'Oh, what a relief! And you do look nice, Daphne! Now tell me all about it.'

CHAPTER II

A DANCER IN DIFFICULTIES

‘Why the exam. kit?’ Irina had caught sight of Daphne’s tarlatan through the half-open door of the Blue House. She flung her case and her cap and coat into Number 29 and came to investigate. ‘Is it a celebration? Did you pass?’

‘Rather!’ Daphne leapt to greet her. ‘Passed well. What about you? Will they have you?’

‘Rather!’ Irina echoed her shout. ‘I’ve been rehearsing all afternoon. I’ve been given a part!’

‘*What?*’ Daphne cried. ‘What do you mean, Irina Ivanovna? They’d never make you a principal when they’d only just seen you!’

‘It takes one second,’ Irina laughed. ‘But it’s a definite part. I have to step out of the crowd and warn the heroine that there are enemies about; she’s come dancing in and she hasn’t seen them. I have to look full of horror and terror and tragedy; M. Antoine said I had the right face for it. He picked me on purpose, because I looked cut out for the part.’

‘Oh, joy! Oh, glory! This is a great day in Rainbow Corner!’ and Daphne pirouetted round the tiny room. ‘They’ve noticed you; they’ll try you in a tragedy part, and your fortune will be made. Oh, good news, Irina Ivanovna!’

‘They’d never have chosen me if I’d been just Irene Jones.’

‘Oh, yes, they would! Your inborn tragedy would have pushed its way out. Elsa said this morning that you looked made for tragic parts.’

‘Clever of Elsa! Where is she? I’ve heaps to tell, but I’m not going to say it all twice over.’

‘Talking to Michelle Barker, in the Green House. I’ll call her.’

‘No, tell me first about you. You must have told Elsa everything already. When did Michelle come back?’

‘Just after I came in. I don’t know much about her yet; I knew Elsa would go across at once, so I left it to her,’ and Daphne plunged into an account of the exam, and a discussion of the criticism.

‘Show me how you did those fouettés!’ Irina demanded.

‘That’s why I changed’ and Daphne sprang up. ‘Tell me what you think!’

They were absorbed in a technical argument when Elsa came in and stood watching Daphne’s slim light figure as she tried to improve the faults which had been pointed out by the examiners.

‘That’s marvellous, Daphne,’ she exclaimed.

‘It’s jolly good. Daphne gets better every day,’ Irina said sincerely. ‘How’s Michelle?’

‘Not very fit. I made her some tea and persuaded her to go to bed. She had a bad crossing and she’s fagged out. Don’t make a row in the passage to-night, you two! It wouldn’t be fair.’

‘Good thing you found she was seedy. I was thinking of working out there, but the gram. might worry her, so I’ll put it off,’ Irina said.

‘But you can show me your *Goose-girl* dance,’ Daphne pleaded. ‘Elsa, she’s in the ballet! Isn’t it marvellous?’

Elsa’s face lit up. ‘Good work, Irina! And I suppose Daphne’s told you——’

‘Oh, Daphne’s told me, indeed!’ Irina said laughing. ‘We’ve decided it’s a great day in Rainbow Corner. I’m going out to find an ice-cream man and we’ll all have ices to celebrate.’

‘But first, tell us about Antoine and the ballet,’ Daphne urged. ‘I haven’t heard anything yet, Elsa; we waited for you. It’s frightfully thrilling; she’s been given a part!’

‘I’m sorry for the way it happened, though,’ Irina said soberly. ‘We had an odd little scene. Are you going to change? Or shall I tell you now?’

‘Tell us at once, or quicker! I want to work some more.’ Daphne rested on the arm of Elsa’s chair, her white skirt frothing up about her.

Irina told of her audition and of the terrifying M. Antoine. ‘There was a rehearsal due, so they sent us in; there were three other new girls. We learned the dance of the village people; the heroine, the Goose-girl herself, isn’t chosen yet, but the girl who had to warn her of danger did her part; did it well, too. She’s just a kiddy; it’s the first time she’s danced in public, but she was jolly good. A pretty kid; yellow curls and dark eyes; and an odd name—made up, I should think. Oh yes! Damayris; Mary Damayris. What do you make of it?’

‘Never mind her name,’ Daphne said impatiently. ‘Why did they take the part away from her and give it to you? Wasn’t she cut up? I’d have been heart-broken!’

‘She was a little idiot,’ Irina said frowning. ‘She would pirouette at a certain point; said the music made her do it—said it to Antoine, mind you! “It’s the music, monsieur; it seems to need a turn just there.” Of course he flared up and there was a scene.’

‘But how mad!’ Daphne cried. ‘What awful cheek!’

‘She didn’t mean it for cheek; she was terribly much in earnest. But nobody could expect him to stand that, could they now?’

‘I should think not! What happened?’

‘He kicked her out. Told her to go back to school, and to come to him again in a year, as she wasn’t ready to dance yet. It happened three times, you see, and he kept giving her another chance. When she did it the fourth time—well, you couldn’t wonder if he was fed up!’

‘How did she take it?’ Elsa asked, enthralled.

‘She’d asked for it,’ Daphne said. ‘Did she creep out in tears?’

‘She did *not*! We all thought she was going to cry, but she just went out looking dazed. Then suddenly she came running down, right to the front, and called to Antoine that she would come back in a year and she thanked him. She was rather fine; she’ll play big parts some day. Then she rushed away, and I expect she howled in a corner. We went on, and he picked me to be the one to warn the Goose-girl, because he said I looked the part.’

‘Did you see her again—the girl with the queer name?’ Elsa asked.

‘Oh no! She’d disappeared long before we went out; we worked for hours. I may come across her again; they’ll give her another chance, for she evidently has a lot in her. But she’ll need to learn her place and how to work with the crowd. I guess her teacher will be mad! I don’t know where she came from; someone said she’d been taught in France and Italy.’

‘I’m sorry for her,’ Elsa said. ‘But I’m jolly glad they gave you the part. It’s a splendid beginning.’

She looked at her watch. ‘The post should be in. I’ll go down and collect any letters for C.’

‘For the colours of the Rainbow!’ Daphne reproved her.

‘Why is Elsa so keen on the post? I’m not expecting letters and I don’t suppose Michelle Barker is,’ Irina said.

Daphne frowned. ‘Elsa has an idea that our aunt’s lawyer is going to write and say something unpleasant. I don’t see why he should. Aunt Mary always had enough and now that

she's gone there ought to be more not less.'

'It depends where your aunt's money came from.' Irina had had more experience. 'I hope it was well invested. Is the lawyer all right?'

'Oh, rather! He never approved of me; he doesn't like ballet and he didn't think I ought to be allowed to go in for it; but he's quite honest. Any luck, Elsa?'

Elsa entered, bringing a letter. 'One, for us. It's from Mr. Courtier, Daphne.'

The anxiety in her voice made the other two look at her.

'I'll go,' Irina began.

'No, don't! I've heaps to ask you,' Daphne exclaimed. 'You read the letter, Elsa, and tell me about it later. You understand business better than I do.'

Elsa hesitated. 'Do you really want me to read it?'

'Sure! I'd rather be told in words of one syllable than wade through pages of lawyer's jargon.'

'O.K.!' Elsa went into the bedroom and dropped the heavy blue curtain which took the place of a door.

'Now, Irina! Recite your dance!' Daphne begged. 'I'll do the steps as you say them.'

Irina began to repeat the sequence of the dance. 'I may not have it right yet.'

'Sounds all right to me.' Daphne translated her directions into action, and twirled and leapt and paused, rising on her points, springing and alighting as gently as a bird.

'Daphne!' There was a strange hard note in Elsa's voice as she stood in the doorway.

The other two turned in dismay. 'What's the matter?'

'Daphne!' Elsa's voice broke. 'You'd better take off that tarlatan. You can't go on with your training. There's no money; we can't afford to live in Town.'

'Oh—rot!' Daphne shouted. 'Nothing on earth will stop me now—not after what the examiners said to-day! Elsa, how can there be no money?'

Elsa sank down limply on the window-seat, the letter crumpled in her hand. 'There isn't any. We didn't understand. Mr. Courtier tells us all about it.'

'Do you want me to go?' Irina looked troubled. 'Perhaps I could be some help. You two are only kiddies. I've knocked about and looked after myself for years. May I hear how it has happened?'

'I'd like to talk to somebody older. Daphne won't understand,' Elsa said forlornly.

'I understand what you said all right. I want to know what you meant,' Daphne raged. 'No one shall stop me now. I couldn't live unless I danced! I'm going to live in Town, whatever anybody says.'

'You must have something to live on, though,' Irina remarked. 'Don't flare up like that! You're keeping Elsa from telling us what has happened.'

Daphne stood, resentment blazing in her face. 'I won't be stopped now, when I'm getting on so well.'

'Elsa doesn't want to stop you, silly. It's on your account she's so cut up about this. She said so,' Irina said severely.

Daphne looked at her sister's white face, then rushed to her and flung herself on her knees beside her, in a cloud of white frilly skirt. 'I'm a beast! Elsa, forget what I said! I had a shock; I'm sorry.'

Elsa's arm gripped her closely. 'I had a shock, too, but it was because of you. It doesn't matter about me, but I know you must go on, if you're to care about living at all, and—and I don't see how it's going to be managed, Daphne.'

‘I should die if I had to give up dancing,’ Daphne gasped, and hid her face in Elsa’s lap.

CHAPTER III

ELSA'S HOUSE

‘How has it happened, Elsa?’ Irina demanded.

Elsa’s voice shook. ‘We never understood about Aunt Mary’s money. There was a story behind that we’d never heard. She hadn’t a great deal, but there always seemed enough.’

‘A story?’ Daphne, still on her knees, raised her head in surprise.

Elsa looked at Irina. ‘Our aunt used to teach music, taking private people—not in a school. Her old pupils are all over Sandylands and they were awfully keen on her, coming to see her and bringing her flowers and presents. She gave up teaching fifteen years ago, about the time our mother died; and she’s looked after us ever since.’

‘She was a brick, of course, but we’ve always known that,’ Daphne said. ‘What story hadn’t we heard?’

‘She’d saved enough to buy Min-y-mor; that’s the bungalow by the sea where we lived with her,’ Elsa went on. ‘But it cost a lot more to bring up two girls, than just to live quietly by herself. We were only infants—really infants; I was one and Daphne was two; we never thought about it. But other people did, and her old pupils met together and talked it over. They bought her something called an annuity and said it was a sign of how much they admired her pluck in adopting her sister’s children, and it was to help her in the job of educating us.’

‘Ah! That’s what I was afraid of,’ Irina murmured.

‘Why? What do you mean?’ Daphne cried.

‘It died with her. It was only for her lifetime. She couldn’t leave it to you two. That’s why there’s no money,’ Irina put the matter briefly and clearly. ‘Is that right, Elsa?’

‘That’s what has happened,’ Elsa agreed, her face sombre. ‘She couldn’t save anything, because it cost so much to look after us. Daphne’s training has been terribly expensive, you know.’

‘Oh, ghastly! Don’t I know it?’ Irina groaned. ‘And she hasn’t had jobs, to help to pay her way. If I hadn’t been earning, I could never have carried on. They send me a little from home, but it’s not nearly enough. If I hadn’t got this new job, I might have had to go home. I’ve often been afraid it might happen and I’d be parked in the country, with no hope of finding work. I don’t mind telling you it was absolutely necessary I should have something this time. But I have had help from home in the past, or I could never have stayed at Madame Roskova’s, to say nothing of keeping myself in stockings and ballet shoes.’

‘It’s ruinous, of course,’ Daphne looked anxiously at Elsa. ‘Then Aunt Mary hadn’t saved anything and the—the annuity has disappeared?’

‘That’s what it comes to,’ Elsa assented unhappily, ‘She did save a little, but the shares it was put into aren’t paying anything at present. That’s why Mr. Courtier has been so long in telling us; he’s been trying to sell them, so that we’d have a little money. Nobody will buy them just now; later on they may be worth something, but for some time all we can do is hang on to them and wait.’

‘And what are you to live on, in the meantime?’ Irina asked.

‘That’s the question. And Daphne’s fees—and her shoes and all the rest of it.’ Elsa’s tone was hopeless.

Daphne looked up, a spark of hope in her eyes. ‘There’s the house. Couldn’t we sell it?’

A wave of colour swept into Elsa's face. 'Daphne—I'll have to tell you. I don't like it, but Aunty's done it and you can't alter a will. She's left Min-y-mor to me.' She looked at Daphne anxiously.

'Gosh!' Daphne gasped. 'All to you? Haven't I a share in it? But why? I'm the elder!'

'It's horrid for me; I feel ghastly about it. But Mr. Courtier says she would do it.'

'But why?' Daphne sprang up, her face indignant. 'She always seemed quite keen on me! Does he know why she did it?'

Elsa's eyes were apologetic. 'Well, you see—oh, Daphne, *don't* you see?'

'Afraid I don't. What d'you mean?'

'I see,' Irina put in. 'Your aunt felt you'd had your share while she was alive. She must have spent a hundred times as much on you as she did on Elsa. Think of your training, all these years—ever since you were ten, I suppose. You've had the best teachers; anyone can see that—your style's so good. Did she realize, when she was making her will, that she hadn't been quite fair to you, Elsa?'

Elsa looked unhappy. 'She said something like that. I don't feel that way, not a scrap, but Mr. Courtier has always said it. He didn't want Aunty to let Daphne be a dancer; he said she ought to treat us both alike. That was silly rot, and Aunty knew it. Daphne had a gift; I hadn't. Daph will be famous some day; nothing will ever make me important. It was right that Daphne should be trained, and if I'd been old enough to understand I'd have said so. But Aunty seems to have been worried, when she came to make her will, because I'd had so much less.'

Daphne stared down at her. 'I never thought about it. It seemed natural. I'm sorry if it hasn't been fair.' She spoke slowly, struggling to grasp a new point of view.

'It was natural! It was right,' Elsa cried. 'You had to be trained. You're born to be a dancer, but an untrained dancer would never do anything worth while.'

'You haven't felt it unfair?' Daphne persisted.

'Gracious, no! And I wish Aunty hadn't either,' Elsa said forcefully.

'Then it's for you to decide whether you'll sell the house?' Irina felt the point of past unfairness had been sufficiently discussed.

'I can't sell it till I'm twenty-one; that's in the will. And Aunt Mary didn't want me to do it, even then. She put in a very special request that I should *not* sell the house; she loved it, and she'd bought it and altered it, and we'd all lived there together. And, apart from the sentimental feeling, she hoped I'd keep it for Daphne's sake, to make a home for her when she wanted to get out of Town and away from dancing for a while.'

'I'll never want that!' Daphne broke out.

Irina glanced at her. 'You might. I can understand your aunt leaving her house to Elsa. You'd have sold it at once, and you'd be left with no home and nowhere to turn to. There may be times when you'll be sick of rooms in Town and the thought of a home in the country will be the thing that will save you. By the sea, did you say? Oh, marvellous! Yes, of course, you said the name was Min-y-mor. I'd give a lot to have a Min-y-mor behind me.'

'It does mean "beside the sea", doesn't it?' Elsa asked eagerly. 'Aunt Mary wasn't Welsh, but the house looks right across at the Welsh coast; we see the hills every clear day.'

'That's all very fine,' Daphne retorted. 'If we can afford a country house I'll be glad to have it. But how did Aunt Mary mean us to live? Didn't she make any plan? A house is no use if you've nothing to live on.'

‘She meant us to sell the shares and live on that, till we were earning for ourselves,’ Elsa explained. ‘She didn’t know there would be any difficulty in selling them. I ought to be able to take a post in another year, and you might be ready for a job quite soon. Auntie didn’t know she was going—didn’t know what was going to happen. It was an operation, not an illness. She hoped to carry on till we were at work; she never meant to leave us unqualified. So long as she was alive, the money was all right.’

Daphne dropped wearily into a big chair. ‘Yes, I see that. It’s her death that has upset things; it isn’t her fault.’

Irina glanced at her and thought of a fading white rose just about to fall. With the poetry of her Welsh nature she looked at Elsa and saw a sturdy bush of heather, bending before the wind but not broken.

‘What does the lawyer suggest?’ she asked.

Daphne looked up eagerly. ‘Yes, what does he want us to do? You are a help, Irina! You keep us on the beat. I keep wandering away.’

Elsa knit her brows. ‘He offers to try to let the house, but he doesn’t think there’s much chance, for this year. It would take some time to get it ready and this is July. And Min-y-mor is so close to the sea, right on the sands; people would say it was too exposed. We’re used to it and we like the wind and the noise of the water, but town people might not care for it. He thinks we ought to live there, and find jobs in the town.’ She looked at Daphne anxiously. ‘He thinks I could go on working at evening classes, at the Technical Institute. But it wouldn’t be anything like so good as what I’m doing here.’

‘And what about me?’ Daphne exploded. ‘I’m to give up everything, after seven years of work, and go into a shop, perhaps?’

‘He says’—Elsa gave a shaky laugh that ended in a groan—‘that you’re pretty and attractive, and he has a friend who could get you into a hairdresser’s, where they’d train you, and he’s sure you’d be a success. He’s terribly proud of the idea. He says you’re still young enough to take up something really useful and practical.’

‘A hairdresser!’ Daphne sprang up, her eyes blazing. ‘I’d sooner die! I’ll never go back to Sandylands! I won’t turn into a beastly barber!’

‘Hairdressers are jolly useful,’ Irina said laughing. ‘Beauty culture and all the rest of it; it must be a paying business. We couldn’t do without them; you and I couldn’t, that’s certain! But all the same I don’t feel you’re quite cut out for it, Daphne Dale.’

Daphne stared at her. ‘I’m a dancer. I’m going to lead the ballet. I’ll have my name on the hoardings and over the theatre. I’ll be in all the papers. Everybody will come to see me dance; yes, even Mr. Courtier, when I’m famous! I’ll do it—some day!’

‘Some day—yes, we know you will,’ Elsa cried. ‘I’m as certain of your future as you are yourself. But it’s to-day, and to-morrow, and next week I’m worried about. How are you going to do it? I know it has to happen—but how? Because even if we let the house it won’t bring in much. It’s very small; at best we might get five or seven guineas a week, for a month or two in the summer, and nothing at all for the rest of the time. No one would take Min-y-mor by the year; it would be only in the summer holidays we’d have any chance of letting. How are we going to live through the winter?’

Daphne drooped in her chair again. ‘I won’t be a hairdresser. I’d much rather die.’

Elsa looked at Irina. ‘She couldn’t afford to stop her training for a few months, till we see how things are, I suppose? We have a house to live in. If we went and lived in it, and found

jobs, just for a time, could Daphne take up her dancing again presently, if we found some way to manage it?’

‘I won’t do it!’ Daphne raged. ‘I won’t stop, when I’ve gone so far! I’d never be able to take it up again; I should go right back to the beginning.’

‘Oh no, you wouldn’t,’ Irina said. ‘But you’d lose ground, and you’ve made such a good start. It would be a terrible pity, indeed, it would, Elsa.’

‘If I once bury myself in Sandylands, I shall never get back to Town. There won’t be any hope. And to-day the examiners said—oh, I can’t bear it!’ Daphne gasped. ‘Not to-day, after that lovely crit.! They promised me marvellous things, if I went on. I couldn’t give it all up now.’

‘It would be a fearful waste,’ Irina assented. ‘Elsa, she really has a future before her; I’m certain of it.’

‘Oh, so am I! But I can’t see how we are going to help her to it,’ Elsa said despondently. ‘I want it quite as much as she does; well, very nearly as much,’ as Irina glanced at Daphne and shook her head. ‘But I don’t see what we can do.’

‘The lawyer hasn’t any other idea but an office for you and the hairdresser’s for Daphne?’

‘Not yet. But he says we must go home. He can’t promise us any money. We can’t even afford our rooms here, and quite soon there will be fees to pay for both of us. I can’t see any other way,’ Elsa said brokenly. ‘We shall have to go home, Daphne.’

‘I won’t.’ Daphne’s voice shook. ‘That ghastly man will put me into his wretched shop before I’ve time to tell him what I think of him. I won’t go, and that’s the end of it.’

Elsa looked at Irina hopelessly. ‘What do you think we ought to do?’

‘Have supper and go to bed,’ Irina said promptly. ‘Don’t talk any more to-night. By to-morrow one of you may have had an inspiration.’

‘You don’t suppose we’ll sleep, do you?’ Daphne asked scornfully.

‘Not for a while, perhaps. But so long as you don’t talk, it will be something. You’re at the stage when you say things over and over again, and every time you say them you feel worse. Just by talking you may keep yourself from having a useful idea. Go to bed, and don’t say one word more till the morning.’

‘I believe you’re right, Irina,’ Elsa sounded weary and hopeless.

‘It’s no use asking Mr. Courtier,’ Daphne said. ‘He won’t lift a finger to help me to be a dancer. He’s always been dead against it. Auntie had endless arguments with him.’

‘If she couldn’t convince him, you never will,’ Irina remarked. ‘It’s no use counting on his help, then.’

‘Not a scrap. But I will convince him! I’ll be a great success and force him to admit I’ve made good,’ Daphne vowed.

‘Yes, but how?’ Elsa murmured.

‘There you go!’ Irina scolded. ‘Buck up, both of you! Pull yourselves together and *stop talking*. By the morning you may see some way.’

‘I won’t speak about it again, Irina,’ Elsa promised, as she put on the kettle. ‘I’m sure you’re right. If we talk all night, we won’t say a word more than we’ve said already, but if we keep quiet and think, something may come. Get into your dressing-gown, Daphne; I’m going to scramble eggs for supper. Will you stay, Irina?’

‘No, thanks! If I stay we shall talk.’

‘Do you expect us to eat eggs in grim silence?’ Elsa asked, as Daphne went gloomily to change.

‘I should talk of something else; the weather! If you try to be silent, you’ll come back to the forbidden subject. Get Daphne to bed, Elsa; she’s had a thrilling day, and on top of it this has been a shock. You’re sensible; you can stand it. But she’s all temperament, and she’s terribly worked up.’

‘I know. I’ve lived with her for a good many years. The artist’s temperament is there all right. I’ll do my best, Irina. And, I say, thanks awfully!’

‘Good luck to you!’ Irina went down the passage and turned into the Red House.

CHAPTER IV

DAPHNE'S WAY OUT

'I've solved the problem.' Daphne drew aside the curtains of Elsa's alcove next morning, still in her red dressing-gown and with long yellow plaits hanging on her breast.

Elsa sat up, pushing her brown tumbled hair from her eyes. 'Oh, Daphne! Tell me!'

'I'm going to Madame Roskova, to ask her to keep me on without fees, till I can pay them, and to lend me enough to live on, till I find a job and can pay for myself.' Daphne's tone was defiant; she was prepared for opposition.

It came. Elsa leapt out of bed. 'Borrow from Madame? Daphne, you can't! You couldn't live on borrowed money!'

'Oh yes, I could—for the sake of the future. I know I shall make good and be able to pay her back. Madame believes in me; she'll help, rather than let me be a hairdresser,' Daphne said bitterly.

'But you can't live on Madame's money,' Elsa protested vehemently. 'It's a ghastly idea! I don't see how you can think of it for a moment.'

'I don't like it myself,' Daphne acknowledged, leaning against the heavy blue curtain and staring at her sister. 'But it's for the sake of the future. Some day I shall put it right, but only if I go straight on now. If I give up dancing for a year or two there's no hope, and no future, and I may as well settle down to shampooing and permanent waving for ever.'

Elsa gazed at her. 'You really mean to ask Madame for money? If she offered it, when she heard the mess you're in, it would be bad enough to take it; but to go and *ask* her! Daphne, you can't! I don't believe you'll do it!'

'Oh yes, I shall; and I can. I'm not proposing to steal the money, so you needn't look so shocked. I will *not* go away and give up everything. So that's settled, and I'm arranged for. Now what about you?'

Elsa dropped on the bed again and rolled over and buried her face in the pillow. 'Go away! I can't tell you yet. I won't live with you on Madame's money; even if she gave you enough for me, I wouldn't take it. I shall go home to Min-y-mor and make a living somehow.'

Daphne shrugged her shoulders. 'Much better think of some way to finish your year at college and then find a good job. What are you going to live on at Sandylands?'

'I don't know, but it won't be borrowed money,' Elsa said passionately.

Daphne dropped the curtain and went back to her room. 'I knew she wouldn't like it. She can only see one side of the thing. But it is sensible! I'm thinking of the future, not the present moment.'

Presently she heard Elsa moving about the living-room, putting the kettle on the gas stove and laying plates on the table. As the bacon began to sizzle, Daphne went out to help, and cut bread and brought marmalade from the cupboard, without a word.

Elsa, looking white, glanced at her over the frying-pan. 'Daphne, are we going to quarrel over this business? That would be worst of all. We've never quarrelled yet.' Her voice shook and she bit her lip.

Daphne threw up her golden head with its crown of neat plaits. 'I hope not. Oh, I do hope not! But it depends on you. You don't like my plans. I mean to carry them out, because I can't see any other way. If you can't bear the sight of me, now that you know what I mean to do, I

suppose we'll have to part company. We couldn't live together and fight all the time. I'll be sorry; it will spoil everything.'

Elsa caught her breath. 'That's what I feel. I don't like what you're doing and probably you won't like what I decide to do. And we'll need to do things separately, if I go home. But we needn't quarrel. If we're so differently made that we can each do things that seem simply awful to the other one—quite mad and hopeless—then we must try our own ways. But we needn't fight about it.'

'Good!' Daphne exclaimed. 'If you'll put up with me I'm sure I'll be able to put up with you. But let's try to do it without scrapping.'

'That would be the worst thing,' Elsa said again. 'Make the tea! This bacon's just ready.'

As they sat down Daphne looked curiously at her sister. 'Elsa, what do you mean to do?'

'Go home and find a job and live in Min-y-mor. I shan't tell Mr. Courtier. He'd want to know about you.'

'And he'd have forty fits!'

'Quite likely. But he'd try to lend me money, and I wouldn't take it. I couldn't bear to feel I was in debt. Are you sure you can bear it?' Elsa looked up wistfully. 'Won't it be a burden, weighing you down? Will you be able to dance, carrying a load like that?'

'Oh, rather! I won't let it worry me,' Daphne's tone was jaunty and confident. 'It's only for a little while. I know I'll be able to put it right in the future, if only I can get to the future! It's the getting there that worries me. But—I say, old girl! Another thing bothers me.'

'What is it?' Elsa asked, her face downcast and subdued, as if the burden she foresaw for her sister was already resting on herself.

'If I get a job and make money, I'll have to repay Madame first of all. I shall want to help you, whatever you're doing, but Madame will have to come first.'

Elsa's chin went up. 'Of course. But I don't expect to need help. I shall get along all right. What's happening out there?'

The sound of voices and footsteps in the little passage was most unusual. Both girls sprang to the door.

'Someone must be ill,' Daphne exclaimed. 'Irina seemed all right last night.'

'Yes, but Michelle Barker didn't. I was bothered about her. It is Michelle,' Elsa cried, at sight of the open door of the Green House.

Irina came to meet them. 'Michelle fainted. She was found lying in the bathroom. That retired nurse from B passage, Miss Stewart, is looking after her.'

'The journey's been too much for her,' Daphne said.

'Can't I help? I was worried about her last night,' Elsa groaned.

'Better leave her to Miss Stewart. A day in bed may put things right. What about you two?'

Elsa shook her head and turned back into the Blue House.

'Tell you later, Irina Ivanovna,' Daphne promised. 'We're working out plans, but nothing's fixed yet.'

'Oh, good!' Irina said heartily. 'I was afraid you'd lie awake all night in tears.'

'That's not our way,' Daphne retorted. 'You may not like what we decide to do—though I think you'll understand—but we shall do something; we shan't just weep.'

'Tell me at night! I've rehearsal this morning,' Irina's tone was full of happy importance.

'If only I could say that!' Daphne sighed, as she went back to her breakfast. 'How different everything would be if I'd found a job yesterday! Elsa, what did you mean about Mr.

Courtier? He'll know you're at Min-y-mor.'

'Not for a few days. He lives in Bristol; he always had to come in his car to see Aunt Mary.'

'I forgot that. But what difference will a few days make?'

'I don't know,' Elsa said doggedly. 'But I'm not going to have him fussing round, suggesting things and being horrid about you. I want a little while to see what I can find to do. When he discovers I'm there he can come and argue, but I shan't invite him.'

Daphne knit her brows. 'But you can't go and live in the house, without any plan for what you're going to do!'

'I can't make a plan till I get there,' Elsa retorted.

Daphne frowned. 'But, Elsa—! You'll starve! You must be sensible!'

Elsa sprang up and began to clear away the plates. 'Have you finished? I can't tell you any more yet; it's all too new. I hadn't thought of doing things quite on my own until this morning; I supposed the two of us would be in it together, whatever it was. Perhaps by night things will seem clearer. I've a week longer at college, before they close for the holidays, but it doesn't seem much use going on. As I can't afford to go back in the autumn I may as well give it up at once.'

'Do you feel bad about it?' Daphne demanded. 'It seems an awful pity to lose the good of all you've done, but I haven't felt you cared a terrible lot about the shorthand.'

'It may not be wasted; perhaps it will be useful some day. I don't care a hoot,' Elsa said decisively. 'I was never keen on being in an office, but it seemed the only thing I was fit for. If I can find anything else to do I'll be only too glad.'

'But what can you do?' Daphne persisted.

'I don't know yet. But quite likely it will be something you won't approve of,' and Elsa turned in the curtained doorway of her alcove. 'While Aunt Mary was alive it mattered what we did. But now, if it's a case of making a living or starving, I shan't care what I do—so long as I don't get into debt. I'll sweep a crossing, or scrub steps, rather than that; so you'd better be prepared for a shock. You gave me one; I may turn out to be a bit of a blow to you. But if I agree to put up with you, you'll have to put up with me. You'll be in London; you won't need to admit I'm a relation, if you're ashamed of me.' She dropped the curtain and vanished.

'My hat! What is the kid going to do?' Daphne said aloud, in consternation.

'Find some way to keep herself, without borrowing from anybody. Don't you worry!' came tartly from behind the blue curtain.

Daphne stared at it, then shrugged her shoulders and went to her own room.

CHAPTER V

ADVENTURE FOR TWO

Madame Roskova looked up as Daphne entered her private room. 'You wish to speak to me, my dear?'

Daphne curtsied. 'If you will be so kind, Madame.' She looked curiously at the girl who stood by the piano, wearing practice kit, tights and ballet shoes and a smooth tunic, her yellow curls tucked into a net. Daphne knew all the girls in the various classes, but she had not seen this one before.

Madame turned to the stranger. 'Go now, my dear; but think over that last phrase, and I will do the same. It may well be that you are right, though your idea is new to me.'

When the girl had gone, Madame turned to Daphne. 'Did you notice that child? She has made a bad beginning, but she will go far. Some day—perhaps soon—she will give us new dances. Now, my dear, what is your trouble?'

'Oh, Madame! It's too awful for words!' Daphne's tragedy swooped down upon her, and her voice shook with strong feeling. 'Our aunt has died, and there's no money. We can't afford to live in Town. I can't pay for any more classes. After yesterday, Madame! I told you what a lovely crit. I had. They want me to go and live at home and—and be a hairdresser's assistant!' She turned away to hide her trembling lips, and leaned on the high back of a chair, her face buried in her arms.

'Tut! That would be a sinful waste,' Madame exclaimed. 'Who wants this stupid plan, my dear?'

'Our lawyer. He doesn't want me to be a dancer. He hates ballet.' Daphne broke down and sobbed. 'And there's nobody to help.'

'You have no one else?'

'Only my sister. She's younger than I am.'

Bit by bit Madame drew the story from her. She frowned in dismay. 'My child, I am sorry. There seems no hope. And you have done so well. You will break your heart, if this other plan is forced on you.'

Daphne flung back her head, with a tragic gesture. 'I should die! I couldn't live and not dance. Madame—oh, won't you help me? You believe I've a future; won't you help me to win it?'

Madame knit her brows. 'You mean——?'

Daphne grew scarlet and then white. It was harder than she had expected. She had hoped Madame would meet her half-way.

'If you'd keep me on without fees, till I'm ready for a job, and let me pay you when I can,' she said unsteadily. 'And—and'—she faltered and her eyes fell—'I've no money, nothing to live on. Oh, Madame, could you—could you lend me just enough, until I begin to earn?' It came out with a rush, and again she flung back her head defiantly. 'I'm not ashamed to ask! I love dancing, and you love dancing, Madame. You believe I'll do well. Give me my chance! I'll pay back every penny at the first possible moment.'

'So!' Madame gazed at her contemplatively. There had been an unconscious touch of drama in the girl's face and voice which suggested the latent actress; hitherto Madame had found a dancer in Daphne but had been doubtful of her dramatic quality. Now, as Daphne pleaded for her future and thrust away all thought of shame, Madame's hopes for her rose.

Perhaps this deep distress had stirred some gift which until now she had not needed; a gift which could be trained.

In dire suspense Daphne waited, her hands clenched on the top of the chair.

‘It will not be easy,’ Madame said at last. ‘You have come at a bad time. I am putting on this new ballet with Antoine, and I had thought to use all that I have in the venture. If it succeeds—but you must have help at once. I must try to invest part in you; I believe it will bring me a good return some day. You are right; I have faith in your future, just as I have faith in *The Goose-girl*. The fees are nothing; you must come to classes as usual. But for yourself you must have funds; yes, I will invest something in your future, my child.’

‘Oh, Madame! Thank you a million times!’ Daphne flung herself on her knees and kissed Madame’s hand. ‘I will work! I’ll make you proud! Was I wrong to ask you, Madame? My sister was frightfully upset.’

‘No, you were right. You were thinking of your dancing, and that is more important than your pride. You did not find it easy, my dear?’

‘No,’ Daphne whispered. ‘Terribly hard, Madame. But I couldn’t go into the country and cut hair and set waves and manicure nails!’

‘No. It would not have been possible to you,’ Madame agreed. ‘And it would have been a sin. But tell me, child. This sister; you do not ask me for her also? I could not promise to keep two.’

‘Elsa wouldn’t take it,’ Daphne cried. ‘She’s utterly shocked and horrified because I said I would. Madame, you understand, I know; she couldn’t! It’s only because you love dancing and I want to dance that I could ask you for help. It isn’t for myself, exactly. It’s for something bigger than myself.’

‘Your art,’ Madame said at once. ‘That must come before your own wishes, before anything. It is because you feel this—because you cared enough to ask my help—that I know you are worth helping. You could not expect anyone to understand who is not an artist. Your sister—what is she like?’

‘Terribly jolly and sensible. She takes care of me, and of other people too. She’s practical; she knows what to do. I’ll find it awfully hard to live without her,’ Daphne said earnestly.

‘And what will she do with herself, in this little house by the sea?’

‘She’ll find something. I’m not worried about her; she keeps saying she’ll be all right.’

Madame gave her a look of complete understanding. Not selfish—but the single-minded artist; that was Daphne. Her gift, her art, would always come first. To stand by her sister, go home with her, and work out a plan together meant the sacrifice of the artistic future to which she felt called, and the thought would never occur to her. She was wholeheartedly loyal and she would sacrifice herself to the uttermost; but the loyalty and the sacrifice were for the ‘something bigger’ than herself, not for a mere sister, Daphne would forsake everything to follow her star.

‘This little sister is content that you should stay here and dance, while she goes home to seek an unknown fortune?’ Madame asked.

‘She wants me to go on dancing. She knows I must. When I’ve made my name, she’ll be terribly proud.’

‘Good!’ Madame said heartily. ‘I like this little sister. I hope her fortune will be worthy of her. It is an adventure for you both, but you must seek it separately. Now, my dear, we will have a business talk.’

At night in the Blue House Daphne told her story to Elsa and Irina. She coloured as she described how she had asked Madame for help, and looked away from Elsa's grave face, but turned to Irina, confident of finding sympathy.

'You asked Madame to keep you?' Irina's brows went up. 'Well, of all the cheek!'

'It wasn't cheek!' Daphne exclaimed. 'Madame understood, and I thought you would, too.'

'I'm glad she didn't fling you out. I couldn't have done it myself. You've found an easy way out of the mess.' Irina, who had struggled to support herself for years, spoke with good-natured contempt, as to a small child.

Daphne bit her lip. 'Irina! I was sure you'd understand!'

Irina glanced at Elsa. 'D'you like the idea?'

Elsa did not raise her eyes from the stocking she was darning. 'Not terribly much, but since Madame was so kind I feel better about it. She evidently didn't mind being asked.'

'She said I'd done right to come to her,' Daphne cried, deeply hurt by Irina's critical tone.

'Oh, well, if she's satisfied and you are, that's O.K.,' Irina said lightly. 'It's jolly for you; you'll have no more worries. Now what about Elsa?'

Daphne, amazed and wounded, found her affairs carelessly dismissed, as unworthy of further discussion. Astounded, she stared at Irina.

'You think I shouldn't have done it? You feel I—I've let myself down by going to Madame?' she demanded incredulously.

Irina shrugged her shoulders. 'It's succeeded, anyway. You've pulled it off; jolly clever of you! I wish I knew how you did it.'

'I wish I hadn't told you!'

'Don't worry! I shan't tell anybody,' Irina said coolly.

Daphne stared at her. 'I don't mind——' she stopped.

'Oh yes, you do! You wouldn't like the rest at the school to know?'

Daphne grew scarlet. 'Irina, how ghastly you are to-night!'

'Have you heard about Michelle?' Elsa interposed.

'No, and I don't care!' Daphne flared.

Irina turned from her. 'How is she, Elsa? I knew you'd have been to find out. Have you seen her?'

'I went along as soon as I came in. She's very seedy, and Miss Stewart has sent for the doctor. He says Michelle's completely run down; not exactly starved, but going on that way. She's been saving for months, in the hope of having a holiday with her mother, and the shock of her mother's death has knocked her over. It's not the bad crossing; that only finished her. He wants her to live in the country for a few weeks. She doesn't know anyone in the country and she doesn't want to go. He says she'll have an illness if she can't break off from her work for a while.'

'That's bad. Pity she didn't stay in France,' Irina said. 'Couldn't she go back?'

'She hasn't any friends there; she doesn't really know her mother's people.'

'She'll have to find rooms in the country, or a farmhouse. Can she afford it?' Irina asked.

'She'd saved something for the French holiday and she hasn't used it all on this trip; she has just a little. The trouble is that she doesn't want to go. She's lonely and she's thinking about her mother all the time; she'd rather keep on at her job and have something to do.' Elsa folded her stocking, her face thoughtful; she so obviously had more to say that the others waited, gazing at her curiously.

At last Elsa looked up. 'I'm going to ask Michelle if she'll come with me to Min-y-mor next week.'

'Indeed! And that's a very good idea,' Irina exclaimed. 'You couldn't live alone in a little house beside the sea.'

'But you can't take on an invalid, when you don't know how you're going to live,' Daphne protested. 'Don't be an ass, Elsa Dale! How are you going to feed her?'

Elsa looked determined. 'She'll come as a paying guest. I shall ask her if she can afford ten shillings a week. It will be something to start on.'

'Sound scheme!' Irina said. 'But will she fit in with your other plans? You haven't told me yet what you're going to do.'

'She doesn't know herself,' Daphne groaned. 'She's going to Sandylands to live in her house, and she's going to find some job. That's all she knows about it. She hasn't any plans.'

Irina raised her eyebrows. 'But Elsa's the practical one. It doesn't sound like her.'

'Have you had any ideas during the day?' Daphne looked at Elsa. 'Real ones, not vague suggestions?'

'Not exactly. I still think I'll have to go to Min-y-mor before I have the ideas,' Elsa said frankly. 'But I'm sure I can earn enough to pay for my food and I'll have no rent to find. I shan't need much; very plain food will do for me. If Michelle will come, she can have her bed and her share of the house in return for her company; I know she can't pay much. She'll have to be decently fed, of course, for that's part of her cure.'

'But how are you going to earn enough for yourself?' Daphne demanded. 'A paying guest at ten shillings a week is just giving away your chances. If you want to take lodgers, you should make it three guineas.'

'I might as well ask Michelle for the moon as for three guineas a week. And I want Michelle. I'd hate to live alone, and I'm sure Min-y-mor will put her right.'

'It's charity,' Daphne said flatly. 'You can't afford to do it. Burdening yourself with a groggy girl when you've nothing whatever to live on!'

'Have you any plans at all, Elsa?' Irina asked.

Elsa's face grew defiant. 'I hear a lot about the Guides from one of our girls. When they want to raise money for some big effort, they do it in all sorts of small ways. They offer to clean steps, and mind babies, and mow lawns, and weed paths. I could do all those. Even people with regular gardeners have things like paths, that they don't want to waste their man's time on; and I expect in the same way people who have a maid or a daily woman might be glad of extra help now and then. I shall go round and tell everybody I'm willing to do any kind of work for an hour at a time, and I'll take ninepence or a shilling an hour—whatever they think is fair, according to the sort of job. If I work three or four hours a day, I shall make enough to pay for my food.'

'You'll do that all right,' Irina gave an admiring laugh. 'But food isn't the whole of it. There'll be rates and taxes, my dear kid.'

'Not at once, I hope. I shall start a taxes fund,' Elsa said doggedly. 'Every penny I can spare will go into that. The rates can't be heavy; it's a little place. If I haven't saved enough I shall go to the office and ask them to wait; or there may be things in the house I could sell.'

'You've thought it out carefully,' Irina said. 'But won't you spend hours running round the town between your jobs, and perhaps doing only an hour's work at each?'

'I shall arrange that; I've an organizing mind. I shall ask people in the same district to have me on the same day.'

‘Elsa, you’re crazy!’ Daphne burst out. ‘Do you really mean to try this mad scheme?’

‘Can you tell me anything better?’

‘Consult Mr. Courtier and make him find you a decent job.’

‘No!’ Elsa said decisively. ‘That would mean a shop or being an untrained office girl. It’s not good enough.’

‘Is being a charwoman good enough?’ Daphne asked bitterly.

‘I said you’d be ashamed of me! I shan’t go about in an old cap and a dirty overall; I’ll promise you that. I’m not clever enough to be a charlady; I’ll call myself an unofficial home assistant—“all jobs in house, garden, or nursery cheerfully undertaken and efficiently carried out”. I shall write it on postcards and deliver them all round the neighbourhood. I’ll have marvellous adventures!’

‘You’re quite mad!’ Daphne exploded.

‘I know what I want, anyway. I’m not going into an office. I never wanted it, and now that the chance has come I’m done with shorthand and book-keeping. At college to-day I suddenly saw that there were other ways and that I could be free from grammalogues and contractions for ever. I felt ten years younger at once.’

‘I’ll say you did!’ Daphne stormed. ‘About six, you are, in your ideas!’

‘Not a bit of it,’ Irina interposed. ‘As a temporary thing, Elsa’s ideas are top-hole. I can understand how she feels about the office; sort of shaking the dust off your feet and turning your face to the future, I suppose, Elsie?’

Elsa nodded. ‘That’s it. But don’t call me Elsie, even if it’s meant in love. Elsie is soft and silly, the village maiden type. Elsa is a princess; didn’t you know?’

‘Gosh, no! How d’you make that out?’

‘Elsa was the daughter of the Duke of Brabant, and Lohengrin came in the car drawn by the white swan and rescued her. I’m called after her; our mother sang in opera and Elsa was her favourite part. I’m not like the real Elsa, of course; she must have been a lovely person, with two thick yellow plaits, like Daphne’s. Daphne looks like Elsa; I don’t. But I have a princess’s name, so please never call me Elsie again. I’ve suffered from it all my school life.’

‘I won’t!’ Irina promised. ‘I didn’t know about the princess. But, my dear kid, it’s your future that worries me. You can’t spend all your life messing about in odd jobs.’

‘Of course she can’t!’ Daphne cried. ‘Her plan’s horrible and there’s no future in it.’

‘The future can take care of itself.’ Elsa folded her second stocking. ‘Perhaps the white swan will come to my rescue—but I don’t particularly want to be bothered with the knight! If you’d been darning all this time your stockings would be done and you wouldn’t have wasted half an hour. I’m going to talk to Michelle.’

CHAPTER VI

ELSA'S FAMILY

'How can I stop her, Irina?' Daphne burst out.

'You can't. Why should you? She can't live for ever on odd jobs, but something bigger may come along.'

'I hate the thought of it.' Daphne frowned. 'She's not thinking of the future at all.'

'She's leaving the future to take care of itself. You can't do anything.'

'I could write to Mr. Courtier. He'd look after her.'

'And he'll ask what you are doing.'

Daphne bit her lip. 'I can't drag him into it, then. Elsa won't tell him about me, unless I put him on her track. Irina, why do you hate my plan so much? I was sure you'd understand. I knew Elsa would be upset, but I thought you'd see that I must go on dancing. I'm thinking of the future, if she isn't. If I go ahead, there'll be good times for both of us.'

'Dancers don't make fortunes, unless they're right at the top,' Irina remarked. 'You may repay Madame and keep yourself, but you won't be rolling in wealth for a long while. Elsa had better depend on herself.'

'But tell me why you're mad with me,' Daphne insisted.

'I don't know that I am mad with you. At first it seemed odd that you should borrow from Madame.'

Daphne winced. 'It sounds awful. I don't like it myself, but there was no other way. Madame said I'd done right to ask her.'

'Perhaps you were right. It's a more practical plan than Elsa's; it's only sensible to finish your training. I wish she could have finished hers too. But Elsa's been a brick, Daphne. Look how she's stuck to shorthand all this year! She evidently hasn't cared two hoots about it, but she couldn't see anything else to do. If she'd thrown it up and gone home, you'd have been left alone. I take off my hat to Elsa! Now she sees a chance of escape, and as she can't afford to stay at college she's going to seize it. She'll have far more fun in this new line, and she knows you'll be all right. It's not as if you were just starting to live in Town. You've plenty of friends, and you'll be hard at work. Nothing will happen to you; she isn't needed now.'

Daphne sat brooding; at last she looked up. 'But you think I oughtn't to have gone to Madame? You feel it lets me down?'

'I did at first,' Irina admitted. 'One has a feeling against living on borrowed money. And it leaves you in debt to Madame. But you haven't borrowed without knowing how you're going to pay her back; that makes a difference. There's no doubt you will get work, with her help, and that will put everything right.'

'Of course it makes a difference,' Daphne said indignantly. 'I'd never have borrowed just to go on living, or to have an easy time; Madame understands that. It's for the sake of my work, because I know I shall make good, if only I get the chance. She's giving me my chance, that's all.'

Irina nodded. 'Right! I won't say any more about it. At first I felt you'd taken a jolly easy way out of your troubles, but I see there's more in it.'

'Easy!' Daphne stared at her. 'If you think it was easy to ask Madame, I'm sorry for you! It was the hardest thing I ever did. I tell you, it needed real courage; I almost funked it. But I care so frightfully much; that pulled me through.'

‘Indeed then, I apologize,’ Irina cried. ‘I know I hurt you; I’m sorry! If Elsa’s going away, and perhaps Michelle, you and I must be pals, Daphne. We’ll miss the others frightfully. Rainbow Corner won’t be itself without Elsa.’

‘I shall miss her, you may be sure,’ Daphne groaned. ‘Yes, we’ll stick together, Irina. You’ll go on helping me, and telling me things, won’t you?’

‘Sure. And you’ll tell me about Elsa’s adventures,’ Irina said heartily.

Michelle looked very small and tired as Elsa seated herself on the bed and gazed at her. She had big brown eyes and heavy black hair, which lay in a thick plait on her shoulder.

‘Feeling better? For I’ve come to talk business,’ Elsa announced briskly.

‘What business can you possibly talk with me?’ Michelle gave her a rather shaky smile.

‘Heaps. I’m going to live in Somerset, at the seaside. I’ve a house with a jolly bedroom downstairs and another in the attic. Will you come and live with me for a few weeks, till you’re strong again?’

Michelle gasped. ‘Elsa Dale! What has happened? What does Daphne say? What about her dancing?’

‘Daphne isn’t coming; she must go on with her work, of course. It’s a story; would you like to hear it?’

‘Yes, please. I’d like to stay with you,’ Michelle said wistfully. ‘You always seem so much alive.’

Elsa laughed. ‘I’ll be much more alive when I get home! I’ve felt stifled here. Wait till you see where I live! I hope you love the sea?’

‘I don’t even like it.’ Michelle shuddered. ‘I’m afraid of the sea.’

‘Oh, but your sea and mine are different. Yours is a thing to be crossed to get to the other side; and a thing that separated you from your mother and made you sea-sick. Mine’s a beautiful friendly person who whispers to me in the night and is always lovely to look at, but never twice the same. Of course he gets in a temper and makes a row, but he’s not very bad, where I live.’

‘Elsa, you’re a poet!’

‘I’m not; I’m a practical business woman. But I’ve lived all my life by the sea, until this last year, and nobody knows how much I’ve missed it. Daphne’s been so wrapped up in her dancing that she hasn’t felt bad, but I’ve never really cared about college, and inside me I’ve been bored. I’ve felt desperate at times; I’ve wanted the sea so badly. You’ll soon learn to love my sea!’

She plunged into her story, and Michelle listened with startled eyes. She heard the tale to the end without comment, and then asked, ‘And you’ll be quite alone unless I come?’

Elsa’s eyes danced. ‘Not quite. Mr. Courtier has put in a woman to keep the house decent, but I shall get rid of her. But there will be two little black faces to welcome me.’

‘Little black——! Oh, do you mean dogs? I love dogs!’

‘Cheers! Only one dog, though; an Aberdeen, three years old—still young enough to bark at the waves and chase seagulls. The other’s a gentlemanly black cat. We call them Min and Mor; the house is Min-y-mor—“beside the sea”. Min’s the cat and Mor’s the dog.’

Michelle lay and laughed. ‘I shall love Min and Mor! Will they be glad to see you?’

‘Mor will have hysterics; the whole of Sandylands will hear about me. Min won’t say anything; he’s very self-contained; but he’ll show he’s pleased. That’s my family, and not one of us has anything to live on. We thought perhaps if we took a lodger for the first few weeks——’ Elsa’s eyes sparkled.

‘Oh, I’ll come! They all say I must go somewhere. I didn’t want to go, but if you’ll have me—you and Min and Mor!—it will be going into a family, being with people—the thing I want most of all!’ Michelle’s voice broke. ‘That’s what I’ve been hungry for, Elsa Dale!’

‘I guessed that,’ Elsa said cheerfully. ‘That’s jolly, then. We’ll give you what you want, and you’ll be extremely useful to us. Get strong as fast as you can, for I want to start for home. And you won’t laugh at my silly little plans?’ Her eyes danced again. ‘Daphne and Irene Jones are making me feel very young and foolish.’

‘You won’t stay at odd jobs. They’re only a beginning.’

‘I feel that definitely.’ Elsa grew serious. ‘I’m sure there’s something waiting for me, some real job that will be worth while. I don’t mean in any mysterious way; I’m not psychic, or any rot like that! But there’s something I haven’t thought of, and I shan’t think of it till I’m there on the spot. That would sound too vague to Daphne, so I had to produce other ideas, and I’m quite keen on my unofficial-assistance-scheme, if nothing else turns up. But I shan’t be a scrap surprised if I find my work waiting for me at Min-y-mor.’

‘You might keep chickens; or grow flowers.’

‘Needs capital, to start; and we’re too near the sea.’

‘Practical person!’ Michelle said. ‘Well, take in boarders, starting with me! But not yet; you aren’t old enough.’

‘I’m old enough for the odd jobs, though. People will laugh and say, “She’s only a kiddy.” They won’t scorn me as they would a grown-up woman, and they’ll find I can work; I’m strong and keen. Later on I’ll do something better. Daphne’s having fits because I’m not thinking about the future, but the present is what matters just now.’

‘Surely. But what’s Daphne going to do?’

‘Oh, that’s all right!’ Elsa said, with deliberate vagueness. ‘She’s arranged it with Madame. She must keep on with her training, of course; it’s different for me. Can you get sick leave from your work?’

‘I shall try, but I don’t believe they’ll give me more than a week. I’ve had a week already, to go to France; I was due a fortnight’s holiday, but I can’t expect more than that. If they sack me I’ll have to look for something else when I come back to Town.’

‘Perhaps you won’t want to come back,’ Elsa began. ‘You may find your work at Sandylands too. It’s quite a big place. With your London training I should think you’d find something, and you could go on living with me.’

‘And Min and Mor! How I’d love it!’ Michelle cried wistfully. ‘It would be like having a home. You’ll always make a home, wherever you live.’

‘What a lovely compliment! But you must have a holiday and be really strong before you talk about another job. I’m sure you’ll find one, either in Town or Sandylands; your work’s so good,’ Elsa said cheerfully. ‘Now go to sleep and dream about me and the seagulls and my little black friends!’

As she reached the door Michelle called after her. ‘Elsa! If I lose my job I’d better give up this room. I can get another if I come back to Town.’

Elsa paused. ‘Rather like burning your boats! But if you’ve the courage, it would be only sensible. You don’t want to pay for two places, and you might not come back.’

‘I could give you what I’m paying here, if you would store my possessions. I haven’t a great deal. Would you have room?’

‘Plenty of room. But I couldn’t take so much as that. You must save something, until you find your new job,’ Elsa scolded. ‘A pound a week would be wealth to me and Min and Mor!’

‘It isn’t enough, but I’m too tired to argue. I’ve put away enough for my expenses here, for a few weeks ahead; I’ve always tried to do that, in case I lost my job. If I give up this place I shall share with you. This is why I spoke of it; couldn’t Daphne have this room when I go? She won’t want to keep on your bigger flat.’

‘What a marvellous idea!’ Elsa cried. ‘Oh, tophole, Michelle! Of course Daphne won’t be able to afford a double flat! This would be exactly right, and Irina’s door is just across the passage. I wonder who will take the Blue House? It might make a difference to Daphne and Irina.’

‘I can tell you who will take it. Miss Stewart said that she wished I had a double flat, as, if I left it, she’d take it at once. She has a friend who wants to join her and there isn’t a double flat to be had in the building. They’re afraid they’ll have to live separately. The Blue House is just what they want.’

‘I don’t mean to be unkind,’ Elsa said, ‘but I can’t help hoping you’ll get the sack, Michelle! I’d love to have you with me indefinitely, and I’d love to feel Miss Stewart was living in C. She’d keep an eye on Daphne; she mothers everybody. I don’t like leaving Daphne on her own; I’ve always seen that she had a decent meal when she came in tired, and little things like that.’

‘You sound as if you were her mother!’ Michelle protested. ‘Aren’t you younger than Daphne?’

‘Just a year. But I’m much more sensible.’

‘I’m sure you are! You don’t think Daphne will ask Irene Jones to share the bigger flat?’

‘Oh no,’ Elsa said with decision. ‘Daphne wouldn’t do that. She likes Irene, but she wouldn’t want to live with her. And I wouldn’t want her to do it. She’ll see quite enough of Irene, if I’m not here, without living with her.’

‘Will Daphne mind living alone?’

‘She won’t have time to think about it; she’ll plunge into work and live for nothing else. I hope she won’t overdo it; I shall ask Miss Stewart to watch her and see if she’s having proper meals. Daphne won’t like having to cook her own breakfasts and suppers!’

‘I always suspected you did more than your share,’ Michelle remarked.

‘Oh well, I don’t work as hard as she does. She comes in fagged out. But she’ll be looked after; they’ll know at the school if she’s messing up her meals or getting run down. You can’t dance her strenuous sort of stuff unless you’re properly fed. Madame will be down on her if she slacks on her meals.’

‘That’s true. You needn’t be worried about her.’

‘No, she’ll be all right. But it would be marvellous to know Miss Stewart was next door to her,’ Elsa said.

‘I shall tell Miss Stewart, and you can tell Daphne. I can’t afford to keep on the room if I lose my job, and I’m sure they won’t give me more than my second week.’

‘A week’s no use to you. You need at least a month,’ Elsa’s tone was firm. ‘You’ll easily find another job, either at Sandylands or in Town.’

PART II
ELSA BY THE SEA

CHAPTER VII

MICHELLE WAKES AT MIN-Y-MOR

‘Nearly there!’ Elsa said cheerfully. ‘This is the last lap.’

Michelle lay limply in her corner, anxious only to have the journey over. A cup of tea had done her good, but she was very tired.

The days of bustle and packing seemed an ugly dream. Three things stood out in her mind: her own exhaustion and unfitness to help; Daphne’s disapproving voice, as she spoke in the next room, just too loudly—‘Taking on a crocked-up girl! You’ll have quite enough to do to keep yourself!’—and Elsa’s ‘organizing mind’ grappling with the situation and deciding everything—‘You’ll take these, and leave that lot. Daphne will take care of them for you. Now I’ll pack your clothes; where’s your suit-case?’ What a relief it had been to find the problems solved and the difficulties taken out of her hands!

‘I’ve been a fearful nuisance to you, but I’ll be all right presently. It’s only that I’m so frightfully tired,’ she said wearily.

Elsa was gazing out at a long green hill, with a quarry cut in its side and a sort of white lighthouse on the top.

‘Oh, of course!’ she turned quickly. ‘You’re all to pieces, but a few days will put you right. You weren’t fit for the packing and the journey. I’m going to put you to bed and keep you there for a week. Talking of beds, would you like to sleep upstairs or down? Daphne and I had the big attic and Aunt Mary had a jolly room downstairs. They’re both ready; it’s for you to choose. There are stairs, if you have the attic, but it’s a lovely room when you get there, with a view all over the bay. But if the stairs will worry you, you can have Auntie’s room. Would you be nervous of sleeping alone on the ground floor?’

Michelle coloured. ‘I’d much rather be upstairs, if I may. I’ve never slept in a downstairs room; it would feel queer. But why should I be the one to choose?’

‘Because I like them both! Good! Then we’ll help you up and you shall have the whole top flat for your own. You’ll soon be leaping up and down the stairs and thinking nothing of it. We’re just at Sandylands; that hill is the wall that keeps out the north wind from our bay. Can you stand a bus ride? We’re rather far from the station.’ She looked at her friend anxiously.

Michelle threw her purse into her lap. ‘A taxi, Elsa, even if it means bread and water for a week. Not a bus to-night!’

‘I’ll try to make it bread and milk!’ Elsa laughed. ‘Oh well, we’ll be extravagant for the last time. I’ve still twopence-halfpenny left; we’ll go shares.’

‘No, it’s for me. I must pay.’

‘Don’t argue,’ Elsa scolded. ‘Here we are!’

Michelle, worn out, allowed herself to be helped into the taxi and surrounded by luggage. Elsa glanced at her, then took the seat by the driver and left her to herself, and Michelle was grateful and remembered little of the long ride. They passed houses and gardens; then no houses and no gardens, but open spaces; then smaller buildings in a village. She hardly saw the little house which was the end of their journey; it was white, with a dark roof, and something red was growing up the walls. A woman welcomed them at the door, and exclaimed at sight of Michelle’s white face.

‘Upstairs and to bed at once.’ Elsa’s tone was full of authority.

In a dream Michelle found herself put to bed, found Elsa standing over her with a steaming bowl of bread and milk, and then fell asleep, conscious only of blissful comfort and relaxed limbs.

She was too completely exhausted to sleep soundly, however, and after a couple of hours she woke and found her attic room nearly dark. She was aching all over and she turned and sighed and wished she could sleep again; but at least everything was quiet, after the bump and rattle of the train.

A light curtain hung over the dormer window and a faint glow shone through it. Was it sunset?—she wondered dreamily.

Then she became conscious of sounds in what had at first seemed silence; a steady rhythmic beat, a light splash of water, on and on, and a gentle gurgle, as of a stream. She remembered Elsa's words—'who whispers to me in the night'. Could this be the sea? Could the sea be so gentle? Where were the waves that had tossed the steamer and made it roll and had slapped at the side?

Then a voice, calling very softly, just below the window. 'Min, dear Min! Oh, won't you come in?'

Michelle thought sleepily, 'Elsa, calling her family. I wonder if they were glad to see her? I haven't heard the dog barking, as she said he would.'

She heard a door close and indoors all was quiet. 'Min must have come when he was called,' she said to herself, and did not realize that the last voice she would hear every night would be Elsa's call to her friend—'Min, dear Min! Oh, won't you come in?'

Outside the gentle splash went on. Michelle lay and listened, and slept again, this time for many hours.

She woke to bright sunshine, pouring in through a small window opposite the dormer which had shown the evening glow. Some sound had roused her; as she waited she heard the click of a closing gate.

'The latch must have wakened me. Is Elsa going out?' Surprised at her own energy, she dragged herself to the window, and forgot her aching body in sheer astonishment and delight.

Here was space she had never dreamed of—long shining wet sands, stretching for miles; a distant sea, a huge blue arch of sky, a great green hump of an island; and one small figure in a blue bathing-suit leaping across the sands towards the edge of the tide, a rainbow-coloured wrap on her arm.

'Is it Elsa? Oh, how marvellous!' Michelle gasped.

She watched as Elsa raced along the sands towards distant houses which must be the town, scattering crowds of seagulls, which rose screaming from her path. Having apparently reached a spot that pleased her, she dropped her wrap, danced across the wet sand, and waded carefully into the sea, pausing in a way that suggested she had found the water cold. Then she plunged in and began to splash.

Michelle laughed and crept back to bed with a shiver. 'Marvellous to have such energy—after yesterday! Perhaps she'll pass some of it on to me. I must have slept well; I don't feel as limp as I did in Town.'

She was still tired, however, and she lay dozing, and woke with a start an hour later to find Elsa in the doorway, a tray with tea and biscuits in her hands.

'Oh! I've been to sleep again. I saw you—oh, you do look nice!' Michelle cried.

Elsa, her brown hair still damp and wind-tossed, wore a pink jersey and long blue trousers. Laughing, she put down the tray and drew the curtains.

‘Do you mind my slacks? They were Aunt’s Christmas present, and I love them, for the sands. I don’t wear them to go to the town, though heaps of people do. But here, out on the shore, they’re the right thing.’

‘I like them,’ Michelle exclaimed. ‘Did Daphne have them too?’

‘She had a new ballet dress. Aunt shouted with laughter when I said I wanted slacks; she’d offered me a silk frock. She was a sport, and I think she liked my legs. How did you sleep? You look better!’

‘Like a log. I heard you call the cat and then I knew nothing more till you went out to bathe.’

‘Sounds as if I’d disturbed you rather a lot! I tried to be so quiet,’ Elsa said ruefully.

‘You were quiet. I’d slept so well that I had to wake. It’s such a relief! I’ve not been sleeping well. I don’t know when I had such a restful night.’

‘Oh, good! That’s our air; it’s the best in the country. In a week you’ll be bounding about the sands as I do. Will you wear slacks too? Or shorts?’ Elsa settled the tray on Michelle’s knee. ‘There! After this you’re to go to sleep again; it’s only seven o’clock. I was up at six, for my dip; I just had to get into the sea! I nearly went last night, but there was too much to do.’

‘Why did you go so far along the sands before you went in?’ Michelle asked, as she poured the tea. ‘I’m so glad you brought your own cup! It’s much nicer to have it together.’

‘That’s what I thought. Because of the river,’ Elsa explained, as she took her cup. ‘The tide’s going down and there’s always a little current from the river. On a rising tide it doesn’t matter; but on the ebb I don’t bathe too near.’

‘I didn’t see any river. Where is it?’

‘Didn’t you hear it?’

‘I thought it was the sea that I heard.’

‘The splash, that goes on steadily, was the sea, but the gurgle-gurgle was the river, swishing down between its banks. Didn’t you hear that?’

‘I did, but I didn’t understand. I want to get up,’ Michelle exclaimed. ‘There’s so much to see!’

‘But you need a week in bed—or at least two days,’ Elsa protested.

‘I’m better,’ Michelle pleaded. ‘I’ll go to bed again in the afternoon, but I want to see things, Elsa!’

Elsa’s eyes gleamed. ‘I knew what Min-y-mor would do for you! It won’t do you a scrap of good to lie in bed if you’re craving to be up. Will you take things very easily and just be lazy? I’ll be busy all morning.’

‘I’ll promise! I don’t say I can do much yet, but if I could crawl out and sit in the sun—’ Michelle began.

‘With my dear Min for company! Right! You shall. I have Mrs. Price coming for the morning; there’s a lot to do,’ Elsa explained. ‘The afternoon’s to be a holiday—my summer holiday! And you’ll go back to bed. To-morrow I shall go round asking people for jobs.’

‘Must you start at once?’

‘I want to get to work. I’ve had some bits of luck; there are things I can sell, if I have to do it; but I’d rather feel I was paying my way. Of course if I sell anything I shall share with Daphne.’

‘But the things in the house were left to you, weren’t they?’

‘I couldn’t leave her out. I’d share the house with her, if she’d let me; but she won’t come home. I shall only take half of anything I sell; but I don’t want to sell things yet. I said I’d

work and I mean to do it. But I've had no holiday and it's the end of the term. I can surely take one afternoon off!

'Surely! What do you want to do?'

'Take out my boat,' Elsa said promptly. 'I've a steady old thing, parked in the river; Auntie always let me go out alone, or with Daphne, so long as we didn't go far. I shall go across to the island; I adore that island, in spite of its horrid name, which I hardly ever use. It's called Car-Ogre—the fort of the Ogre, it probably means. I'm sure so beautiful a place never had an ogre!'

'The big green hill? I thought it was joined on to the sands.'

'It is, but on the other side of the river; we're cut off from it. The island makes a sort of harbour, sheltering this corner of the bay. I'll row across and go along the sands.'

'There ought to be a ferry,' Michelle said. 'How do people get there, if they haven't a boat?'

'There was a ferry, but the old man died a year ago and no one else took it on. There is a way by road; you can go by bus or car, but you have to go about eight miles round, to avoid the sands. They're treacherous on that side; patches of quicksand, that shift about. The road sweeps round and comes back to the coast near the island; my way, by my boat and then along the dykes—raised banks of hard sand, above the pools—is much quicker.'

'It sounds a much jollier way. What is there on the island?'

'Nothing!' Elsa laughed. 'Turf, and sheep, and gulls. It's a haunt of all kinds of sea birds. People go there to picnic and to see the birds. I love the wind on the top. Now tell me! Is this room all right for you? Are you sure you don't mind the stairs?'

'I love my top flat! I'd far rather be here than downstairs. The sun comes in at both ends; I've discovered that already.'

'You've been quick! That's all right, then. I like being downstairs; it's so handy for the kitchen and for running in and out. And Min is so pleased to have somebody in Auntie's room again! He always slept with her and now he's adopted me. You'd have had to be a mother to him if you'd chosen the other room.'

'I want to see Min. And—oh, Elsa, where's the dog? You said I'd hear him. How have you kept him so quiet?'

Elsa's eyes lit up. 'I couldn't have done it. He hasn't come home yet. Mr. Courtier sent him to the vet., to be looked after, when Aunt Mary was taken ill, and I asked Mrs. Price to fetch him this morning. I know what Mor will be like when he sees me, and I didn't want you disturbed last night.'

'But how lovely of you!' Michelle exclaimed. 'You went without him for the whole night, just for me?'

'One more night didn't matter. Min was very much astonished, when he saw me.' Elsa put the cups together on the tray. 'He stalked up to me and rubbed on my legs, singing at the top of his voice; and he's following me about as if he daren't let me out of his sight. But he didn't go bathing; he waited for me at the gate. Now I'm going to do an hour's work and then get breakfast, and then Mrs. Price and Mor will arrive. Will you go to sleep again?'

'No.' Michelle's voice had more life and decision than it had held for months. 'I shall lie and be comfy for a while and then I shall dress slowly and come down to join you. I'd really like it; I want to see your house.'

'Sure you can do it? Then I'll bring hot water.'

'What work are you going to do, in such a hurry?'

Elsa paused at the door, the tray in her hands. 'Well, you see, I'm using Aunty's room; I hadn't realized it would be full of her things; clothes and so on. I'll have to sort them and clear them out; there's no one else to do it. It's no use being sentimental about it; they aren't any good to me, but they'll be valuable to some people. I shall do it by degrees, when I haven't other jobs, but already I've seen things that will be useful to Mrs. Price, and she's a decent soul and so honest that she hasn't touched a thing. I'm going to look out a pile of coats, and hats, and frocks for her; it's the first step.'

Michelle nodded. 'You're very wise. Perhaps later I could help,' and she lay dreaming and listening to the quiet wash of the river, and the screaming of the gulls. 'I suppose the sea's gone too far away. I don't hear it, as I did in the night. I'm going to love this place!' and presently, when she began to dress, she went to the dormer window again, to look at the bay and the sands and the withdrawn sea, and Elsa's green island.

'I still don't see any river! There's the other window, though.'

She went to the back window, through which the sun was streaming, and cried out in delight, for here were green hills, one crowned by a ruined church, and cottages clustered under a white cliff, and a gleam of water.

'Could that be the river? But how does it reach the sea? I must find out about this place. We seem to be half-way between the sea and the land!' and she began to dress in earnest.

CHAPTER VIII

THE COMING OF THE WHITE SWAN

‘Oh, cheers! You do look fit!’ Elsa cried, coming to the door of the kitchen. ‘I knew Min-mor would cure you, but I didn’t expect it to happen in half a day.’

‘It’s not a complete cure yet; I’m rather shaky still. But it’s going to be,’ Michelle assured her.

‘Of course. Come in here, to the sunshine! Do you mind breakfast in the kitchen? It saves carrying, and it’s such a nice morning room.’

‘It is a nice morning room,’ Michelle agreed, sinking on a chintz-covered seat by a lattice window, with sun pouring in upon her.

A long-legged black gentleman in a shining velvet coat looked up at her from the flagged path outside, his green eyes inquiring, his tail erect with a curl at the end. He placed two white feet on the sill and sprang up, then stepped daintily inside, and seated himself on her lap, curling round with a sigh of content.

‘You darling!’ Michelle exclaimed. ‘What a compliment!’

Elsa, timing her eggs, laughed. ‘Not really. He’ll sit on anybody, and I haven’t time to nurse him. Aunty let him use her lap, but Mrs. Price isn’t keen on cats. Min’s great desire is to sit on somebody. I’ll pull the table up and you won’t have to disturb him.’

Min sang psalms of joy over this arrangement, and Michelle, basking in the sun as he was doing, looked round the room in delight. ‘It feels so homelike to have meals in the kitchen!’

‘Only breakfast,’ Elsa said firmly. ‘And only because of the sun. After twelve the other room’s jollier. You’re to have all the sun you can stand, and I want it too, after London.’

‘London seems a thousand miles away and a thousand years behind me. I don’t know how I’ll ever go back.’

‘It does, rather. Perhaps you won’t. But this, place is fearfully lonely in winter. Do you see what Min’s doing?’

‘Washing?’ Michelle stroked the sleek black head. ‘He’s working hard.’

‘He’s so much amused by those white stockings that he spends hours washing them every day. He’s fearfully proud of them.’

Michelle laughed. ‘He has no other white on him, has he?’

‘Only his front toes. They’re jolly useful! When I call him at night, I can see him by his feet. Listen!’ Elsa’s face lit up. ‘Do you hear that little voice? Mrs. Price is early; we must hurry. But I must go and meet Mor!’

Michelle put Min down gently and hurried after her. A woman was crossing the sand to the gate, and a purposeful young Aberdonian was trotting towards the sea, his little ears and tail erect. He gave another staccato bark, and the gulls rose from the wet sand with angry screams.

‘Mor! Mor!’ cried Elsa, from the gate.

Mor paused and turned his head, startled unbelief in every shaggy hair. Then with a wild yelp he rushed upon her.

Elsa knelt and held out her arms, and he flung himself into them, barking and wagging hysterically. The onslaught bowled her over and they rolled together in the sand, both laughing and exclaiming with joy, in their different ways.

‘My! You look better, miss!’ Mrs. Price exclaimed.

Michelle, watching with amused sympathy, turned to her. 'Indeed I am! What is it about this place? I feel a different person!'

'It's the hair. Hair like wine; that's what it says on them postages. Sets everybody up, it do.'

'Postages? Oh, posters!' Michelle murmured. 'Well, the wine has certainly done me good!'

Mor broke away from Elsa and rushed round and round in wide circles, biting the sand and throwing it up in his glee.

Elsa laughed and came to finish her breakfast. 'Nice of you to bring him so early, Mrs. Price! We won't be long. Aren't you starving, Michelle?'

'I haven't been so hungry for months. A pound a week won't pay for my food.'

'Oh, won't it! I want you to be hungry and sleepy; those are the correct results of Min-y-mor. Here comes the tornado!'

Mor, finding her gone, rushed through the house like a whirlwind; then, with a grunt of joy, he settled at Elsa's feet, his red tongue hanging out, his bright eyes expectant. She fed him with scraps, and his stumpy tail beat a joyful tattoo on the floor.

All the morning he trotted after Elsa, while Michelle drowsed in the sun, Min sleeping in her lap but waking suddenly at intervals to give an extra polish to his white feet. When Elsa called that dinner was ready, Michelle woke with a start from a refreshing sleep.

'Don't move,' Elsa commanded, bringing a folding table. 'We often have meals out here. Mrs. Price is busy indoors still,' and she brought plates of hot soup. 'You won't get three or four courses, but you'll have plenty and it will be good.'

'It is good! I'm hungry again, though I've done nothing all morning.'

'Sleep's your job just now. When Mrs. Price goes I'll show you round, and then you'll go to bed and I'll be off to my island.'

'I've seen one thing you can sell,' Michelle remarked.

'Aunty's piano; yes, it's a good one. I'd be sorry, for she loved it and she used to play to us; Daphne knew the Chopin music long before she heard of the ballets that are made for it. Aunty taught us to play; neither of us was particularly good, but we loved listening to her. I shall keep the piano as long as I can.'

'I love this!' Michelle looked at the fuchsia which clothed the white walls and was hung with scarlet bells.

'The garden's too small and sandy to grow much, but the fuchsia loves the sea, as I do.'

The door by which they sat opened into a tiny hall, leading to the kitchen. On one side was Elsa's bedroom; on the other was a pleasant lounge-sitting-room, with the piano, several overfull bookcases, and a solid table for meals or work, all coloured to match the outside world—sandy walls, sea-green curtains and cushions and carpet. The bathroom was behind Elsa's room; the whole top floor was one big attic, but had a rail across for a curtain which would divide it into two.

'You could use one half to store your goods, when they come,' Elsa said. 'With the curtain down, the other half would be very cosy.'

'But I don't understand,' Michelle said. 'Where's the river? And is that the town over there?'

'You can't see much of the town, except where it climbs that hill we saw from the train. We're too low; you must go up to Hilltop Church; then you'll see Sandylands. We only see the hotels along the promenade, and the piers; there's a lot more of it behind. Hillside, our village,

where Mrs. Price lives, is up that lane, below the green hill with the church; we're two miles from the town by road. There are plenty of buses, but the jollier way is to walk along the sands. As for the river—come and see! I'm going off for my summer holiday! Come along, Mor, my dear!

Carrying a pair of light oars, she led Michelle across the sand, and Mor raced round them and told the universe what a happy place the world had suddenly become. To their left, as they went towards the sea, was Min-y-mor and behind it were the village roofs and the green hills; to their right rose the high green ridge which Elsa called her island, but which was joined to the land by long stretches of wet sand, crossed by firm raised dykes. So far as Michelle could see, they could walk to it from where they stood.

'There!' said Elsa.

The sand fell away at their feet in a steep bank. Opposite was another bank and between ran the river, swishing slowly along with a quiet gurgle.

'Oh, how it's hidden! I never dreamed it was there!' Michelle cried. 'It's not very wide, is it?'

'It's wider at high tide. The sea fills it twice a day; tide's falling quickly now. At spring tide it comes to the top of the banks and floods right across the sands—a fine sight. Even at low tide, with only a yard or two of water, it's deep enough to need a boat. Yes, Mor, we're going! He heard me say "boat".' Elsa laughed, as Mor broke into sharp peals of delight. 'Now you will go to bed, won't you? Then my mind will be easy about you.'

'I promise. Have a good summer holiday!'

Elsa ran down the muddy bank to the old boat which was moored to a post, Mor in hysterical joy at her heels. 'Rather! You bet I shall!'

Michelle watched as she put out the oars and took the boat across. Then, as Elsa climbed the opposite bank, waved good-bye, and set out along the dyke with the happy Mor, she went back to the house to sleep.

Elsa was thoughtful as she climbed to the top of the green ridge and wandered over the turf. There was a mile-long stretch here, though it was only a quarter of a mile wide; the view of sea and bay, Welsh hills and Somerset coast, was magnificent, but she knew it well and while she delighted in this return and in Mor's excited joy, she was puzzling over her problems. It was necessary, of course, to be confident and cheerful before Michelle, but she was too clear-sighted and practical not to feel her difficulties acutely. There was very little money, except Michelle's contribution, and there were inevitable expenses. Michelle's savings would not last long.

'And anyway, I can't live on her,' she said, as she reached the point and stood in the wind, her hair and her slacks blown back. 'She's getting value for every penny at present, but once she's fit again I shan't feel I'm doing enough for her. I must have a job, and I must have it soon. I haven't found anything waiting for me, as I hoped, so I must fall back on my other plan.'

She turned to look over Sandylands—houses, churches, hotels, big roofs of cinemas and banks. 'There must be work to be found there! I shall start my hunt to-morrow. I don't mind if it's weeding or odd jobs about a house, but I must have something to do—and quickly. Come on, Mor! You can't catch those birds, you know!'

After a long afternoon of wandering round her favourite nooks she went down to the sands and along the dyke to her boat. 'Jolly to have had old Car-Ogre all to myself! It's a long way for trippers, but some usually manage to come.'

She climbed the bank and moored her boat to the post at the top, with a long rope, so that it would float with the tide. Then she turned to look at a small car which was racing along the sand towards her.

It seemed very full. As it drew near she laughed, for it was crowded with Boy Scouts. Five were packed in behind, and one more, beside the Scoutmaster who was driving, held aloft a pole with the patrol flag.

The boys were gazing at the girl in jersey and slacks, with wind-tossed brown hair. The car swept up to her, and she heard a shrill wistful voice exclaim—‘Gosh! D’you think she’s got a boat?’

‘She’s got oars, anyway,’ cried another.

Elsa’s eyes gleamed, and she went to the side of the car. ‘Did you want to go across to the island?’

‘We thought there was no chance,’ the Scoutmaster explained. ‘We came to look at it. We’re camping and touring with our equipment, and we’ve had a night at Sandylands. They told us there was no ferry across the river now. We’ve an invitation to join a local troop in a couple of hours, so there isn’t time to go all the way round by road, but we’re pining to have a look at this place. I suppose’—he hinted—‘you couldn’t—I see you have a boat! You wouldn’t lend it to us?’

‘I’ll put you across,’ Elsa said promptly. ‘I’ve been spending the afternoon there. You’ll love it! Come along; the car will be all right.’

‘Golly, you’re a sport!’ cried the patrol-leader.

A torrent of boys in khaki poured from the car and made for the boat. The Scoutmaster looked at it and then at Elsa.

‘It’s tremendously kind and sporting of you! I’m afraid it will mean more than one trip. Can’t I do the work?’

‘You’d better cross with the first batch and keep an eye on them, or they’ll be all over the sands,’ Elsa retorted. ‘Make them stick to the dykes; there are quicksands among the pools on that side. No, I’ll row; I like it.’

The channel was smaller than when Michelle had seen it, as the tide was at its lowest ebb. ‘We could wade across,’ the patrol-leader exclaimed.

‘No, you couldn’t. It’s deep,’ Elsa told him. ‘Aren’t you the patrol-leader? You must wait for the second trip with those we leave behind.’

‘How d’you know I’m patrol-leader?’

‘Guides. No, I’m not one, but I’ve Guide friends who tell me things. If you coo-ee I’ll come and fetch you in an hour and a half. That will give you more than an hour on the island, and you’ll be back in Sandylands in time for your engagement.’

‘It’s truly kind,’ the Scoutmaster said again, and marshalled his troop to the boat.

Elsa looked at the patrol emblem as she rowed the second party across. ‘What is it? A swan?’

‘We’re the White Swan patrol,’ the leader explained. ‘Our patrols are all water birds; the others are the Black Swans, the Moorhens, and the Wild Geese. Is this animal yours? Priceless tyke!’

Mor was greeting each separate scout with yelps of joy, delighted by the invasion.

‘He’s Mor; it means the sea,’ Elsa said. ‘But in Welsh “mawr” means great, and “more” in Scottish names means big, and I’ve a secret feeling that Mor thinks his name is really Mawr or More—the great one, you know.’

The patrol-leader laughed. 'Jolly little beggar! I say, it's awfully sporting of you to put us across! We're dying to see the island. Why isn't there a ferry?'

'The old man died a year ago.'

'Well, I say, why don't you start it again? You've got a jolly boat!'

'Jim, don't be absurd!' laughed the Scoutmaster, as the keel grounded on the sand. 'But you'll let us pay our way, won't you? We'd gladly have paid for the ferry. You can give the money to some deserving cause, but you ought to take it. What did your old man charge? I say! You're not offended, are you?'

Elsa had leapt out, her face ablaze. 'My job! You've given me my job! Offended? No! *I'm* the deserving cause! I'm on my beam ends for want of cash! Gosh! The white swan has come to my rescue, after all! Is your name Lohengrin, by any chance?'

He stared and then broke into a laugh. 'I'm afraid it's Masterman. But I came in a car, led by a white swan, didn't I? Do you need to be rescued so badly?'

'I'm Elsa,' she cried. 'Not Elsa of Brabant—Elsa Dale. I live in that little house—it's mine—but I haven't a penny. I was going to earn my keep by weeding paths and minding babies. I shall start the ferry again—oh, marvellous! I'll love to be a ferry-woman! You are Lohengrin, you know!'

He gave a shout of laughter. 'I don't understand what it's all about, but a ferry here would be a most useful piece of work, and a paying job for the summer months, I'm sure. As a start, what do we owe you?'

Elsa's face was radiant. 'The old man charged fourpence single, sixpence return; everybody does return, of course! But there are seven of you; there ought to be a reduction for parties.'

'Three shillings for the party and you'll come to fetch us when we call,' Lohengrin said promptly. 'You must have a pole with a bell on each bank, so that people can summon you. Here you are!'

'My first fees!' Elsa gave a shout of triumph. 'You're sure it isn't too much? I am so glad you came, Lohengrin!'

The laughing Scoutmaster turned to follow his boys, who were galloping along the high dyke, and Elsa sped back to Min-y-mor, with Mor leaping around her in excitement almost equal to her own.

'Michelle! Michelle Barker! I don't care if I have wakened you—come down and hear what's happened to me. The white swan has come—I've been rescued from the odd jobs! I've found the work that was waiting for me! Lohengrin came in a car, with a white swan, and he's shown me what to do! Oh, Michelle, such a thrill! I'm going to restart the Hillside ferry and spend my whole life in my boat. I shall make my fortune. Look! Our first earnings! Tomorrow's dinner paid for—and in five minutes' work. Meet Miss Dale, the ferry-woman, Michelle!'

Michelle hung over the stair-rail, her eyes sleepy and her hair rumped. 'But who is Lohengrin? What is it all about?' she asked, bewildered.

'I did wake you! I'm frightfully sorry, but I just had to tell you.' Elsa put the kettle on and began to collect plates and cups for tea. 'We'll have this outside. I've to go and fetch my—my clients, at half-past five.'

She told her story eagerly, as they sat down to tea, and Michelle listened wide-eyed.

'It's a marvellous idea,' she agreed. 'But will people come? Will it be worth while?'

‘Oh, rather! They’ll come all right. I can’t expect big parties every day, but it’s the sort of place people love for picnics. I’ll have to make it known in the town. I’d far rather row a boat than weed or clean steps!’

CHAPTER IX

ELSA SEES THE RED ADMIRAL

'I want you to help me, Lohengrin.' Elsa had brought back her party and heard their delight over the breezy uplands of Car-Ogre, and she was standing by the car as the boys packed themselves in.

Scoutmaster Masterman laughed. 'The White Swans want to know why you call me that. What can I do, Princess Elsa?'

Elsa's eyes gleamed. 'Thank you! You're the first person to recognize that I'm a princess; usually I have to tell people. Will you ask your Scout friends in the town to spread the news that the Hillside ferry is reopening? It would be a real good turn.'

'We'll do that,' he said heartily. 'Are you in earnest, then?'

'Oh, rather! It's the job I've been looking for. I shall enjoy it, and for a month or two there should be plenty of business. By October I may have to close down for the winter; if so, I'll find another job.'

'I don't understand, of course,' he began cautiously. 'Haven't you any parents or guardians?'

'Only a lawyer in Bristol. I want to start before he hears about it.'

The Scoutmaster laughed. 'Well, I say! You'll have to get permission, you know. You can't just start a public service without a word to anybody.'

Elsa's face fell. 'I hadn't thought of that. How can I find out?'

'Was the old ferry run by the town, or was it a private affair?'

'I haven't the foggiest notion.'

'To whom does your island belong?'

'To the Lord of the Manor, retired Admiral Sir Rodney Barron. He lives two miles away, at the foot of the hills; he owns all the land round here. My aunt, who died six weeks ago, knew him and his daughter, and she bought her scrap of land from him.'

'Good! Then you must go to your Admiral and ask him to grant you the ferry rights. Then you'll be secure and no one else can barge in and cut you out.'

'You're being an enormous help, Lohengrin,' Elsa said earnestly. 'I'd never have thought I'd have to do that. You'd better not advertise the ferry till I make sure it's all right.'

Lohengrin took the wheel of his car and Jim raised the white swan aloft. 'I shall send my sister to see you to-morrow afternoon,' Masterman said. 'She's staying in the town, but she's moving on when we do, in two days. Our next camp is on the Quantocks, and she'll stay in some village pub near us. To-morrow we're off to see Cheddar and Wells, so I can't promise to come myself, but Nell will enjoy the tramp along the sands; some friends have taken her in their car to see the caves and the cathedral to-day. You can tell her if you've been successful; you'll see the Lord of the Manor in the morning?'

'I shall try. If he gives me the rights, will you be able to tell your Scout chums in the town?'

'That's the idea. We've a united sing-song and Camp Fire to-morrow night, with all the Sandylands companies. We'll broadcast your news.'

'Oh, marvellous!' Elsa cried. 'That's the most magnificent help! You really are sports!'

'You were the first to be a sport, with your generous offer of help,' the Scoutmaster reminded her, as she stepped back and the car swept away, the white swan fluttering gaily.

‘Lohengrin!’ Elsa shouted, and he laughed and waved good-bye.

‘I shan’t wait till to-morrow,’ Elsa decided, as she called Mor and raced across the sands to report this development to Michelle. ‘The Admiral may spend the morning in bed; he’s an invalid. I don’t want to go all that way twice. I shall call on him this evening and have the matter settled.’

Michelle agreed, when she understood. ‘You’d be thinking about it all night. Elsa!’ she cried in horror. ‘You’re not going like that?’

Elsa had picked up a stick and turned to the door. She paused. ‘I *am*! Why not? I’m going to be the ferry-woman; I’m dressed for the part.’

‘You must make yourself decent!’ Michelle wailed. ‘You can’t call on an Admiral—in the evening—in trousers!’

‘Slacks! It’s a business call,’ Elsa retorted. ‘He’s far more likely to give me the job if I go in a jersey and slacks than if I swank in a silk frock. Don’t I look ready for work?’

‘Oh, you do! But I want you to look nice.’

‘*Don’t* I look nice?’

Michelle gazed at her. ‘Perhaps you do,’ she admitted. ‘You’d look better if you brushed your hair, though.’

Elsa laughed and sped to her room. She returned, neatly brushed and wearing a soft canvas hat on the back of her head. ‘Quite the respectable little lady! Now will Sir Rodney Barron like me better?’

‘He’ll like you,’ Michelle said, with conviction.

‘I’ll take Mor’s lead; I shall have to tie him up at the gate. There are dogs at Barronscourt,’ and Elsa whistled to Mor and strode off across the sand to where the road from Hillside and the rest of the world ended abruptly as the shore began.

‘She has pluck enough to face anybody,’ Michelle marvelled. ‘I shall go for a walk; I’ve slept all afternoon. I feel made into a new creature since yesterday!’

Elsa’s whistle, as she walked through the lanes, was more for herself than for Mor. In spite of her resolution she was nervous about the coming interview, and it was necessary to keep up her courage.

‘I’m glad Michelle’s here. I might have funkcd it and dashed home,’ she said to herself. ‘But I couldn’t own up to her!’

Sir Rodney Barron, known to Daphne and Elsa since their childhood as ‘The Red Admiral’, because of his ruddy weather-beaten face and the fringe of graying red hair and beard, was the father of Clare Barron, who had been their aunt’s pupil and chief friend; she had, indeed, been the prime mover in the scheme to buy the annuity which had made Elsa’s education and Daphne’s costly training possible. The girls had often met her, when she came to visit their aunt, bringing flowers and fruit from Barronscourt, but they knew her father only by sight and had a vivid idea of his hot temper and strong language when roused to anger; and he was easily roused, they had been told.

‘I hope Miss Barron is at home. She’d understand and help me through,’ Elsa murmured, as she tied up the indignant Mor at the gate, with a word to the lodgekeeper, and went on alone, feeling distinctly nervous.

The butler’s expression, as he looked her up and down, from slouch hat to slacks, was not cheering.

‘Sir Rodney is in, but I do not think he will see you,’ he said stiffly.

Elsa's chin went up. 'Please say Miss Dale from Hillside is anxious to speak to him for a few minutes. If Miss Barron is in, I'd like to see her too; I know her very well.'

'Miss Barron is away from home.' The man's tone showed severe disapproval. 'One of these summer visitor young women,' he said to himself, as he went to the library. He had seen the summer visitors on the promenade and he disliked them intensely.

He still looked bleak and reproachful when he returned, but he bade her follow him.

Elsa's heart had sunk at the news that Clare Barron was not there to stand by her, but her hopes rose again. At least she was to be admitted, and it would rest with herself what success was hers.

Sir Rodney looked up from his evening paper, a glint of curiosity in his blue eyes, which were so vivid in his red face. 'Miss Dale, from Hillside, eh? I don't know you, my dear. Sit down and tell me what I can do for you.' Then, as he grasped the details of her appearance, she saw his jaw drop and his eyes grow round.

'I should have said Elsa Dale; Daphne's older than I am. Miss Murray, of Min-y-mor, at Hillside, was our aunt; your daughter knew her and often came to see her. I've come to ask you to help me,' Elsa began.

The Admiral's fist came down on the table with a bang that made the glasses ring.

'No, miss! I know who you are now. Your aunt squandered the money that was given to her—yes, squandered it; that's the only word! Sinful waste—training one of you to be a dancer! Absurd! Money thrown away. It's no use being a dancer unless you're a genius; it's not likely a child from Hillside would be worth training. I never agreed with Clare about that, but the money had been provided and I couldn't interfere. Now your aunt has gone, and I suppose she's saved nothing, and the dancing child can't earn, and you're both in a hole, and so you come to me to ask for more. Not another penny, miss, and that's the end of it! Wasted her money, that's what your aunt did——'

'Please let me speak!' Elsa rose and stood beside him, seizing her chance as his indignation left him breathless. 'I haven't come to ask for money. I wouldn't take it if you offered it to me. Of course I can't ask you for anything now; I'll go away at once. But I just want to say this: Daphne is worth training; everybody says so. She has a real gift, whether she's a genius or not. She has passed two very stiff exams brilliantly, with the best examiners in the country. They all say she'll do well and make her name, but she isn't ready to start yet. Aunt Mary was quite right to spend the money on her; she's more than worth it. That's all—except that I didn't come to ask for money. I wouldn't dream of taking it from you. I'm sorry I troubled you.'

She turned to the door, holding her head high.

'Hey! Come here! Don't be in such a hurry.' The Admiral's voice sounded almost subdued.

Elsa stood by the door and looked at him. 'It's you who were in a hurry. You don't even know what I came for. How dare you assume I'd come to beg? And how can you speak ill of Aunt Mary, when she's gone?'

'I apologize. I'm a bit hasty, perhaps,' he growled. 'Look here, my dear! It's myself I'm annoyed with, not you. I ought to have let you speak. Tell me about this! What did you come to ask me for?'

Elsa stood by his chair, looking down at him. 'The ferry rights, on the river,' she said simply.

‘Eh? What’s this?’ he stared in blank amazement, and she knew she had his interest now and that he would hear her out. ‘Ferry rights? Bless my soul, what does the child mean?’

‘The child has come home to find a job, and she wants to start the ferry again. I must earn my living somehow,’ Elsa pleaded. ‘I’ve a boat, and I live right on the spot. I know all about the river, and the currents, and the tides; I’ve rowed there for years. And I’d a thousand times rather run a ferry than go into a shop or an office. Wouldn’t you?’

Sir Rodney gave a short laugh. ‘I agree with you there! But a shop or an office is more suitable for a young lady.’

‘Then I don’t want to be a young lady. I’d rather be a working girl. Won’t you let me have the ferry? It will be really useful to heaps of people; they love to picnic on the island, and it’s such a long way round by road, and not everybody has a car. If they walk along the sands I can put them across in two minutes, and they’ll be on the island almost at once. Please, Sir Rodney! I’m frightfully keen on the job.’

He looked her up and down, as the butler had done. ‘And you’ve dressed for the part, eh?’

‘No, I’m dressed for the sands and the island; I was over there myself this afternoon. The friend who’s living with me wanted me to put on a frock, but I said I’d look more like hard work in my slacks.’

‘And you think you could do it? I don’t deny it would be useful; I’ve thought of appointing someone in Brown’s place, but nobody applied for the job. You’ll have to stick to it, you know; can’t have you leaving the ferry to run into town and eat ices and go to the pictures! If we reopen the ferry we mustn’t let the public down.’

‘I’ve no money for the pictures, and I can get all the ices I want from the shed at the end of Hillside road! I’ll stick to the job all right! Do you really mean it when you say “we”?’ Elsa cried exuberantly.

He laughed. ‘Sit down, child, and tell me about your business affairs. Did your aunt leave you quite unprovided for? I was afraid of it. Where is the other girl?’

Elsa told her story, only keeping back the solution of the problem which had satisfied Daphne, saying vaguely that her sister had made arrangements with her teacher to continue her training.

‘They all say she must go on. She’s really good, you know. It would be definitely a waste of time and money if she gave up now and threw away all the work she’s done,’ she said earnestly.

‘I saw Pavlova dance, and Karsavina, and our own Markova, and I have seen Margot Fonteyn. It seemed foolish and presumptuous of your aunt to imagine that her niece could follow in their steps, and I felt she was wasting her money and the girl’s time in letting her attempt it.’

‘But that’s very hard on Daphne! It’s the only thing in the world she cares about, so she ought to have her chance. After all, mother was a singer and she chose opera because she acted so well. Her dramatic gift was “of a very high quality”; that’s how Auntie used to put it. Why shouldn’t Daphne have inherited the gift in another form?’

‘H’m! And what about you?’

‘There was none left for me!’ Elsa laughed. ‘I’m a year younger; it was all used up for Daphne!’

‘Then you’ll be content to be the ferry-woman?’

‘For a time,’ Elsa told him frankly. ‘If I think of anything better I’ll find somebody else to take it on; I won’t let you and the public down. I don’t suppose I’ll want to do it all my life.’

But I've hated living in London and swotting at shorthand and book-keeping. I'm dying for an outdoor job. Can't you understand?"

'Perhaps I can.' He looked at her eager glowing face. 'You certainly don't look like an office girl. But, my dear, what about the winter?'

'Close the ferry from November till March,' Elsa said promptly. 'I'll find something else to do—charring in the village—steps and knives, and minding babies. Nobody goes to the island in winter.'

'I'm afraid you'll have to close down,' he agreed. 'Well, child, you may try. I will put it in writing that the ferry rights are yours. It's a plucky idea, and I hope you'll make a good thing of it. Will you advertise in the local paper?'

'That costs money. I've a marvellous plan!' and Elsa's eyes danced as she told of Scoutmaster Masterman's offer. 'I call him Lohengrin, because he came to my rescue and the car carried a flag with a white swan.'

Sir Rodney laughed. 'The Scouts will give you all the advertisement you need. They might ask some of the big shops to put up notices for you. You'll reach a good part of the town, and the news will soon spread. You have my good wishes. Now may I give you a cup of coffee? How did you come? It's a long walk to take alone.'

'My escort's tied up at your gate, because he's rather a noisy little chap and I was afraid your dogs might not approve of him. He's an Aberdeen and he's still excited about seeing me again; he only came home this morning. Thanks very much, but I'd better get home. I'm very grateful to you, sir.'

'I suppose,' he began doubtfully, actual hesitation in his tone, 'you wouldn't let me help you, with a loan? This ferry business isn't really suitable. You are an educated girl; you could do better than row a boat. No, I see you wouldn't accept my offer. Well, forget it! But in spite of my first words to you, I'll help, if you ever need it.'

Elsa's colour had risen, as she stood looking down at him. 'It's very kind of you, sir. I really do appreciate your offer. But I couldn't take money; all I came to ask for was work.'

His eyes twinkled. 'I know that now. Don't be offended, my dear. I meant it kindly.'

'Oh, I know! I do thank you just terribly much. But I couldn't borrow; I'd rather sweep a crossing. The ferry will be much better than that, though I know it can't be a permanent job. But it's a beginning. There's one other thing,' Elsa said, very earnestly. 'When Daphne is ready to dance, I do hope you'll go to see her. I'd like you to know how good she is. She'll be really worth watching. I'm very proud of her.'

'I can see that. If it's possible I will go, if only to satisfy myself and you.'

'Thank you a thousand times!' Elsa cried. 'I'll tell you when she gets her first engagement. I'm going to save up, for I shall have to go to Town for that. I hope you and Miss Barron will be able to come.'

'I hope so too,' he said courteously.

'Good night! And thank you so much for being so nice about my ferry!'

'In spite of a bad beginning!'

'Oh, you didn't know me then! I shall always think of you as kind and understanding,' Elsa said gaily.

CHAPTER X

ADVENTURE FOR MICHELLE

Elsa did not whistle on her way home, for she was running far too hard. Long-legged, she raced through the dusky lanes, where the overhanging trees made her feel stifled, and stopped in relief to breathe the fresh salt air as she came out in the wind-swept spaces of Hillside, and faced a flaming sunset, spread all across the sky.

‘I couldn’t live under the hills, shut in by woods. The shore’s the place for me! Min-y-mor—beside the sea! Come, Mor—home! And stop that row, you bad boy! The whole county knows where you are!’

She threatened him with her stick, and he laughed and leapt upon her and tried to seize it. But he understood, and subsided into a contented trot at her heels.

‘Michelle! It’s all settled!’ Elsa’s shout of triumph rang through the front garden and brought her friend to the door.

‘Oh, Elsa, splendid! Was the Admiral nice?’

‘Not at first. Poor dear, he thought I’d come to borrow money, and he almost flung me out. But when he heard about the ferry he was thrilled to the marrow, and we fixed things up. The rights of the Hillside ferry are mine.’

‘You should call it the Min-y-mor Ferry.’

‘Sounds good!’ Elsa exclaimed. ‘But it’s always been known as Hillside, after the village. “The Min-y-mor Ferry, Hillside,” would do, and it would seem more like mine—ours! What are you doing? Not making a frock? Michelle, what has happened?’

A heap of flowered material, lay on the big table by the window, with a tape measure, a packet of pins, and a pair of scissors.

‘That’s my bit of the story.’ Michelle looked at her with starry eyes. ‘I’ve found a job too.’

‘Michelle Barker! Tell me!’ Elsa gasped, dropping into a chair and hauling Min into her lap.

‘I went for a walk and I found a marvellous camp, all caravans and tents and cars with trailers,’ Michelle began breathlessly.

‘I know; where the Hillside road meets the sands. They come every summer; there are several camping-sites round the village. We hear their gramophones sometimes.’

‘I heard them and saw the tents and went to look. I’ve never seen crowds of people living out of doors like that. I wandered round and spoke to some of the girls and asked them how they managed. One was in despair; she’d been in the town and she’d bought a frock at the July sales and it didn’t fit. She’d tried it on to show her friends, and it hung round her like a sack. They were in fits of laughter, but she was disappointed and worried, for she’d torn the dress she was wearing and she’d bought the new one to use at once. They tried to tell her how to alter it, and said she must turn it up at the foot. I saw that would spoil the pleats, so I suggested raising it at the waist. They thought that would be too difficult, so I showed them what I meant. And’—she paused and gazed at Elsa.

The mistress of Min-y-mor gave a shout. ‘They saw you were a professional?’

‘They asked if I was, and I said I was on holiday but I worked in London. I offered to do the alterations, and the owner of the frock said she’d give five shillings to have it made to fit her, quickly. I said I’d do it at once, and I’d take half a crown.’

‘So everybody’s happy!’ Elsa exclaimed. ‘Michelle, how simply marvellous! Do any more of them want work done?’

‘Two girls said they’d seen frocks they liked, but the shops wouldn’t do alterations during the sales. If I’d make the things fit, they’d buy them to-morrow. And another’s dying to have a dress made from some material she’d seen, but she didn’t know anyone who would do it, so she meant to take it home with her. She’d love to have it to wear on her holiday,’ Michelle said in triumph.

‘But are you willing? It’s your holiday too!’ Elsa protested. ‘And only yesterday you were being put to bed as an invalid!’

‘I can’t believe it was yesterday. I don’t mind working at my own job. I couldn’t row your boat or do much housework, but I can sew while I’m sitting in the sun. I want to feel I’m helping.’

‘Oh, but you are! You’re helping just by being here. Apart from paying your way, think how flat I’d have felt if I’d had to come home to-night to an empty house. I rushed back to tell you about the Admiral. I’d hate to live alone.’

Michelle gave her a quick look. ‘Truly? For by the end of the week I have to decide. I must either go back to my work or send in my resignation.’

‘They were brutes not to see that you needed much more than a week! I hope you won’t go back. Oh, Michelle, stay here and live with me, and build up a new little business of your own!’

‘But suppose I fail? I’m not as daring as you?’

‘It’s an adventure, of course,’ Elsa conceded. ‘The safe way is to go back to Town and stick to your settled job. But to work up a connexion and run your own show would be much more thrilling!’

‘I believe I could go back,’ Michelle pondered. ‘Already I’m heaps better; in a week I’ll be quite fit again. But I should hate to leave this place—and you.’

‘I daren’t tease you. You mustn’t decide too quickly. But if you’re finding jobs already it looks hopeful, doesn’t it?’

Michelle laughed. ‘How long do your campers stay in that field?’

‘I know. It’s a summer job, like my ferry. There won’t be many of them left after August, and almost none by mid-September. That’s why it’s an adventure for both of us! But you’re trained in your job; you’d be sure to find work. It’s worse for me; I may come to sweeping up leaves on lawns, or taking round bread in a basket; I’m sure I’d make a good delivery girl!’

Michelle turned to her dressmaking. ‘I haven’t felt so much at home anywhere for the last six years. That counts for a lot.’

‘Lovely of you to say so! I believe we’d be a good team.’

‘And as for that sunset——!’ Michelle added. ‘It’s the finishing touch to the whole beautiful place.’

‘We specialize in sunsets; there’s such an enormous stretch of sky. I can promise you a performance on a grand scale almost every night.’ And Elsa went to the kitchen to prepare supper.

‘I’ve had an idea,’ she announced next day, when Michelle came back from a visit to the camp, bringing her well-earned half-crown and two more frocks to be altered. ‘If you decide to throw in your lot with me and go all out for adventure, we’ll tell these camping people that you’re starting a business here and ask them to mention you in the shops where they bought the frocks. It might lead to something. Later on you can advertise.’

‘I’m very much inclined to try it. But it’s a big thing to make a complete fresh start, and I had such a good berth in Town. And it was safe; they were quite satisfied with my work.’

‘I know. You’ve a lot to lose; I hadn’t anything. I mustn’t try to persuade you,’ Elsa admitted. ‘Look, Michelle! Is this Lohengrin’s sister? She hasn’t turned up the Hillside road to the bus, as most walkers do, so she must be coming here.’

The girl on the sands came to their gate. ‘Is this Min-y-mor? And are you Princess Elsa? Do tell me, is it all right about your ferry?’

‘Quite. I’m duly appointed ferry-woman. Will your Scouts tell everybody for me?’ Elsa asked, as she opened the gate.

‘Oh, good! I’m so glad. We’ll pass the word round. I like your little house!’

‘It’s terribly kind of you to have come so far. Couldn’t we do something in return? Would you have time to come across and see my island?’

‘There’s nothing I’d like better,’ Nell Masterman said gaily. ‘I’ve heard all about it and I’m jealous of the Swans. Would you really put me across? Let me be the first passenger by the ferry!’

Elsa went to fetch her oars and to say a word to Michelle. ‘Lohengrin and the Swan Patrol were the first, but the ferry wasn’t officially a ferry then. You’ll be our first real customer.’

‘I heard about Lohengrin,’ Nell laughed, as she went to the boat. ‘Tell me your plans, won’t you? Oh, is this the noisy little dog? May he come too? The Scouts told me to look out for a lively tyke!’

‘Mor won’t be left behind; he loves the island. Come on, boy! He’s off his head with joy still; he only came home yesterday,’ Elsa explained.

Nell insisted on paying her sixpence return fare, and declared she would have liked to double it, because Elsa’s services as guide were so valuable.

‘I know every corner of the island,’ Elsa agreed, ‘but I can’t be guide as well as ferry-woman; I couldn’t leave the boat. Most people don’t want to do the place properly; they just roam about and picnic, and watch the gulls and look at the view.’ She took up the oars and led the way back to Min-y-mor. ‘You’ll let us give you tea, won’t you? I asked my friend to have it ready.’

‘It’s more than kind! I’d love a cup of tea, after that glorious wind,’ Nell said gratefully.

‘Are you laughing at my slacks and jersey?’ Elsa demanded, seeing the amusement in the guest’s face, as Michelle poured the tea and she acted as waitress.

‘Indeed, no! They’re just right for a ferry-woman. I was thinking of some other girls who once gave me tea. They wore blue shorts and white shirts—climbing kit; it was in the Lake District, where people wear shorts for hiking on the fells. My brother and I had a few days’ holiday and we’d been tramping; we came to a cottage called Hikers’ Halt, and the name took our fancy. Two pretty girls welcomed us, and the little one said we were their first customers—just as I’ve been your first client at the ferry! I was charmed with the girls; they were about your age, and their names were Rachel and Damaris. We laughed because they were so Biblical; they wouldn’t tell us their surname. They obviously didn’t belong there; they were well educated, though the cottage was just a shanty and the woman in charge was a very poor specimen. What our girls were up to we couldn’t find out; they said they expected to be there all the summer—it was two years ago—but when we went back some weeks later they had disappeared and the woman said their relations had taken them away. We never heard any explanation, but we’ve often spoken of Rachel and Damaris, wondering what had become of

them. They were delightful children. Why don't you give teas regularly, to the people who have been to the island, Princess Elsa?"

Elsa, her face ablaze, whirled round to her friend. "Michelle! Your job! I'll row the public across the river and make them hungry, and you'll feed them on their way home! Oh, Michelle, will you? I couldn't do it alone!"

"No, it's a job for two," Nell said laughing. "But there are two of you to do it."

"Michelle's only here for a week. She has her work in Town; she's an extra special dressmaker," Elsa explained breathlessly. "She hasn't quite decided yet to throw up her job and join me in my adventures."

Nell looked from one to the other. "It needs thinking about. Your ferry-and-tea business will only be useful in the summer, I suppose."

"That's the snag. We don't know what we'll do in the winter. I hadn't any job, but she'll be giving up a good safe one, if she joins me. You'd find work in the town, Michelle! But I mustn't persuade you," Elsa said wistfully. "It's such a marvellous plan!—ferry and tea-shop in one!"

"I'm tempted, too," Michelle said, her colour rising. "I'd love to give tea to your clients."

"I'd cut bread and butter and wash up, in between my trips across the river. You will think about it, won't you, Michelle? What a good thing it's been for us that Lohengrin and the Swans came this way!" Elsa turned to Nell again. "Look at all the new ideas you and he have given us!"

"I'm very glad we did," Nell said heartily. "We shall come back some day—before long, perhaps—and see how your ventures are faring. I expect you'll have developed in heaps of ways by the autumn. Lohengrin and I will run down for a week-end, without the Scouts, and we'll come along to patronize the Min-y-mor Tea-rooms."

Elsa gazed at her, fascinated. "It sounds marvellous! I'm just terribly glad you came! And I'm desperately grateful for your help."

"Nonsense!" Nell cried laughing. "Who very generously offered to put the Scouts across the river, without expecting payment? That was the beginning. And who was hospitable and invited a stranger to tea? That was the next step. We've merely made a few suggestions."

"Extremely useful ones, though! Have some cake," Elsa cried. "I didn't expect to see cake again, but at this rate we'll be able to afford it, after all."

"There's one thing you should do," Nell said thoughtfully. "If you decide to give teas, it might be wise to consult your Lord of the Manor, who granted you the ferry rights. I don't suppose he would object, but if this is his land it might be as well to tell him what you are planning to do."

"As a matter of courtesy," Elsa agreed. "I'll do it. He won't make difficulties, but he'll be pleased to have been told."

"My brother told me to ask you one thing," Nell said. "Where do you keep the ogre? Isn't the island called Car-Ogre?"

"There isn't one; there couldn't be, in such a beautiful place. I hate the name; it's a shame!"

"I agree with you. You should give it a new name—"Elsa's Isle" would do."

Elsa laughed. "No, it must remain Car-Ogre, but it makes me cross whenever I hear it."

When Nell had set out on her walk back to town, weaving farewell to Mor and Elsa at the gate and to Min sitting on the wall, Elsa settled herself with a writing-pad. "I must tell Daphne all these thrills! Only two days since I saw her, and yet there's heaps to say. Go and chase the

gulls, Mor! No, Min, I can't have you in my lap while I'm writing; go and wash your feet, or sit on Michelle while she sews.'

'Are you expecting your lawyer to turn up, to see what you're doing?' Michelle asked.

Elsa grinned. 'Not at once. I thanked him for his letter and said I'd write again when we'd made our plans. Even if he hears I'm at home he'll only think I'm having a holiday; he expected us to come home for August. I don't suppose he'll hear about the ferry from anybody! Once it's going well I shall tell him, but not yet.'

Michelle nodded and bent over her work again.

Elsa glanced at her wistfully, but made no attempt to hasten her decision.

CHAPTER XI

TEA WITH MICKIES

Michelle folded her work and rose. 'May I do the supper to-night?'

Elsa looked up in astonishment. 'Why—of course! But where's the invalid gone?'

'Vanished. Your wonderful air is making me stronger every hour.'

'Oh, splendid! But you mustn't trouble to cook. There's a jar of potted meat.'

'I'll heat some of the soup,' Michelle said. 'And I want to make a little surprise for you. So don't come to the kitchen, please.'

Elsa raised her eyebrows. 'A surprise? What fun! Oh, I won't! But have you everything you'll need? I'm afraid supplies are rather low.'

'There's plenty; I looked this afternoon. I planned my surprise while I was getting the tea.'

Elsa laughed. 'Marvellous, Michelle! You're an angel! Is it a celebration?'

'Yes—of your ferry rights.'

'I thought perhaps it was the birthday of the Min-y-mor Tea-rooms,' Elsa hinted.

Michelle coloured. 'It might be that too. You finish your letter.' And she went towards the kitchen.

'I'm sorry we haven't gas, or an electric cooker,' Elsa called after her. 'Can you manage the range? I apologize for the primitive conditions in which I've asked you to live.'

Michelle smiled. 'I like a range. I've always been used to one; we lived in the country till my father died. Oh, you couldn't have gas or electricity here!' and she went into the kitchen and closed the door.

Elsa laughed and scribbled away, but presently put down her pad and sniffed. 'Something good, whatever it is! Cakes or pastry; is it because I said we couldn't afford cake? I didn't know Michelle could cook. Perhaps her French mother taught her. I can't bear that gorgeous smell much longer!'

Michelle came in quietly and began to lay the table in the window, where the sunset was beginning to colour the sky.

Elsa glanced at her. 'If the surprise is as good as it smells, I'm going to eat the whole of it. Is it a cake?'

Michelle laughed and shook her head. She brought plates of soup, but still kept her secret. 'Look at the sky! Is it really going to be as lovely as last night?'

Elsa sighed. 'Michelle, I could eat you! How can you make the house smell like this and not tell me how it's done? It's like a gorgeous baker's shop!'

Presently Michelle, with amusement in her eyes, set before her a plate of rolls fresh from the oven, delicate golden brown, pinched up at the top into little crisp points. 'That's all; nothing really thrilling. Mother and I used to have them for tea. They're nice hot, but they're quite as good cold.'

Elsa sampled one. 'They're delicious! There's something just a little different about them. You'll have to make them for me every day; they didn't take long! And if you go back to Town, I shall never taste them again! How do you do it, Michelle?'

'It's an old recipe in Mother's family. I suppose they're French, in some way; they're very easy. You really do like them?'

'Love them! I could eat six straight off!'

‘You couldn’t! You feel like that at first, but you’d find you couldn’t eat more than three. Would other people like them too?’

Elsa looked up at her curiously. ‘I’m sure they would. What are you thinking, Michelle?’

Michelle stood gazing down at her, colour in her face. ‘If I stayed here and did teas, could we make a special thing of these little rolls, so that people would come on purpose to have them?’

Elsa sprang up with a shout. ‘Teas with Michelle’s rolls! Oh, marvellous! We’ll advertise, and people will come, even when the ferry is closed! Teas with—haven’t they a name, Michelle?’

‘I’m afraid they haven’t.’ Michelle laughed. ‘I call them tea-rolls.’

‘That isn’t good enough. They must have a name. We’ll call them Michelles—“Teas with Michelles”. Will that do?’

‘No, it will not! I don’t want my name advertised!’

‘Oh well! Michelles—Michaels—Mick—Mickies! Oh, Michelle! You wouldn’t mind that! “Teas with Mickies!” People will come in crowds for Micky-teas! May we call them Mickies?’

‘It’s a good name,’ Michelle said laughing. ‘I’ll make Mickies every morning.’

‘It’s as good as they are,’ Elsa cried joyfully. ‘And we’ll eat up what are left for supper—if there are any left! Then—oh, Michelle Barker! Are you going to stay with me and be part of the adventure?’

Michelle gazed out of the window at the sunset, shining in rosy light in the pools and the wet sand. ‘I almost think I am.’

‘You couldn’t snatch away my Mickies now,’ Elsa urged. ‘You wouldn’t have made them unless you’d meant them for the Min-y-mor Tea-rooms!’

Michelle turned, throwing off her burden of indecision with a sigh of relief and facing a new and adventurous future gallantly. ‘I’ll send my resignation to-morrow.’

‘Oh, cheers!’ Elsa cried. ‘We’ll stick together, whether we sink or swim; but I know we’re going to swim on the very crest of the wave! Michelle, you and your Mickies will make our fortunes! I shall beg Sir Rodney and Miss Barron to come for Tea with Mickies, and they’ll tell all their friends. Before we know where we are we’ll be needing help in the house because our business has grown so big. We’ll engage Mrs. Price to wash up and see to the kettles! There’s a great future for the Min-y-mor Tea-rooms, now that the teas are to be Micky-teas!’

‘You won’t try to do lunches or dinners? That might be too much for us.’

‘No, only Morning Coffees and Afternoon Teas. People can go back to town for big meals. I’m thrilled to the limit!’ Elsa said. ‘Something more to tell Daphne! I shall add a PS. that will be as long as my letter. Now for another Micky! They’re as good with jam or jelly as they are with butter, or with nothing at all, for that matter. Aren’t you going to Micky too?’

Michelle laughed and sat down to finish her supper. ‘I can vary the look of them; four little points at the corners—one in the middle—two, or three. People will be amused.’

‘You’ll need to have a reserve stock. Folks will ask for bags of them to take home. I don’t know how you’re going to work up your dressmaking business!’

‘There’ll be time for both,’ Michelle said placidly. ‘The rolls don’t take long to make.’

‘Call them Mickies!’ Elsa pleaded.

‘The Mickies,’ Michelle laughed. ‘And there will be wet days when nobody will come to the ferry.’

‘That’s true. Is it really settled, Michelle?’

Michelle nodded. 'I'll write to-night.'

'Then I'll tell Daphne to send the rest of your things. I'll finish my letter and you'll write yours, and I'll write to Sir Rodney, and Mor and I will run to the post in Hillside. I want to feel yours has gone, so that you're really part of Min-y-mor!'

'I shan't draw back now. I'm thrilled to be part of the Min-y-mor adventure.'

'Daphne's having an adventure too, you know,' Elsa said soberly, later in the evening, as she sat nursing Min, with Mor snoring at her feet, while Michelle sewed by the light of the lamp. 'I didn't tell you much about her plans, but now that you've decided to plunge with me I'd like you to understand. I've a great ambition, Michelle; much bigger than just trying to keep myself and the house.'

'To help Daphne?' Michelle asked quietly. 'It would be like you.'

'To get Daphne out of debt,' Elsa retorted, her colour rising. 'That's what I didn't tell you. Daphne's way out of the hole we were in was to go and borrow from Madame.'

Michelle looked startled. 'Oh, that was rather——' she paused.

'Cheap. That's how I felt at first.'

'You wouldn't like it, of course,' Michelle agreed, staring at her, while her work lay in her lap. 'You're far too independent. Strange that Daphne isn't. I wonder she could do it.'

'Daphne cares for only one thing in the world, and that's her career. Her own personal feelings don't count.' Elsa leaned forward eagerly, hugging Min to her as she tried to explain. 'She didn't like asking Madame, but she felt it had to be done. There was no other way by which she could live in London and go on with her training. And from the point of view of the future she's right, Michelle, and perhaps I'm wrong. I can't see my way beyond the next month or two, but Daphne sees hers quite clearly. She'll work desperately hard, and when she's ready she'll dance; she'll make her name and be able to repay Madame; she'll be famous and perhaps make a fortune. It's all planned in her mind.'

'If she succeeds,' Michelle agreed. 'But suppose she doesn't have the big success? Then she's left in debt.'

'She won't be; I'll see to that! Somehow I'll help her to repay that money. I'm the business man of the family.'

Michelle gazed at her, her eyes kindling. 'I believe you'll do it! But not out of pennies at the ferry, Elsa!'

'Sixpences! And remember our Mickies!'

Michelle shook her head. 'It's all for the summer. You still need an idea for the winter months. Couldn't you do something to your island to make people come all the year round?'

'What could I do? No, it will have to be odd jobs during the winter.'

'You won't rescue Daphne on the proceeds of odd jobs.'

'I will do it somehow, though,' Elsa said doggedly. 'We'll seize every chance to turn an honest penny and I'll save all I can of my share, to help Daphne. We'll go shares equally in our takings, of course.'

'As to that,' Michelle was a business woman also, 'there are things that must come first. We mustn't be reckless. Rates and taxes must be paid, before we talk of sharing profits.'

'We'll keep a fund; I shall make out proper books and we'll know just how much we need. My book-keeping will come in useful, after all. Mor's licence must come out of my share; he's not part of a public fund!'

'Oh, I think he is!' Michelle laughed. 'He's a necessary part of the household.'

‘I’ve been thinking about Aunty and the house,’ Elsa said. ‘It came into my head when I was talking to the Red Admiral. Don’t you think perhaps she left Min-y-mor to me because she felt Daphne had a great gift, which would carry her through, but I hadn’t, and so I needed the house more?’

Michelle laid down her work again and stared at her. ‘But you have a gift—several gifts. No, I think your aunt wanted to be fair, and she felt Daphne had had her share. She was right, of course.’

‘Do you mean that being business-like is a gift? I do try to do things properly!’

‘You’ve a clear organizing mind—as you once said—and a gift for business methods, and you’ve been trained, to a certain extent. You have imagination; you see chances and how to use them. And you have an enormous gift of hospitality; of making people feel welcome. That will be the greatest help in this new job; your customers will come back again and again because they’ll feel you’re glad to see them.’

Elsa reddened. ‘Michelle, how lovely of you! I do like to welcome people and give them a good time.’

‘Of course. It’s all through your nature. You’re cut out for some sort of social job, like this one you’re making for yourself.’

‘We’re making! Don’t say “you”!’ Elsa cried. ‘As a start, Michelle, will you make a batch of Mickies early to-morrow morning?’

Michelle raised her eyebrows. ‘I will, but you’ll need more flour. Why? Do you want them for elevenses?’

‘Good idea! If I’ve rowed parties across the river I shall be ravenous; but the parties will be hungry too. We won’t advertise our Teas till I’ve heard from Sir Rodney, but it would be a good plan to have something ready, in case people beg to be fed.’

Michelle laughed. ‘Do you expect business to start to-morrow morning?’

‘Quite early. Remember the Scouts! And school holidays have begun. Wait and see!’

The morning proved her to be right. By ten o’clock, in sunshine and a cool wind, six schoolgirls arrived, eager and excited.

‘We’ve wanted to go to Car-Ogre for ages. It’s just terribly sporting of you to start the ferry again!’ the leader exclaimed, tendering three shillings. ‘You’ll fetch us when we call, won’t you?’

‘We heard about it from the Scouts,’ another added. ‘They’re coming later, shoals of them. You’ll be kept busy.’

‘I shall be a millionaire by night,’ Elsa said solemnly. ‘But there’s a reduction for parties; sixpence for six of you, or a shilling a dozen,’ and she handed back sixpence, and went to fetch her oars.

‘You don’t sell chocolate, do you?’ a small girl asked wistfully. ‘We forgot to bring any, and we’re starving.’

Elsa’s eyes danced. ‘We’ll lay in a stock of chocolate, and some packets of biscuits. But my friend makes marvellous little loaves, and she’d let you have some at a penny each. Wait a moment!’ and she checked the wild rush to the house. ‘They’re called Mickies, and nobody knows about them yet. We’re going to serve Teas with Mickies, beginning next week. If you like the Mickies, will you tell people to come to the Min-y-mor Tea-rooms?’

‘Oh, rather! You bet we will!’ and the girls swooped down on the amazed Michelle like a flight of hungry seagulls.

‘Miss Dale, they’re topping! Just marvellous!’ they shouted, as they raced back to the ferry, a bag in the hands of the eldest and a Micky being devoured by each. ‘We’re going to eat the rest on the island; and we’ll tell everybody!’

‘You’re not going to have any time for dressmaking until next term begins, Maker of Mickies!’ Elsa called, as she came back to the house.

‘Only at night. You’d better send for more supplies,’ Michelle said laughing.

‘I’ll ask these kids to leave a note at a big grocer’s in the town. Look, there’s the next batch!’ and Elsa pointed along the sands. ‘Boys this time. I’ll be ready to say my piece about the Mickies; it’s the best advertisement we could have. And we’ll lay in a stock of packets of chocolate, and dates and raisins, and biscuits, and put a table at the gate, with Mor to keep guard. He’s as welcoming as I am; he’ll tell the neighbourhood if anybody comes!’

‘Aren’t you very tired?’ Michelle asked, that night.

‘Thirty-seven people on that island! Sixteen shillings; I had to give some reductions for parties.’ Elsa stretched herself in a deck-chair in the sunset light. ‘I shall have another bathe presently. Yes, I’m tired; but it’s tremendous sport. But I’ve decided one thing. No ferry or teas on Sundays! If people must go to the island on Sundays they can cycle or bus all the way round. We must have one day’s rest. I know Sir Rodney will agree.’

‘I’m glad you feel like that. I’m sure it’s wise.’

‘Sundays are going to be different,’ Elsa went on. ‘We’ll have breakfast late and I shall wear a frock and stockings. We’ll go to the old church in Hillside and then have a quiet afternoon. In the evening *we’ll* go across to the island, and you shall see what it’s like; or we’ll take a bus to the top of the hill and you’ll see the view of the Mendips, and up the channel as far as Bristol. Sundays will be holidays; it will be good for us both.’

CHAPTER XII

CONVERTING A LAWYER

‘This is when I write to Mr. Courtier.’ Elsa looked up from her books and papers and the piles of small silver and copper spread on the table, some days later.

Michelle laughed, with the quick understanding that made her such a useful companion. It was never necessary to explain things to Michelle. ‘Because we’re doing so well?’

‘Just that. If our plans had failed I’d lie low and say nothing, but as we’re rolling in wealth I’m ready to see him. I shall tell him Daphne is going on with her work in Town, but that I’ve come home and, with a friend, have started a little business at Min-y-mor, and that we hope to do well. He’ll turn up promptly to see what the little business is.’

‘How many ferry-ites to-day?’

‘Thirty-five; three parties of six or eight. The total soon mounts up. We vary from thirty to forty each day; I’ve made sixteen shillings to-day, and there’s your Micky-cash as well, and those three lots for tea, and two couples for morning coffee. We’re making money. Of course it won’t go on; we’re a novelty just now, and the children aren’t in school, and there are the summer visitors. We’ve started at a lucky time. But all the same, people like the ferry and they’re pleased to get to the island, and they adore your Mickies and our tea-room. For the moment we’re rather the fashion in Sandylands.’

‘It will drop with a bump in a month or six weeks,’ Michelle observed, putting finishing touches to the frock she had made for the girl in the camp.

‘All the more reason for breaking the news to Mr. Courtier while we’re on the top of the wave.’

‘I liked your Admiral and his daughter,’ Michelle said, for Sir Rodney and Clare Barron had been one of the morning couples for coffee.

‘They liked you. He congratulated me on having such a charming companion.’

‘He congratulated me on my luck in living with such an energetic person,’ Michelle said laughing.

She was finishing her morning batch of loaves, two days later, ready for the groups of Scouts and Guides, or mere schoolgirls and boys, who seemed willing to buy as many as she could turn out, when Mor’s frantic barking took her to the door.

A tall thin man stood there, a frown on his face.

‘Where is Elsa Dale? I wish to see her at once.’

‘She’s at the ferry. She’ll be back in a moment; three boys wanted to be put across. Can I do anything?’

He looked her over; big cooking overall, dark hair and bright dark eyes, face no longer pale but healthily tanned.

‘My name is Courtier. You are——?’

‘Michelle Barker, the friend who helps Elsa with the tea-rooms. She attends to the ferry; I do the teas and the morning coffee. Won’t you have a cup?’

His frown deepened. ‘What does all this mean? Elsa is only a child. Ferry? Where is the ferry? And who gave her leave to start one?’

‘Sir Rodney Barron, the owner of the land. Elsa’s young, but she’s very capable,’ Michelle said sturdily. ‘Excuse me one moment! I can’t afford to burn a batch of rolls. Won’t you sit down?’ and she hurried back to her oven.

‘Hello, Mr. Courtier! Nice of you to come to us for your elevenses!’ Elsa came racing across the sand. ‘That’s the third lot this morning—two sets of boys and a crowd of girls. Nobody grudges sixpence to get to the island, and they often bring their dinner and stay all day. It’s a cheap outing! Would you like to go across?’

Mr. Courtier looked her up and down, from windblown hair to slacks and bare feet. ‘My dear Elsa——!’

‘Well, and isn’t it very sensible?’ she retorted. ‘I’m saving pounds in shoes and stockings, and who wants a hat, in this wind? Oh, Michelle, you angel!’—as Michelle brought a tray. ‘I was definitely ravenous. I hope nobody will come for half an hour. These little loaves are Michelle’s speciality, Mr. Courtier; have one with your coffee. All Sandylands is talking about them; people come every day just to eat our Mickies.’

‘But, my dear child,’ the lawyer began, as he found himself installed in a big chair by the window, with a cup of coffee and a very tempting little loaf in front of him.

‘I know,’ Elsa agreed, with dancing eyes. ‘I ought not to have done it without consulting you. But I couldn’t tell if we’d succeed; I wanted so frightfully much to make good before I said anything.’

‘And do you consider you are—er—making good?’

‘At the moment—oh, rather! You shall inspect my books. We know it won’t go on, of course. When the schools start and the trippers leave we shall go flop. Don’t ask what we’re going to do then, for we don’t know; that’s where the fun comes in. It’s an adventure, and we don’t know the next step. But this one has been such a success that we can afford to stop and breathe, and think out something else.’

‘Tell me about this ferry,’ he commanded, eyeing her curiously.

Elsa gave a vivid account of the birth of her enterprise, and he watched her face as she talked, in growing surprise. He had always looked upon her as the unimportant one of the girls, left in the background while the more showy Daphne—of whom he disapproved strongly—filled the front of the picture. This was a new Elsa, a girl he did not know.

‘You have grown up during your year in London,’ he said, stiffly apologetic. ‘You are more fit to manage your little business than I thought. It is possible you may succeed, though I confess I did not think it likely at first.’

Elsa’s eyes gleamed. ‘That’s jolly nice of you, sir! You do understand how much I want a job that will let me live in my house and use it, don’t you? I’d take boarders for the winter, but we haven’t room. Something will turn up for me, and Michelle has her own work, when she has time for it; she’s a good dressmaker, but she’s too busy making Mickies to make dresses just now. I shall find something too. We may make only just enough to keep ourselves during the winter, but if the spring and summer are like the last ten days have been, we’ll be able to afford to lie low during the bad months.’

‘If you should be in difficulties, will you promise to apply to me for help?’

‘I’ll sell the piano first! If I’ve sold everything worth while, perhaps I’ll come to you then,’ Elsa laughed. ‘Would you really like to be useful, Mr. Courtier? Then tell us about rates and taxes; we want to know what we’ll have to pay, and when.’

‘I will send you the information you require. What about your sister?’

‘Oh, she’s all right! Working hard in Town.’

He frowned again. ‘You don’t ask me to believe you are paying her expenses as well as your own?’

‘Not yet, but I expect to do it soon,’ Elsa said defiantly.

‘And in the meantime?’

‘Her friends are looking after her. They’re so terribly keen that nothing should interfere with her training.’

‘She persists in going on with this dancing? Did she not even consider my suggestion?’

‘If you hadn’t proposed the hairdressing idea she might have listened to you,’ Elsa began, a wicked glint in her eyes. ‘That was the limit, to Daphne. She just raged!’

‘She wouldn’t have listened to anything that meant giving up her dancing,’ Michelle observed.

‘I know. But the hairdressing really was the last straw, to her. Mr. Courtier, you wish me good luck, don’t you?’

‘On the whole—yes, I do. You are more enterprising than I thought. I wish you all success.’

‘Jolly nice of you! Then won’t you wish Daphne luck too?’

But that was too much for the lawyer. ‘No, I’m afraid I cannot do that. It seems to me extremely unsuitable that she should be a ballet-dancer. I wish with all my heart her talents lay in some more reasonable direction.’

Elsa sighed. ‘Why does ballet-dancing upset you so? It’s perfectly respectable!’

‘And very beautiful, and full of artistry,’ Michelle added.

‘I do not consider it a seemly profession for Miss Murray’s niece.’

Elsa opened her lips to say ‘Bosh!’ but caught Michelle’s eye and bit back the word. ‘But Mother was an opera singer—an actress! Why shouldn’t Daphne be a dancer?’

‘It is a point on which we shall not agree,’ he said, as he rose to go.

‘No, I’m afraid not. I’m definitely going to help her all I can. There’s the ferry bell!’ and Elsa sprang to the window. ‘Two ladies, with painting things; we get lots of artists. I’ll have to run. Good-bye! Thanks awfully for looking us up!’

Mr. Courtier watched her as she raced across the sand, swift, and slim, and strong. ‘At least it is a healthy life,’ he said, turning to Michelle. ‘And she’s very young. I’m glad you are here to steady her, Miss Barker.’

‘I don’t know that I can do that, although I’m seven years older than she is.’ Michelle treasured the remark to repeat to Elsa at night. ‘But I’m company. She’s very happy, sir. I don’t think she was happy in Town, though she never complained. She says she feels ten times more alive here. She’s in the sea by six every morning, and sometimes at night too.’

He gave a short laugh. ‘I feel happier about her than her sister. You’re sure she is being looked after?’

‘Oh, yes! She has plenty of friends and she’s working very hard. She hasn’t time to get into trouble.’

Mr. Courtier went back to his car and to his Bristol office, and thought often, during the next week, of Elsa’s ferry and the sunny windy sands at Min-y-mor.

‘He’s half converted, anyway,’ Elsa said, when Michelle repeated the conversation that evening. ‘Miche, come to the gate for a moment.’

Michelle had been working in the kitchen for half an hour. Much mystified she obeyed, and gave a cry of surprise, for the river was brimming over and already the banks were gone.

‘It’s the spring tide. We shall have three or four days like this. It’s going to interfere with business,’ Elsa said. ‘For an hour on each side of high tide we won’t be able to get near the ferry. *I* could, of course; but the general public won’t want to paddle. It will be quite ankle-deep.’

‘Spring tide? But this is August!’

Elsa laughed. ‘There’s a spring tide twice every month, at new and full moon; it means a very big tide, extra high and extra low. The opposite is the neap tide, at half-moons; most dull and uninteresting. It doesn’t go far out and it doesn’t come far in. Give me the springs! There’s always a thrill in the high tide.’

Michelle agreed, gazing spellbound, and watched each tide for the next few days, as the sea flooded the river and the water welled out of the channel and spread across the sands. The stretch over which Elsa ran to her boat was a shining shallow lake; at the height of the tide there came a west wind and little waves dashed against the garden wall of Min-y-mor, and Mor barked his indignation, while Min stared down from his perch on the window-sill in unending puzzled wonder over this change in the look of the world.

The interference with business was not serious, for the high tides came between six and eight o’clock in the morning and evening, and these were not times when the ferry was in use. During the crowded mid-day period the tide ebbed so far that it almost disappeared and the whole bay turned into a desert of wet sand and pools. The river became so narrow that one small boy tried to paddle across and had to be rescued and hauled into the boat by Elsa when the current took him off his feet.

‘It isn’t much to look at, but it’s there,’ she told him severely. ‘It comes from miles away, in the hills, and though it runs so steadily it’s quite strong. So don’t be a donk, and don’t try that again!’

Following the high tide there came two days of pouring rain and then several of wind and storm and showers. Nobody came to the ferry; no one could walk along the sands for Micky-teas.

Elsa looked at Michelle and laughed gallantly. ‘This is where the adventure gets really thrilling! It was all too good to last.’

‘This is where we eat up our profits,’ Michelle agreed. ‘But I’ve had an idea. We’ll take the bus to town and buy material, and I’ll make winter frocks for us both.’

‘Miche, you sport! You aren’t the least depressed! If I’d been alone I might have felt a trifle gloomy,’ Elsa admitted. ‘You’re worth your weight in gold!’

‘When we come home soaked we’ll change and I’ll make Mickies for tea, just for ourselves,’ Michelle promised, her eyes amused.

‘Worth twice your weight in gold!’ Elsa proclaimed.

PART III
BALLETS IN TOWN

CHAPTER XIII

A DRAMATIC COME-BACK

Daphne put a shilling in the meter, gave the handle a vicious turn, and lit her gas-fire in the Green House which had been Michelle Barker's. She threw off her frock and pulled on her red dressing-gown, let her long yellow plaits fall on her shoulders, and dropped into a chair. The day, which was so bright and wind-swept at Sandylands, was cheerless in London, with thin rain falling, and she was tired and lonely. It was four days since Elsa had left her, and to her surprise Daphne was missing Elsa badly. Moreover she was not easy in her mind about her.

'I can't see that it was sensible,' she said unhappily to the unsympathetic gas-fire. 'She has nothing to live on; she may not find jobs, and if she does it will be charwoman stuff; she'll waste her life scrubbing steps and weeding paths. She can't do it for ever, and she isn't training for anything; she's wasting the training she's had! And then to take on an invalid; it was mad—but exactly like Elsa. I couldn't have stopped her; and I had no other plan to suggest; but I don't like it. I do hope she'll be all right. I might write to Mr. Courtier, but that would bring him down on me too. Perhaps Elsa will come to her senses presently. I hope she'll write soon. I've nothing to tell her, and if I write I shall say things she won't like.'

Classes at Madame Roskova's school had closed for a month, but Madame herself was staying in town to see the new ballet, *The Goose-girl*, safely launched. Production was due in a week now and everyone was working hard. In answer to Daphne's plea that she wanted to work too and that she could not possibly go into the country and take a holiday, Madame had at first hesitated and then agreed.

'It would not do you any good, in your present mood; you would not rest. *Bien!* You shall work here at your exercises each day, and when I can I will come to see what you are doing.'

It was dull working alone, and though Daphne loyally did her best she was bored, missing the companionship of the other girls in the classes and still more missing Elsa at home.

Miss Stewart and her friend had moved into the Blue House with much rejoicing, and had taken over the coloured curtains and furnishings which fitted the rooms, paying fairly for them. Daphne had done the same in the Green House, keeping only her personal belongings and sending Elsa's off to Min-y-mor. So the change had been quickly effected, and the only difficulty was that when she came home tired Daphne went from force of habit to the Blue House and had twice pulled herself up just in time as she was opening the door.

'"House" seems rather pretentious, but if you don't mind we'll keep the name. We'll be delighted to belong to Rainbow Corner and you've chosen a lovely blue,' Miss Stewart said, as they completed the arrangements.

'Elsa chose it. I like my new green room, and my red house-gown won't look any more gaudy than it did in the Blue House,' Daphne remarked.

'Not gaudy! Only cheerful,' Miss Stewart laughed.

In spite of her gay gown Daphne felt anything but cheerful as she crouched over the fire. She was temperamental, either in high spirits or low, and following the excitement of her exam, and of her visit to Madame, she had slumped, after Elsa's departure, to the depths of depression.

With the slightest knock on the outer door Irene Jones entered. 'May I? I've the most amazing yarn to tell you. Oh, Daphne, you will listen, won't you? I must tell somebody! You

look bad; are you ill? Caught a chill?’

‘No, just a bit worried about Elsa.’ Daphne would not own to being lonely. ‘I can’t help wondering what she’ll do.’

‘She’ll be all right. Will you come and have tea in Red House? You look like part of the furniture in that gown; as if we’d cut you out of the curtains. I must talk to somebody, and Stewart and Co. wouldn’t understand. Nobody would, but you.’

Daphne was putting on the kettle. ‘You have tea with me. I’ve half a cake left and we’ll make toast. What’s happened, Irina?’

‘The weirdest thing!’ Irina sat on the arm of a chair and stared at her. ‘I’ve told you about Léonie, the French girl who was dancing the heroine in *The Goose-girl*?’

Daphne turned from the cupboard, tossing back the heavy plaits which had fallen forward and were in her way. ‘Yes? You said she snapped people’s heads off.’

‘She was ill, poor blighter, though we didn’t know. She crocked up in the night, and this morning they operated for appendicitis. No wonder she was snappy!’

‘Gosh!’ cried Daphne. ‘But what about the ballet?’

‘That’s the weird yarn. Do you remember a kid who was chucked out because she would put in pirouettes? Mary Damayris.’

‘I remember.’ Daphne stared at her. ‘You don’t mean——?’

‘I do! Madame sympathized with her and sent for her, and Damayris has been working with her ever since. They’ve been making new dances; the girl seems to be a genius at turning music into dances. She made the heroine’s dances for *The Goose-girl*, and Léonie has been doing them. To-day Madame turned up with Mary Damayris; they’d offered her the part, as she’d made the dances and practised them. An absolute beginner, my dear! She’s never danced in public yet. But when she does, next week, she’s going to be the sensation of the season.’

‘What a marvellous chance for her!’ Daphne said enviously. ‘Is she really good enough? You saw her, I suppose?’

‘She had her first rehearsal to-day. She’ll need a lot, of course, but there’s still a week. Good enough!—well, when she did the dance before the King—I’ve told you the story; it’s the high spot of the ballet, for her—we, and the orchestra, all cheered her; we just had to clap. Daph, she’s really lovely! She may not have learnt to keep her place in the *corps de ballet*, but she’s full of music and as a soloist she’s wonderful. I said she’d do big things, didn’t I?’

‘You did. Tell me more about her!’ Daphne cut bread and butter, rather badly. ‘Sorry I don’t do this nicely. Elsa always did it. I’m finding out just how many things Elsa always did.’

Irina grinned. ‘Oh well! Your work’s more important than cutting bread and butter; and much more important than anything Elsa ever did! Give me a chunk; I don’t mind.’

‘Tell me about Mary Damayris! Is she like Léonie to look at?’

‘Gosh, no! The very opposite. Léonie was dark and small and neat; very French; and she wasn’t much contrast to the Princess, who’s also dark. Damayris is as English as she can be; masses of yellow curls, which she wears in a net for rehearsal, big brown eyes—very pretty. She’ll look lovely made up, with her hair loose.’

Daphne turned from the gas-ring with startled eyes. ‘I believe I’ve seen her. There was a girl with Madame one day; they’d been doing something together with music. Madame told her to think over the last phrase and said her ideas might be right. She had yellow hair in a net, and it was curly, and her eyes were dark. Could she be your Mary Damayris?’

‘Sounds like her. Ask Madame to let you come and watch her at rehearsal. It’s worth while; good for your education! And if she makes her name you’ll be bucked to have seen her before she appears in public.’

‘Thrilled! Are her dances really good?’

‘Very original, and she does them marvellously.’

‘Rather odd to put in a beginner as heroine,’ Daphne exclaimed. ‘Do people like it?’

‘It’s all right in a new ballet,’ Irina explained. ‘She couldn’t dance lead in *Sylphides* or take the Swan Queen, or Columbine or Papillon, or any well-known part; she’d be compared with other Swan Queens and Columbines and criticized at once. But she’s creating the Goose-girl, and no one can criticize; there’s no standard performance yet.’

‘I see that. She’ll set the standard and other people who do it will be compared with her. What a wonderful beginning for any girl!’

‘She made the dances, you see.’ Irina came to fetch her cup. ‘Thanks, old thing. Is it your first tea-party in your new home?’

Daphne laughed. ‘If you can call it a home! It’s my first Green party. Tell me more about Mary Damayris. I’m thrilled to think I’ve seen her. I shall have something to write to Elsa about, after all.’

‘Damayris has a sister, an Elsa in the background, just like you. She was there, watching the rehearsal. But she’s older than young Mary, and different to look at—dark, but quite pretty. She looked interesting.’ And Irina launched forth into a detailed description of the new dances.

Daphne found her thoughts during the night haunted by the young dancer and her dramatic come-back to the ballet from which she had been dismissed. In the morning she went in search of Madame, hoping to find her before she left for the theatre.

Madame, however, was waiting for her and called her as soon as she arrived. ‘My child, do not change. I have something else for you to do. Come with me to the rehearsal; there is a girl I wish you to watch. She will repay your study.’

‘Mary Damayris?’ Daphne exclaimed.

‘Now how do you know that?’ Madame turned to look at her inquiringly.

‘Irina Ivanovna told me. She’s in *The Goose-girl*. She lives in the hostel, close to me.’

‘So! Then you have heard of our little Damayris. The child is a marvel when she dances; and she has made the dances. They are all her own; I have hardly helped her at all. You know that?’

‘Yes, Madame. It’s simply marvellous.’

‘You will say so when you have seen her. Come then, my child! There is still much to do, and not much time to do it in.’

CHAPTER XIV

ADVENTURE FOR DAPHNE

‘Well? What do you think of her? I saw Madame had let you come to watch.’ Irina glanced in at the Green House that evening.

Daphne was sitting over the fire again, though to-night the fire was not lit. ‘Madame told me to go; said it would be good for me. I say, Irina!’

‘What’s up? And how did you like young Damayris?’

‘Simply loved her. I could watch her for ever. I shall, too, if Madame will let me. Her dances are wonderful. But—Irina! This is from Elsa.’

‘Oh, good! You were waiting for it, weren’t you? What’s the news? All right?’

‘I don’t know that it’s all right,’ Daphne said, frowning. ‘Elsa thinks it is; she’s thrilled to the limit. But she can’t go on like this for ever!’

‘Oh, she’ll grow up! Don’t worry; she’s still only a kid!’ Irina sat on the edge of the table with her hands in her pockets and swung her legs. ‘What’s she done now? And how’s Michelle Barker?’

‘Seems to be all right again. Elsa says she came to life as soon as they settled down at Min-y-mor; Michelle slept most of one day and then was almost fit.’

Irina nodded. ‘She was worn out. Is it good strong air?’

‘Supposed to be almost the best in the country. I’m glad Michelle’s better; she’s finding work—dressmaking for the people in the summer camp; and she isn’t coming back to Town. She’s thrown up her job and decided to stay with Elsa.’

Irina whistled. ‘In rather a hurry, isn’t she? Hadn’t she a good job?’

‘Jolly good; and this other may not last. Elsa’s made her as mad as herself.’ Daphne frowned again. ‘It is mad, Irina! Michelle ought to have stuck to her job.’

‘Elsa seems to be infectious, but whether it’s madness or just furious energy she infects people with I’m not sure yet. What’s she doing herself?’ Irina asked.

‘She’s—oh, Irina, it’s too hopeless!—she’s got leave to start the ferry again! She’s done it properly—been to see the Lord of the Manor and had the rights granted to her, all written down; but—a ferry, Irina! And she’s ramping about the sands with bare feet and no hat, in her slacks and old jersey.’

Irina gave a shout of laughter. ‘I can just see her! Good for Elsa! She’ll have the time of her life.’

‘Until it rains. And what about the winter?’ Daphne retorted.

‘H’m—yes! Has she any ideas for the winter?’

‘Not one. But Michelle’s going to give teas and morning coffee to the people who come to the ferry, and she makes buns or rolls and people will buy them by the dozen. Elsa’s fearfully thrilled by it all.’

‘Sounds like the start of a jolly good little business. I didn’t think Michelle Barker had it in her, though I can quite believe it of Elsa,’ Irina laughed.

‘She calls it their great adventure, and she’s going to confess to Mr. Courtier. She wouldn’t do that unless she felt sure of herself. She’s going to make money and she hopes soon to send some to me, so that I won’t need to——’ and Daphne paused and coloured.

‘Live on Madame,’ Irina finished for her. ‘Elsa never liked your plan. She’s rather a brick, Daphne Dale. Where is her ferry? Is there a river?’

Daphne described the sands, the river-mouth, and the island, and their nearness to Min-y-mor.

Irina nodded. 'A ferry's really needed. Elsa saw the need and has stepped in and filled it. She'll be all right from April till September, but her ferry will flop for the winter. She'll find something else, being Elsa Dale!'

'She'll need to. But it's not good enough, Irina. She'll turn into a country lout, half a boy.'

'And you'll be a ballerina and move in the highest circles. It's odd, of course,' Irina admitted. 'But so long as you both like your jobs, you'll have to put up with one another. You can't stop Elsa, that's quite certain.'

'Not now,' Daphne groaned. 'I used to say that she had nothing to go home for, but now she'll say she's found her job. And I don't like the job she's found!'

'You'll have to make up your mind to it. Elsa knows what she's about, and Michelle must think she has a chance of making good, if she's going to stick to her. Which did you like best—the dance before the King, or the Goose-girl's entrance?'

Daphne sighed and put Elsa's letter on the mantelpiece. 'I wish my young sister wasn't quite so enterprising. Mad, I call it. The dance I liked best of all was that sad little thing at the beginning of the second act, where the Goose-girl's alone in the King's garden.'

'That really does belong to Mary Damayris,' Irina said. 'I heard someone say she suggested it; said it was needed, and when they thought about it they agreed with her. Léonie didn't do it half as well as Damayris does.'

Every day Daphne sat at the back of the empty theatre and watched the rehearsals, and came to know every movement of the dances, every note of the music, every gesture and expression of the Goose-girl heroine. At her lonely practice in the studio she tried to reproduce some of the dances, but was not satisfied that she had remembered them aright.

Madame surprised her at it one day and watched unseen for a time. 'So you like our new dances, my child?' she said at last.

Daphne whirled round. 'Oh, Madame! Do you mind? I was trying to be the Goose-girl; the dances are so fascinating. But I can't quite remember——'

'I can tell you where you are wrong. Would you like to work on the dances our little Damayris has made?'

'How I'd love it! Madame, would you let me? Would she mind?'

'I think not. I will talk to her; but why should you not learn them? Already, from watching her, you half know them; others will learn them also from seeing her. *Allons!* We will work,' Madame said briskly.

Daphne's face was radiant. 'Gosh! What a bit of luck she caught me at it!' she murmured. 'I'd never have dared to ask her.'

Irina raised her eyebrows when she heard. 'We all try to do bits of the new dances, of course, but I shouldn't have thought Madame would teach them in earnest yet. You won't do them as Damayris does, my dear infant.'

'I know,' Daphne said humbly. 'But nobody ever will do them as she does. After all, she made them! She must see more into the heart of them than anybody else. We can only copy what she does.'

Irina gave her a keen look. 'That's true. I shouldn't wonder if you copied them rather well. They're so fresh and natural and original; just right for a beginner. Although they're so fascinating, in some ways they're simple. When other people come to do them, they may find

that old and experienced dancers—like me, look you!—aren't as good as fresh young beginners like yourself.'

'Like the girl's dance in *The Spectre of the Rose*. They say beginners do that best,' Daphne agreed.

She watched the rehearsals with even keener interest now, both for her own enjoyment and because she knew Madame would question her at her next practice. Often, when she slipped into the dimly lit theatre, she saw the sister of Mary Damayris, of whom Irina had spoken, sitting with Madame or alone, watching with attention as keen as her own.

'She looks jolly. I'd like to speak to her,' Daphne thought. 'But I've no excuse. She might think it was cheek.'

The night of the first performance came, and Daphne, in the gallery, gave half her excited attention to Irina in the *corps de ballet* and half to the triumph of the unknown dancer, Mary Damayris. She saw Madame watching from a box; the dark-haired sister was with her, wearing a yellow evening frock, and also another girl, still darker, who looked like a foreigner.

The dress rehearsal had been good, but this was better, and Daphne's cheers were the heartiest in the theatre as 'Damayris' appeared alone at the end, to bow her thanks rather shyly.

'She's made her name to-night, lucky girl! I wonder what the critics will say? I wish Elsa could have seen her! But she's cut herself off from all jolly things like this; she'd rather potter about with her boat and her ferry and her teas, and the dog and cat!' Daphne sighed, as she went home to the loneliness of the Green House.

'Come here, my child,' Madame called next morning, when she went to the studio.

Daphne paused at the door, for Madame was not alone.

'Oh!' she grew scarlet with shyness and delight. 'Oh, Miss Damayris! It was marvellous! Aren't you terribly thrilled this morning?'

The yellow-haired girl in practice tights and tunic, with her curls tucked out of sight in a net, laughed ruefully. 'I was, till I came here. Madame's pricked my bubble in a dozen places. I'm glad you liked it; perhaps you didn't see all the faults she's been pointing out to me!' She was sitting on the table, eating strawberries from a blue bowl. 'Have some? I brought them for Madame. I'm eating too many; and I had some for breakfast. It will be a real kindness if you'll finish them; may save me from making myself ill. And that would be jolly awkward, as I haven't any understudy.' She laughed across at Daphne and then glanced at Madame.

Madame fixed a keen gaze on Daphne. 'My child, will you be the understudy?'

'I?' Daphne gasped. 'For the Goose-girl? Madame, what do you mean?'

'I'm so new, you see,' Mary Damayris explained, pushing the bowl towards Daphne. 'Come on—help yourself! If you're going to swoon they'll revive you. A huge basket arrived from Sussex just as I was setting out, and as I'd already eaten a dozen or so for breakfast I brought a few along to Madame. I daren't stodge on them as I'd like to do, for fear I have tummy-ache and can't go on to-night; and what would M. Antoine do then, poor thing? He'd fling me out again. Oh, you've heard that sad story, have you?' She laughed at the gleam in Daphne's eyes.

'But I don't understand,' Daphne faltered. 'You couldn't think that I could ever be the Goose-girl?'

'You'll never need to be her,' Mary Damayris said briskly. 'I haven't the slightest intention of ever being ill, and I'm very healthy and strong. Ray—my sister Rachel, you know—looks

after me like a mother, or a dragon; she'll see that I keep fit. There's no fun in the job for you; I think myself it's a ghastly thing to ask of anybody, but these good people can't sleep at night because they've nobody to fall back on if I get run over or catch 'flu. You'll have to be in the theatre every night, ready to go on if anybody drops anything on me, and you'll never get your chance, because it will never happen. You'll have rehearsals and they'll be good experience, of course; and you'll be paid for your time. But you mustn't take on the job expecting to get a chance to be the Goose-girl and make your name, for it simply won't happen.' And she laughed across at Daphne again. 'I shall see that it doesn't! I'm far too keen on my Goose-girl to let her down by crocking up in any way.'

'Damayris and I both feel that the Goose-girl is a character who will be played better and danced better by a beginner than by an experienced dancer, if it should ever be necessary,' Madame began.

'I'm so frightfully new to it all,' the heroine of the moment said earnestly. 'Everybody says I've a kind of freshness that suits the part. The Girl was a nice simple open-air kid, at the beginning; it's quite possible that somebody who'd been dancing for years couldn't do her as well as a beginner. The dances aren't hard, you know; they happen to be new and people seem to have liked them, but they aren't difficult. Madame says you've been working at them a bit, on your own; jolly clever of you to pick them up from watching!'

'They fit the music so marvellously,' Daphne said shyly. 'I've watched your rehearsals and I know how the music goes. It helps one to remember.'

Mary Damayris gave her a quick look of approval. 'Of course it helps. I'm glad you feel that; and I'm glad you think they fit. I'll help you with them; we'll work them up together.'

Daphne coloured. 'I'd love that. I'd do the job for that alone.'

'Nice of you! It will be good training for me,' Mary Damayris laughed. 'Some day, when I'm too old and stout to dance, I shall have a school and train girls in ballet. You'll be my first pupil; will you?'

'I can't believe you really mean it!' Daphne cried. 'You must know I'd love it more than anything. It's a marvellous chance!'

'You'll find me terribly strict! I know just how I want the Goose-girl to go, and nothing else will do. Right! We'll call that settled, Daphne Dale. Madame told me about you; I do like your name. You'll never need to invent one to put on your programmes!'

'Is yours made up?' Daphne asked eagerly. 'We thought it must be. We'd never heard it before.'

'A Countess made it for me. I'm really Mary Damaris Ellerton, and at school I was called Dammy or Damson.'

'But how pretty! Why didn't you use it?'

'My home folks wanted me to keep Damaris for them. So we made it into a surname, as Damayris.'

'Damaris—Damayris! Oh, how clever! It's a good stage name.'

'That's what we all thought. But you must always use your own. "Daphne Dale" is perfect. Now let me see what you've made of my dances. I'm frightfully curious to watch somebody else be the Goose-girl!'

'Oh—I can't!' Daphne cried, in a sudden rush of shyness. 'Not before you! How could I?'

'Bosh! Let's have the garden dance; the sad one,' Damaris said briskly, slipping off the table. 'Madame will play for us. Now off you go, into that corner! Then come in dreaming of

home, and the wind on the fells—the hills where you used to keep your geese; and put it all into your dance.'

'I've never been so frightened in my life! Not even at the exams.!' Daphne gasped.

Damaris gave a ringing laugh. 'Don't be an ass! I haven't passed those exams., so you can despise me, if you like. I've been taught in France and Italy, and the London examiners haven't had a chance to tell me off. I think you've been jolly plucky to face them; Madame told me how well you'd done. Perhaps some day I'll take the exams., just to see what happens; it would be useful to have certificates when I want to start my school.'

'It is almost necessary,' Madame said. 'You would pass, my child, but you would need to work.'

'It's been rubbed into me from the start that a dancer's life means work and nothing but work,' Damaris grinned.

'Not "nothing",' Madame said quietly. 'There was last night, Damayris.'

'Yes.' Damaris spoke more soberly. 'Oh yes! It's more than worth all the work. Last night was great.'

'Now, my children,' Madame urged, 'there has been enough chatter. There is much to do.'

'I'm afraid there'll always be chatter where I am,' Mary Damayris said ruefully. 'I've a gift for chatter. Now, Daphne Dale, show us the Goose-girl, dreaming sadly of home.'

CHAPTER XV

THE UNDERSTUDY

As Daphne left the studio, after a strenuous spell of work with her new teacher and some earnest practice alone, she looked wistfully at Madame.

‘Shall I be good enough, Madame?’

‘Damayris is delighted with you. I shall speak to M. Antoine, but since she is satisfied I think you can feel the understudy is yours,’ Madame said kindly. ‘The salary will be small, but the experience will be worth much.’

‘About the money, Madame! You’ll take it, won’t you?’ Daphne pleaded. ‘Anything I earn must go to you.’

Madame looked thoughtful. ‘I think not. I am glad you have said it, my dear, but you need the money and I can wait. This will bring the start of your career one step nearer. If you do well at rehearsals, Antoine and I will use you in some other production; he will see you and you will win his approval—or he will not give you the understudy. Oh yes, it is a step forward! But at the moment you must keep the money. Do you not wish to send some to the little sister in the country?’

‘Not just now. She’s all right, Madame.’

‘What has she found to do?’

Daphne reddened and laughed. ‘She’s running a ferry and a tea-shop, with a friend to help her.’

‘*Mon Dieu!* She has ideas and enterprise! Her adventure deserves to succeed,’ Madame said heartily. ‘But keep your salary, my child. You will have earned it and you should have pocket-money to play with.’

‘I shall put away some every week and bring it to you when it seems worth while. You’re more than kind, Madame.’

Madame Roskova looked after her with thoughtful eyes. ‘A good child, that. I like her better than I did. Little Damayris likes her too. They will be friends, and it will be an excellent thing for our Daphne.’

Daphne rushed off to tell her news to Irina. But the Red House was locked and empty, and she remembered that her friend was to have tea, following rehearsal, with other girls from the ballet and would not be home till after the evening performance. Madame had ordered early bed, until such time as Daphne was accepted as the understudy, when she would need to be at the theatre until a late hour, on those nights when *The Goose-girl* formed part of the programme; and Madame’s word was law. So she had regretfully to postpone the telling of her story until the morning.

After breakfast Irina’s door remained shut, a luggage label hanging from the handle—the private sign in Rainbow Corner that the inmate did not wish to be disturbed.

Daphne gazed wistfully at the label, but the signal had to be respected, so she went back to the Green House and began a letter to Elsa, as it was too early to go to the studio.

She was scribbling away, her cheeks flushed and her eyes bright as she told of her good fortune and relived the enjoyment of her first lesson with Mary Damayris, when Irina, with her usual brief knock, put her head in at the door.

‘See you to-night. I must dash; I’ve slept too long. Sorry to black-label you, but I was dead beat and didn’t want to see anybody this morning.’

‘Oh, Irina—one minute! I’ve something so marvellous to tell you!’ Daphne sprang up.

‘Sorry. Keep it till to-night. We had a supper-party and I wasn’t home till this morning. I mustn’t do it again; it won’t pay. But some girls asked me; they’re a pally crowd.’

Then Irina was gone, and Daphne, much disappointed, turned back to her letter.

‘Irina’s making friends with the other girls in *The Goose-girl*. Well!’ and her eyes danced. ‘I shall be part of the pally crowd quite soon! How thrilled she’ll be when I tell her!’

Her lesson from Mary Damayris was a joy to both. Daphne was eager to learn, a responsive pupil; Damaris taught well and knew what she wanted. In her school days she had been a leader, adored by the juniors, to whom her word had been final; she found the same kind of hero-worship in Daphne, and—not abusing it but using it well—she led the younger girl into a deeper understanding of the music and of how to express it in her dancing.

‘How old are you?’ she asked, as they rested.

‘Seventeen last spring. I’m getting rather old,’ Daphne said anxiously.

Damaris laughed. ‘There isn’t much between us. I’m not eighteen till the end of August. Rather cheek for me to be bullying you like this!’

‘I love it! You’ve had much more experience than I have. And I’m only a student; you’re a star.’

Damaris grinned. ‘A very tiny flicker of a star, who couldn’t keep her place in the *corps de ballet*! One thing I like about you, Daphne Dale, is your hair,’ she said seriously.

Daphne flushed resentfully. ‘Madame won’t let me cut it. I’d much rather have it short.’

‘No! Oh no, Madame’s right! If you should ever need to be the Goose-girl—but I’m sure you won’t!—you’ll look the part far better than I do. They tried me in a wig with two pigtails, but they didn’t like the effect. You could produce two long yellow plaits, if you wanted them, I’m sure.’

‘That was Madame’s idea when she made me keep my hair; not for this part, of course, but for other ballets.’

Damaris nodded. ‘One night when *The Goose-girl* isn’t on, Ray and I are going to Sadler’s Wells, to see *Checkmate* again. Would you come too? We shall go to the gallery; we aren’t millionaires! We could make a jolly party.’

‘I’d love it!’ Daphne’s eyes sparkled. ‘I’ve seen your sister at rehearsal; she looks so interesting!’

‘She’s much more interesting than I am. She’s just had her first story accepted by a magazine. Isn’t it a thrill? Now let’s have another go at the King’s dance. You wouldn’t wear pigtails for that, of course; you’d have your hair as it is now, round your head. I like the way you do it so neatly. But the wild girl from the hills would have plaits, and you’d score over me there.’

‘Oh no! When your hair’s loose it looks just right for the hill-girl.’

‘Wild, and wilder than wild! Now to business, Daphne Dale. I do like your little name! I’m longing to see it on a poster.’

Daphne went home feeling her cup of happiness was brimming over. In a few days she was to have a rehearsal with the whole company; she realized the value of the experience and rejoiced in her good luck, even though she was never likely to dance *The Goose-girl* in public, for it would have been hard to find anyone healthier or more full of life than Mary Damayris. She rejoiced also in the friendship which was deepening so rapidly, and was determined to foster it by every means in her power. She would go to Sadler’s Wells and would meet Rachel, the elder sister who wrote stories; some day she would tell them about Elsa—she had an idea

that Elsa's enterprises would appeal strongly to Damaris. It was a friendship which was full of enjoyment and happiness, and which could not fail to be of the greatest value in many ways.

There was no label on the handle of the Red House door, which stood ajar. Daphne pushed it open anxiously.

'Irina! Why aren't you at rehearsal?'

'Matinée, and no *Goose-girl* in the bill.' Irina was darning stockings. 'They're doing *Giselle* and *Carnaval*. It's our half-day off.'

'Oh, I see! I say, Irina, I've such gorgeous news! Your Mary Damayris hasn't an understudy yet, has she?'

'They've chosen one. Damayris is training her and we're going to rehearse with her in a few days.' Irina glanced up at her sharply.

'I know.' Daphne laughed happily. 'I'm it.'

Irina flung her work aside and sprang up. 'You—what? Say that again, young Daphne!'

Startled, Daphne stared at her. 'Madame has chosen me. I've been working with Mary Damayris for two days. I wanted to tell you last night. Irina, what's the matter?'

'They've given the understudy to you—an absolute outsider? And passed over all of us, who know the show inside out? What a rotten trick!' Irina raged. 'One of us ought to have had it! How could you possibly—you—just a kid—oh, it's ridiculous! Have they all gone batty? It's a beastly shame!'

'I never thought of that,' Daphne faltered, her joy shattered. 'Irina, it is hard on all of you, I see that. But—Irina, do think! It's not the least likely I shall ever have the chance to dance; Damayris is the sort of person who's never ill, and she'll take care not to have an accident. I shall have to sit there in the dressing-room every night, and knit or darn or read. It will be frightfully stale! But you're dancing all the time. You have the best of it, Irina. And they won't pay me anything like you're getting. Irina, do be sensible!'

'Sensible!' Irina towered over her, a tragedy queen. 'Sensible! When I, after dancing for years, and all my pals, are passed over for an inexperienced chit who's never been on a stage! Sooner or later you'll have to take the part—something will happen to Damayris—and there you'll be dancing lead, while we're all still in the background. It's horribly unfair—and it's quite crazy. They must be mad! And you're mad to think you can do it. I wouldn't have believed you'd have the cheek to take it on.'

'Damayris seems to think I'm fit for it,' Daphne retorted, her temper rising. 'She's satisfied, and she ought to know!'

'Do you mean to say you've been working with Damayris? You're as thick as thieves with her already, I suppose!' Irina's envy surged up in a wave of bitterness. 'You've gone behind us all and made up to her. You're a little toad, Daphne Dale—a snake!'

'I like her, and I believe she likes me. I'm going to meet her sister and go to the Wells with them.' Daphne flung the rest of her news at the angry Welsh girl. 'I'm fed up with you, Irene Jones. You're mad. There's nothing to make a fuss about.'

She flung out of the room and banged the door of the Green House and locked it against all comers.

'Little pig!' Irene fumed. 'To go behind us all like that!'

In her green room Daphne stood, trembling from shock. It had been such an utter surprise.

'Elsa warned me,' she thought numbly, dropping into a chair and staring unseeingly at the fire-place.

CHAPTER XVI

MARY DAMAYRIS TAKES CHARGE

‘What’s the matter with you?’ Damaris looked keenly at her understudy. ‘Something’s gone out of you. You’re different. What’s happened?’

‘I didn’t sleep,’ Daphne confessed, colouring. ‘I was thinking of—things.’

‘What things?’ Her teacher’s tone was peremptory. ‘Something’s upset you. Have you had bad news?’

‘Oh no! I’m just a bit worried.’

Damaris looked at her gravely, with some anxiety. ‘Are you temperamental? Do you get easily upset?’

‘Elsa—she’s my sister—says I am,’ Daphne owned.

‘Well, you mustn’t, you know. You must learn to control your feelings and not let them spoil your work. You’ll be no use to us as the Goose-girl if you go to pieces when anything worries you. People must be upset sometimes, of course, if they’re worth anything. You can’t be an artist unless you’re sensitive; and a dancer must be an artist. But it mustn’t interfere with your work. You must learn to carry on as usual, no matter what you’re feeling. All the joy has gone out of you to-day; you aren’t yourself at all. It won’t do! You must pull yourself together and dance—really dance—whether you feel the world has come to an end or not. You must be the Goose-girl, not yourself.’

‘That’s rather how I feel,’ Daphne muttered. ‘About the end of everything, I mean.’

‘It’s what you look like. You saw Madame speak to me as she went out? She was in despair about you, and she told me to find out what was wrong. She thought you might be more willing to tell me. Now, Daphne Dale, out with it! What’s the matter?’

Daphne shook her head. ‘It’s so silly and unnecessary. It shouldn’t have happened at all.’

‘Lots of things are like that. You’ve had a row with somebody. Is it your sister?’

‘Oh no! She’s not even in Town.’

‘A pal, then,’ Damaris said sensibly. ‘You’d better tell me, for I shall keep on at you until you do. Who is she? Does she live with you?’

‘She’s just across the passage, in the hostel. We’ve been pals for a year,’ Daphne burst out. ‘I told her about being your understudy; I was so happy and proud that I had to tell her. And—and she got up and cursed me high and low. She said fearful things, and I said she was mad, and—this morning I didn’t see her, and—and——’

‘Now steady!’ Damaris said quietly. ‘Tell me a little more. Why should she be upset because we’ve chosen you?’

‘She’s in your *corps de ballet*. She feels I’m an outsider, and a child, and one of them ought to have been chosen. She’s boiling over with rage and jealousy.’

‘Oh, gosh!’ Damaris sat down suddenly. ‘Oh, horrors! Now I’ve done it!’

The despair in her voice was so acute that Daphne, on the verge of tears, pulled herself together, staring at her blankly.

‘You don’t understand, of course,’ Mary Damayris said forlornly. ‘I’ve done the very thing I’ve been trying to avoid; the one thing of all others I didn’t want to happen. I’ve seen so much cattiness and jealousy among dancers, as students, that I made up my mind never to have it anywhere near me if I could help it. Madame suggested we should choose an understudy from the *corps de ballet*, as they knew the play, but I begged and prayed it might

be an outsider; I knew how all the rest would feel if we picked one of them. How could I know you'd have your best pal among them? It's frightfully bad luck!

'She's the only real pal I have, now that Elsa's gone home,' Daphne faltered.

'I'm terribly sorry.' Damaris looked at her in pathetic apology. 'I wouldn't have had it happen for anything. It's my fault; but I couldn't know.'

'Oh, it's not your fault!' Daphne cried indignantly. 'Irina's an idiot! It's nothing to do with you.'

'Oh, yes, it is. I've made the mess and upset you, and it's the thing I was trying so hard not to do. Which girl is it? Irina—what?'

'Irina Ivanovna. Her real name's Irene Jones.'

For one moment Damaris grinned. 'How jolly clever! And she was Irene Jones when she rose up and cursed you—Welsh, I mean!'

'Her mother was Russian. It's a queer mixture. Her father was a sailor, like ours.'

'A weird mixture! I can believe she could flare up. Do I know her? What's she like?'

'Tall and dark and tragic. She's the one who has to warn you, in the first act.'

'Oh, is that Irene Jones? I've often admired her. She does her bit jolly well; I feel positively scared when I see her face. I know she's only pointing at the enemy, but I'm always sure there's something really horrible, like a snake or a spider, or perhaps my undies coming down; something completely gruesome. There's no make-believe about Irene Jones! She frightens me every night.'

'She'd be terribly bucked to hear you say so,' Daphne said wistfully.

'Tell her, then. Oh, but I suppose she won't speak to you now, will she? But look here, Daphne Dale, the girl's an ass. She could never be the Goose-girl! The jealous Princess—yes, she could do that; she'd do that awful woman perfectly. But not our little Goose-girl. So what is she making a fuss about?'

'She doesn't like to think I'm doing it.'

'Oh, but that's sheer dog-in-the-manger! She's that type, of course. There isn't anyone she thinks would do it better than you?'

'Not that I know of. But she feels you've passed over the whole *corps de ballet* and chosen an outsider.'

'We did it on purpose,' Damaris said grimly. 'I knew what they'd be like if we chose one of them.'

She sat thinking gloomily. At last she sat up, with a sigh. 'I shall have to do something about it. I've made the mess, although I never meant it.'

'It isn't your fault,' Daphne protested. 'You mustn't let it worry you. That would be frightfully unfair.'

'Rot! It's up to me to put things right. I shall talk to Rachel. I do hope you won't feel too bad about it,' Damaris said anxiously. 'I want you for my understudy, but you'll have to be a lot better than you are this morning, you know. Can't you forget Irene Jones and be the Goose-girl for an hour?'

'Oh, I will, now that you know all about it! But please call her Irina Ivanovna; she'd be terribly upset if she knew I'd told you about Irene Jones.'

Damaris laughed. 'Irina Ivanovna she shall be. It's a good name. She's clever, and she'll go far; but she must have tragedy parts. She's cut out for dramatic situations. She needn't be jealous of you, for you'll never clash with her; you're made for quite different stuff. You and

Irina Ivanovna may be stars in a ballet together some day, but you'll take contrasting parts—like the jealous Princess and me. I say! There's an idea there!

She looked so thoughtful that Daphne watched her eagerly, full of hope for more to come. But Mary Damayris thrust the problem aside and sprang up.

'I'll play for you, and you'll show me the King's dance and for goodness' sake be the Goose-girl in earnest this time and forget Daphne Dale and Irina Ivanovna!'

She went to the piano and played the air.

Daphne watched and listened enviously. 'I wish I could do that! You play jolly well.'

'Don't you play?' Damaris looked up at her.

Daphne's eyes fell. 'I used to. My aunt was a music-teacher and of course I had to learn. But I haven't kept it up.'

'That was stupid,' Damaris said severely. 'You'd find it useful. Dancers ought to be able to play their own music. My invaluable guardian sister bullied me till I practised. Why didn't yours do it for you?'

'She's younger than I am. She gave it up too. We've no piano where we live now.'

'If she's younger I suppose she couldn't bully you,' Damaris conceded. 'It's a pity, though. The music means so much more when you play it for yourself. Now show me my dance, please!'

'You aren't still worrying about Irina's rage, are you?' she asked presently. 'That was tons better; almost as good as yesterday. You can put things away, if you try. But it isn't right yet.' And she eyed Daphne keenly. 'You are worrying, you know!'

'I was thinking how horribly nervous I'd be if I ever have to do it in public,' Daphne confessed.

'Oh no! You'll have been through something so very much worse that you won't mind the audience, if the time ever comes—which it won't,' Damaris said coolly. 'Rehearsal before a critical company is far harder.'

Daphne looked startled. 'I suppose—yes, of course, it would be.'

'I felt simply awful, and I haven't had time to forget it yet.' Damaris looked up at her as she stood by the piano. 'They all knew I'd been kicked out by Antoine, and there I was, doing the heroine! I nearly funk'd it and fled. But the music helped; when I heard my notes on the flute I just had to dash in and dance; I'd been shaking with terror in the wings. Once I started it wasn't so bad; I forgot the eyes fixed on me and thought only of the music. That's what you'll have to do. Then—well, something happened, and after that we were all friends and everything was happy and jolly.'

'I know. They cheered your dance before the King. Irina told me.'

'Yours must be good enough to satisfy them too. They're terribly critical, of course; far worse than the ordinary public. But they do know what's good, and they're generous—they'll tell you.'

'It will be far worse for me,' Daphne said sombrely. 'For Irina will have set them against me.'

Damaris gave her a quick look. 'Perhaps we can do something about that. Irina Ivanovna isn't such a very important person yet. Tell me more about her! Is she interesting? She sounds as if she had plenty of character, even if it's rather boisterous at present; she needs to learn control, just as you and I do; you of your feelings, and I of my pirouettes! That was what Antoine told me; to come back in a year when I had learnt control. We must all try together, you and I and Irina. What sort of life has she had? Can she talk? Tell stories?'

‘Oh, rather! She’s told me masses of useful stuff. She’s danced since she was twelve, in pantomimes and revues and all sorts of little shows. But *The Goose-girl* is her first big ballet.’

Damaris raised her eyebrows. ‘Thrilling! Ray would love to know her; she’s keen on people who can tell her about their lives. We’ve done so little, and things have been made rather easy for us. We’ve a wealthy cousin who saw us through. Someone who has made her own way and fought for her place would interest Rachel enormously.’

‘Irina’s done that. Her people live in Cardiff, but she’s been in Town for years. She’s nineteen now.’

‘I begin to see my way out of this mess!’ Damaris proclaimed. ‘No, I can’t tell you any more yet. I want to see my sad dance in the garden; we’re doing more chatter than dance, as usual. Here comes Madame to say so!—All right, Madame! We’re going to work now. We had to argue things out. *Allons*, Daphne Dale! You are now the Goose-girl, feeling sad with her thoughts of home.’

She gave up her place at the piano to Madame and became the stern critic and teacher instead.

CHAPTER XVII

DAMARIS HEALS THE BREACH

'I'm frightfully nervous! I haven't made a speech since I left school,' Damaris cried, laughing.

'That isn't so very long. Come, my little pirouette, up you go!' and Bernard, her partner in *The Goose-girl*, picked her off the chair on which she stood and hoisted her on to the piano. 'From that height you can survey your loyal subjects.'

Damaris addressed the assembled ballet company from her perch, telling in a few words of the imperative need for an understudy for her part.

'Poor M. Antoine is going grey and bald, for fear somebody will drop something on me in the street; and I can't sleep for thinking how you'd all hate me if I were the next to develop an appendix,' she explained.

There was a laugh, for Georges Antoine's thick black hair showed no sign of suffering and she herself was as eager and bright-eyed as usual.

She told of her reason for the choice of an outsider. 'None of you would have liked it if we'd picked out one of you; now would you? You'd have looked hate and thunder at the poor brute who was chosen'—and a conscious laugh went round. 'It's a part that calls for somebody simple-minded and young and childish, like me.' The laugh grew to a shout. 'That's all right then! We've found a kid who has never had her chance yet, but as a dancer she's jolly good. I'm training her; I'm a fearful bully, though you wouldn't believe it when you know how humble I am among all you experienced people and how scared I am of M. Antoine. But with a still younger and more humble person I'm a terror.'

Antoine smiled grimly, well aware by now that the girl who had insisted on putting in pirouettes by herself was an asset to his company for her influence and personality alone, as well as a most promising dancer and a favourite with the public.

'I've told Daphne that she mustn't expect ever to play the part,' Damaris went on. 'Her name's Daphne Dale, and of course we shall see it on the posters one day; a name like that is simply wasted if it isn't on a programme. There's not much fun in the job for her, for I'm never ill and nobody will allow me to have an accident, and I love my Goose-girl far too much to give her up for a single night. But Daphne will have the experience of learning the part, and she'll need rehearsals, I shall bring her along presently and we'll try her out. You'll be nice to her, won't you? She's just a kid, and she's a bit frightened. And she's full of our beastly awkward artistic temperament, which means that she'll dance beautifully when she's trained, but also that she'll suffer from nerves. So I want you all to help her—and me—by being jolly to her when she rehearses. Oh, and one other thing! Madame says I may tell you it has been decided that when the company goes on tour in October, *The Goose-girl* shall be included in the programmes.'

There was a cheer, for many, specially engaged for the new ballet, had been anxious on this point.

Damaris sprang down from her throne and crossed the stage to Irene Jones.

'You're Irina Ivanovna. You know Daphne Dale, don't you? I wish you'd come along and have tea with us; I've asked Daphne, and my sister is coming, and three's such an awkward number.'

Irina's face was a study in emotions. She had been indignant to find the ground cut from under her feet, for her tentative attempts to prejudice her companions against Daphne were obviously doomed to failure; she had been scornful and angry to see the change in the expressions of her friends as Damaris won their sympathy for the new-comer. But here was an invitation she could not resist; an honour and an opportunity which might never come again. A great part of her resentment had been due to the conviction that Daphne's new job must result in a close association and perhaps even intimacy with Mary Damayris, who was already adored from a distance by the whole company; if the friendship could by any means be extended to herself, nothing whatever must stand in the way.

Mary Damayris was eyeing her with a penetrating look. 'You weren't pleased that I'd asked Daphne, were you? She didn't tell me; I saw there was something wrong—her dancing was all to pieces, and I had to get to the bottom of it, for if she was going to collapse like that she'd have been no use to us. I questioned her and found she hadn't slept, so I made her tell me the reason. You're her best pal, now that her sister's left Town, aren't you? I'm sure you didn't mean to let her down, but of course you did, didn't you? You failed her when she needed your sympathy. She's young and inexperienced beside you; you won't do it again. I expect she cried all night. She was so keen, and so excited and happy, and you gave her a shock.'

Irina was scarlet. 'I'm sorry. I didn't think of it like that. She is just a kid, of course.'

'And you'll come to tea, won't you?' Damaris coaxed.

Irina looked at her and broke into a laugh. 'Miss Damayris, you know I'll love to come.'

'That's good! Come on, then, before I die of thirst. But you mustn't call me Miss Damayris; it sounds all wrong. Just "Damayris" is a much bigger compliment; as if I really was somebody worth while! If you must say "Miss," then I'm Miss Damaris Ellerton. You've heard of people taking stage names, haven't you?' There was a gleam of mischief in her dark eyes.

Irene Jones looked at her sharply. 'We wondered about your name,' she confessed. 'I've changed mine too. Did Daphne tell you?'

'She said you were half Welsh, and that the Welsh part was your father,' Damaris owned. 'You've been jolly sensible; a Russian name goes down better than a Welsh one, for a dancer.'

'My father was John Jones,' Irene said defiantly. 'I've every right to call myself Ivanovna.'

'Absolutely. Daphne Dale is the one who doesn't need to trouble about her name; her fairy godmother looked after that at her christening! Here we are; do you know this wee place? It's quiet, and close to the theatre. They're used to me by now; I've turned up before with a crowd.'

The retired little tea-shop, dainty in its curtains and china and coloured cloths, had an inner room shut off by gay screens, and Damaris led the way to this quiet corner.

'Oh, you're here before us!' she cried gaily.

Daphne had arrived a few minutes earlier, to find the pretty dark-haired sister already in possession of a table and to be greeted with an eager, 'Are you Daphne Dale? Marry—I mean Damaris; sorry, but I always call her Marry. No, it's not French, though they turned it into Marie in France and Maria in Italy. But it's English; short for Damaris, you know. She hasn't come yet. I want to hear about your sister. Why don't we see her? Where is she?'

Before she knew, Daphne was sitting at the table and pouring out the story of Elsa's house by the sea—her adventurous departure in search of a living and her reckless invitation to the

invalid friend—the ferry and the Lord of the Manor—the recovery of Michelle and the starting of the Min-y-mor Tea-rooms.

Rachel was a good listener and she loved a story. She was so deeply absorbed in the recital that she hardly looked up when Damaris and Irina came in.

‘Irina Ivanovna! I’ve watched you warning Marry—I mean Mary Damayris!—so often that I feel I know you quite well. You do it most convincingly; the horror in your face startles me every time.’

‘It terrifies me,’ Mary Damayris asserted. ‘I feel sure the theatre’s on fire or I’ve something unmentionable showing somewhere.’

Rachel laughed. ‘Daphne’s telling me the most thrilling yarn. You order the tea; I must have the next chapter! I’ll tell you at night; no, she can’t go back to the beginning for you. You shouldn’t have been so late; chattering as usual, I suppose! Now, Daphne, go on! What did the Lord of the Manor say to Elsa? I love her; she’s an absolute brick! I’d give a lot to see her, and her Mor and Min and Michelle!’

‘But Irina Ivanovna was to tell you about her adventurous early life,’ Damaris complained. ‘I was going to talk to Daphne!’

‘We’ll change over when Daphne’s finished this instalment of her thrilling serial,’ Rachel said laughing. ‘I could make a dozen short stories out of the ideas she’s given me already.’

‘Drinking in copy at every pore, you are,’ Damaris jeered. ‘You’d better charge her a percentage, Daphne Dale. Irina, you can tell me about the girls in our show. I’m interested in several of them.’

A self-conscious look had passed between Irina and Daphne, and as Irina took her seat she murmured, ‘Sorry I was a beast! I didn’t think.’

Daphne flushed, but under pressure from the insatiable Rachel she had to go on with her story.

‘It’s priceless about Lohengrin,’ Rachel murmured. ‘Marry will love that bit. Did his sister come to see Elsa, as he promised?’

‘She loved Min-y-mor, and they gave her tea, and she said she’d come back and that they reminded her—I say!’ Daphne gasped. ‘Your names—you’re Rachel and Damaris—could it have been you? Did you ever live in the Lake District?’

‘It’s our home; a wee farm on the fells. Why? What has that to do with Lohengrin’s sister?’

Daphne leaned forward and spoke eagerly. ‘Did you once give somebody tea, at a place called Hikers’ Halt?’

Damaris, listening with interest to Irina’s stories, was startled by a shout from her usually quiet sister. ‘Marry! Marry! Listen to this! Hikers’ Halt is haunting us again! Tell us, Daphne! What did she say?’

‘Two pretty girls, one dark and one fair, gave her tea at a funny little hut on the—the fells, is it?—and they said she was their first customer. They wore shorts, like hikers do on the hills; and she went back later, but they’d disappeared,’ Daphne said breathlessly.

‘Gosh!’ Damaris gasped. ‘How our past does follow us round! It’s all true, even the shorts. Ray loathed them, but I loved them.’

‘I only loathed them when I was serving teas. They were all right for the fells,’ Rachel protested. ‘I remember that girl and her brother. We gave them tea and eggs out at the back, where the view was, Marry.’

‘And you forgot the salt, and I talked too much and you pulled me up. Golly, how odd!’ Damaris cried. ‘So she went back and we weren’t there! We were hiding from the cousin who later turned out to be a fairy godmother and not a strict interfering guardian, as we’d feared; when we found how topping she was we went away with her and she helped us with our careers, or tried to.’ And she laughed.

‘Our careers went off on different lines,’ Rachel said.

‘Ray was to be her secretary and I was to keep hens and bees at our wee farm on the fells. But—well, Mary Damayris came along, and Ray insisted on being an author. Fortunately our cousin didn’t object.’

‘I should think she’d be terribly proud,’ Daphne ventured shyly.

‘I believe she is a bit bucked.’ Damaris grinned. ‘What is it all about? I can’t have Ray keeping things like this to herself! Was it your sister who met Nell Somebody? We never heard her surname, but she was called Nell.’

‘Nell Lohengrin,’ Rachel laughed. ‘You’d better go back to the beginning, Daphne, while I pour the tea. Elsa must write good letters!’

‘They’re always thrilling. She tells all sorts of little things; just what one wants to hear.’ And Daphne started again to tell of Elsa’s adventures, for the benefit of eager Damaris.

‘I say, what a sporting sister! Aren’t you terrifically proud of her?’ Mary Damayris cried, her eyes lighting up.

‘No, she’s mad with her,’ Irina said laughing. ‘She’s worried about her future, and she feels Elsa’s turning into a tom-boy.’

‘Oh, but tom-boys are great fun! Her future will solve itself. Such an enterprising person is sure to find some way to carry on.’

‘We miss her and Michelle in the hostel. Could you spare time to come and see where we live?’ Daphne looked at Rachel. ‘It’s quite near; I believe you’d like it. We call it Rainbow Corner. I live in Green House and Irina in Red House; Elsa and I used to have the Blue House, but it was too big for one, so I moved out when she went away.’

‘It sounds fascinating!’ Rachel exclaimed. ‘We’d love to see it, just for a few minutes. Marry and Irina are free to-night, as *The Goose-girl* isn’t on, so may we come now?’

‘I could read you the bit about you two, in Elsa’s letter,’ Daphne added, as they rose to go.

Irina came close to her, while Rachel and Damaris argued as to who should pay the bill. ‘I’m sorry about last night, Daph. I was an ass, and I upset you. You’ll wash it out, won’t you?’

‘I’ll be glad,’ Daphne said unsteadily. ‘I felt so much alone, without either you or Elsa.’

‘I ought to have remembered you’d just lost her. It’s different for me; I’ve always been on my own. I’m terribly sorry. Aren’t these two jolly?’

‘Marvellous! I love Rachel almost as much as I do Mary Damayris.’

‘You won’t feel bad about that rehearsal now? I knew what she meant, look you!’

‘Not so bad as I did. I shall be frightened, of course, but not as much as I expected to be if you were looking tragic at me.’

‘I won’t do it! I’ll smile at you like a mother.’

Rainbow Corner gave great joy to Rachel, and to Damaris also, though Mary Damayris seemed to have something on her mind and kept falling into thoughtful silences. Rachel, interested in details of any person’s life, begged to be shown every inch of the tiny flats, so Daphne knocked on the door of her former quarters and begged Miss Stewart to allow the strangers to inspect the Blue House also, to see what the larger residences were like.

While Daphne was showing off her old home, Irina slipped away and ran downstairs to the rack where letters were placed. She hurried back to Rainbow Corner and held out a letter to Daphne.

‘From Elsa. I knew you’d like to have it.’

‘How good of you!’ Daphne exclaimed, her face lighting up, cheered both by the letter and the kindness.

‘Oh, do read it!’ Rachel cried. ‘I’m sure you’re pining to hear how the Tea-rooms are going on. Irina will show us her Red House while, you’re busy.’

Daphne glanced quickly through the letter, which was shorter than usual.

‘All well?’ Rachel asked, coming back to the Green House.

‘Ye-es. Elsa’s had the lawyer and made him give her his blessing; that’s all right. But they’ve had days of rain and wind, and nobody’s been near the ferry; that’s not so good.’

‘It was sure to happen, though,’ Rachel said. ‘They can’t have fine weather all the time. What do they do with themselves when it’s stormy?’

‘They went shopping in town and Michelle’s making a blue winter frock for Elsa and a wine-coloured one for herself. That will be quite useful.’

‘Oh, good for Michelle! She seems to be as enterprising as Elsa.’

‘She wasn’t when she lived here. We think Elsa has infected her.’

‘Suppose you say inspired her.’ Damaris had been sitting on the window-seat, gazing at the blank wall opposite, while Daphne read her letter and Rachel inspected the Red House. She sprang up and ran across the little corridor. ‘Show me your house, Irina Ivanovna, and then come back to Daphne and Ray! I’ve had an idea; I want to tell you about it.’

‘I wondered what was the matter with you,’ Rachel commented.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BIRTH OF A BALLET

‘I want to make a little ballet for you two,’ Mary Damayris announced, sitting on a stool on the hearth-rug, while Rachel and Daphne lay back in big chairs and gazed down at her and Irina sat on the table, swinging her legs.

‘What a marvellous idea!’ Daphne gasped, sitting up with a jerk. ‘Just for us two?’

‘Gosh! That would be a super-thrill,’ Irina exclaimed.

‘But could it be done?’

‘This is Mary Damayris, suddenly come uppermost. I thought something was fermenting within you,’ Rachel said. ‘Explain, Marry! Tell us more!’

‘Just a little thing, of course. You couldn’t have a real ballet without a man and some love-stuff. But a sort of interlude, between more serious things. They’re such opposite types, these two, Ray! I’d like to see them as contrasted characters in a play.’

‘I see that; they’d be splendid foils for one another in everything, even looks. But could you do it without a man? I thought he was an essential part of any ballet.’

‘Usually. It isn’t done to have only girls,’ Damaris admitted. ‘Some day we’ll have a thing for them and perhaps Martin Bernard; Daphne will be the young innocent sweetheart and Irina the jealous wife.’

‘Queen Eleanor and Fair Rosamond,’ Rachel suggested.

‘Yes. And some day Daphne must have a little ballet called *The Flight of Daphne*. She’ll be the Greek maiden, the daughter of the river god, fleeing from Apollo and being turned into the laurel tree—the legend of Daphne, you know. But I want something else, some story of two contrasted types of girls. Think, all of you! Irina Ivanovna, be Welsh for a moment! Isn’t there some Welsh fairy-tale we could dramatize? I’d ask John Grant Grandison, who wrote *The Goose-girl*, to do the music.’

‘A Welsh story!’ Rachel leaned forward eagerly. ‘Yes, of course! There’s *Sili go Dwt*. That’s about two girls.’

‘So it is, to be sure,’ Irina exclaimed.

‘Rachel Ellerton, what do you know about Welsh stories?’ Damaris demanded. ‘Your name isn’t Jones!’

Rachel laughed. ‘No, but Mrs. Bloom’s was. She’s the housekeeper, where we’re living, Irina Ivanovna, and her name before she married was Jane Jones. She lent me an old book of fairy-tales that was lying in her room. Wouldn’t *Sili go Dwt* make a ballet?’

‘I’m sure! I think so,’ said Irene Jones.

‘Sili go where?’ Damaris demanded. ‘Doot? Is it a place in Wales?’

‘She was a fairy. It was her name, look you.’

‘You’re more Jones and less Ivanovna every minute! Tell me about the fairy with the weird name. Daphne would make a champion fairy,’ Damaris cried, with growing eagerness. ‘Who was the other one—you?’

‘A young widow—very tragic.’

‘Just right for Irina Ivanovna,’ Rachel murmured, watching Damaris with eager interested eyes.

‘What did they do?’ Mary Damayris asked breathlessly.

‘Miss Ellerton must tell you; she thought of it. I’m sure she tells stories well,’ Irina said.

‘Don’t call her Miss Ellerton! You’ll make her shy. Come on, Ray! Give us the yarn. It’s your job to tell stories!’

‘Not this time. Irina will do it better; Welsh stories are in her blood. I only read it once, and quickly. Tell it to us properly, Irina!’

‘The widow was very poor—starving,’ Irene Jones began. ‘Her only treasure was a baby boy in his cradle, but they had nothing to eat. The fairy came in, disguised as a fine lady, and threw a shower of gold on the table. The widow tried to seize it in delight, but the fairy kept her off. She offered to do anything, give anything she had, for the gold. The fairy pointed at the cradle, saying the only thing she wanted was the baby. The widow was in despair——’

‘Frantic with horror and dismay,’ Damaris cried. ‘A gorgeous part for a tragic person like you! What happened?’

‘The fairy went away, saying she’d return in three days for the child, but that if the widow could guess her name within that time she wouldn’t take him and she’d give her the gold all the same?’

‘And then the widow has a dance of despair and the curtain falls with her on her knees by the cradle,’ Damaris said gleefully. ‘I can see it all! But that’s not the end?’

‘You’d need a little change of scene; some woodland scenery dropped in front of the cottage. The widow goes out to consult her friends, and on the way home through the forest she comes on a pool of light and in the midst of it a little fairy, dancing, wild with joy.’

‘Daphne’s great chance!’ Damaris chuckled. ‘She’ll be a lovely fairy, dancing in a pool of light! *How* I’m going to enjoy making those dances, once we have the music! I’ll be able to tell John Grant Grandison exactly what we want.’

‘It will be glorious,’ Rachel said. ‘I can see it too. Daphne will throw off her robes and be a transparent-looking spirit all in white.’

‘Go on, Irina!’ Damaris cried. ‘How does it finish?’

Daphne, out of breath with it all, could only stare at them, and wait, and listen.

‘The widow hadn’t known her visitor was a fairy, but she recognizes her now and hides behind a tree to watch. She hears the fairy singing; you’d need a few programme notes, but not many. Her song was like this—

*“How the widow would laugh to hear
That Sili go Dwt is the name I bear.”*

In triumph and delight she hurries away, and the scene changes back to the cottage for the fairy’s second visit.’

‘Easily done,’ Damaris nodded. ‘I suppose the widow’s full of triumph?’

‘Yes, but she hides it and pleads again with the fairy, who’s firm and says she must have the boy, unless her name has been guessed. The widow, teasing her, tries every name she can think of, and then at last says: “I suppose it isn’t *Sili go Dwt*, by any chance?” And the fairy, in a burst of wild rage, vanishes up the chimney in flames.’

There was a shout from Rachel, who had been waiting for the climax. ‘You can’t manage that, Marry!’

‘She can vanish, but not in flames or up the chimney. It would seem too much like cribbing the man’s leap in *The Spectre of the Rose*,’ Damaris said regretfully. ‘Can you manage a final wild dance of rage, Daphne Dale?’

‘Are you sure Daphne wouldn’t be better as the young mother?’ Rachel asked.

‘Oh, my dear girl!’ Damaris remonstrated. ‘She’d be lovely, of course, but what about Irina Ivanovna as the fairy in the wood?’

Irina chuckled. ‘Doesn’t sound like me!’

‘No, it can’t be done. Besides, the mother is very dramatic; first in tragic despair, then pleading, then heart-broken by the cradle, then laughing in delight in the wood; triumphing over her baby as she waits for the fairy—mocking her—wildly happy at the end. It’s a gorgeous part, but it needs more drama than Daphne has in the whole of her, at present. The fairy’s much simpler, and yet she’ll have some lovely dances; round and round the cottage kitchen, pirouetting on her points, gleefully keeping the mother away from the gold, coming between her and it every time she tries to seize it—I can just see that fairy’s mischievous jolly dance! Then in the wood, in and out among the trees—glorious, Daphne Dale!’

Daphne sat up. ‘But wouldn’t you like to do it yourself? You’d be a lovely fairy. Why should you plan it for me?’

Damaris looked wistful. ‘I’d love to do those dances, especially the one in the wood,’ she owned.

‘You ought to do them. It’s all your work.’

‘No,’ Damaris said firmly, ‘it’s for you two. Remember, the idea is Ray’s and the story is Irina’s; only the dances will be mine. It belongs to all of us. I shall be the mother of the ballet and watch fondly from the wings. I want to see you and Irina Ivanovna as the fairy and the widow; I shall dream about *Sili go Dwt* to-night! Come home, Rachel Ellerton, and let’s get started! I must ring up John Grant Grandison and tell him what we want.’

Before Daphne and Irina realized it they had gone, Rachel whirled away in the rush of creative energy that had seized Mary Damayris.

‘It will be my first ballet,’ was the final exultant word from Damaris. ‘I merely made dances for *The Goose-girl*, but I’m going to plan this one all on my own. We’ll get the music and we’ll work at it, and then we’ll tell Madame and M. Antoine. If it’s good, perhaps they’ll try it out in their programmes when we go on tour.’

Alone in the Green House Irina and Daphne looked at one another.

‘Gosh! Some idea! She’s an artist, whateffer!’ gasped Irene Jones.

‘Doesn’t she take your breath away?’ Daphne cried.

‘But what a marvellous chance for us, Irina!’

‘She’ll make her name, and ours at the same time, look you! This is the biggest bit of luck I’ve ever had,’ Irina chuckled. ‘The ballet from Rainbow Corner will be great.’

‘You don’t mind now about the understudy, do you?’ Daphne asked shyly. ‘This is a much bigger thing!’

‘I’m sure! Indeed, Daphne, and I’m sorry I was a brute last night. Don’t think about it any more, my dear. Will you now?’

‘No, I won’t,’ Daphne promised, her face alight with relief. ‘I must finish my letter to Elsa. What a gorgeous story for her!’

‘You didn’t tell her——?’ Irina began, flushing.

‘Not a word; and I won’t,’ Daphne promised.

‘Decent of you! Come to supper in Red House when you’ve finished; I’ve sardines and tomatoes and bananas. And I must go to bed early, after last night’s party.’

Daphne’s dreaded first rehearsal came upon her before she realized it. Damaris, with rare fellow-feeling, gave her no warning, but bade her come to the theatre to watch from the

wings, and then suddenly flung her into the midst of her ordeal, with no time to think or be nervous.

‘You’re going to be the Goose-girl to-day. Yes, *now!* You’re ready aren’t you, and don’t you dare to let me down! I’ll never forgive you if you funk. The music’s started; now run out there and do exactly as you’ve been doing at practice. Bernard will pull you through the *pas de deux*. And when it’s over I’ve some good news for you!’

Daphne, with a gasp that was half a sob, knew that her chance had come and reached out to seize it. She was frightened, but she could not fail Mary Damayris, who had spoken for her to those critical girls and men in the *corps de ballet*.

Martin Bernard had spared an hour more than once, out of sheer kindness of heart, to come to the studio and work on the dances they would do together, amused and interested in the protegee of his ‘little pirouette’, as he called Mary Damayris. He had said encouraging words and Daphne was no longer afraid of him.

Now, waiting in the wings, he smiled at her. ‘On you go! There’s the flute; I’ll be after you in two minutes!’

Then she was on the stage, the wild girl from the hills, reproducing, to the very limit of her powers, all that she had watched so often in Mary Damayris.

Bernard ran on, chasing her, caught her up and whirled her into their *pas de deux*. Suddenly Daphne felt something new, something which intoxicated her. Far from being afraid, she was enjoying every minute. She forgot everything and danced as she had never done before.

Irina stepped forward and checked the joyful dance, laying a hand on her arm with such a look of horror and warning that Daphne shivered and gazed up at her in terror.

There was an approving murmur from the crowd, as she followed the direction of Irina’s pointing finger and looked at the soldiers, and then in an agony of fear hid her face against her partner. He put his arm round her and they began to run, but were caught by the soldiers and dragged apart. The Goose-girl fell, stretched on the ground, a forlorn little white figure, and the shepherd knelt above her and cursed the King.

Then he rose to his feet and said in a matter-of-fact tone—‘Fine! You’ll do! Nothing to worry about there, I think, my little pirouette?’

‘Daphne, that was splendid!’ Mary Damayris cried. ‘You’ve never done it so well before!’

Daphne sat up, rubbing her eyes. ‘Was it all right? I feel awfully odd—as if I’d been somebody else.’

‘You were,’ Damaris said laughing. ‘But whether you were me or the Goose-girl I’m not sure.’

‘I was trying to be you.’

‘It would be more sensible to be the Girl. But so long as the result’s like this, I don’t care which you think you are. Now for the sad dance in the garden! You won’t worry any more, will you? You couldn’t help doing well now.’

At the end there were congratulations and kind words from Antoine, and Madame, and the Prince and the jealous Princess, and Irina, and others whom she did not know, and from Rachel, who had been watching from the stalls.

‘You did well, my dear,’ said Georges Antoine. ‘I hope we shall not need you, for we do not want to lose our little Damayris. But now that we have seen what you can do, we shall give you a part some day soon. I am glad Damayris has discovered you.’

Daphne, glowing with happiness, looked at Damaris. ‘Did I let you down?’

‘You did not! I’m proud; everybody’s saying what a good teacher I must be! And, I say, Daphne Dale!’ and Damaris drew her into a corner. ‘This morning the first draft of the music for *Sili go Dwt* arrived and it’s so gorgeous that I had to share it with Madame, and she wanted to know what it was for. So I told her about the ballet from Rainbow Corner and she’s fearfully thrilled, and we’re to start working on it at once!’

‘Gosh! Isn’t life marvellous?’ Daphne sighed happily.

Damaris gave her a sympathetic grin. ‘Our music is marvellous! Wait till you hear your dance in the wood! And your teasing scene with the widow; John Grant Grandison has caught the idea exactly. He says we described it to him so well; he came to tea with Ray and me and we told him all about it. He’s an old dear. I call him John Granny Grandison—but very strictly behind his back, you know!’

CHAPTER XIX

THE BALLET OF RAINBOW CORNER

Work on the new ballet proved so enthralling that every spare moment—there were not many of them—was given to it, and the visit to Sadler's Wells was postponed.

'We can't spend a whole evening watching other people, when we're making a ballet of our own!' Rachel said laughing. She came to every rehearsal, and her suggestions were practical and were often adopted.

Madame, amused and interested and with great faith in the powers of Mary Damayris, left them to it, but gave valuable help by allowing them the use of a room and a piano at her studio. While the composer polished his music and arranged it for the orchestra, Daphne and Irina worked at the dances and the miming, and Damaris watched and advised, and unconsciously educated both them and herself, drawing out their powers of interpretation while she increased her own gift for teaching and useful criticism.

The result of the team-work was astonishing, and when Madame was at last invited to a rehearsal they were able to show her a promising little production, needing only finishing touches and the additions of costume, lighting, and stage effects.

'In fact, it's time we had a doll in the cradle for Widow Irina to sob over, and some gold for Fairy Daphne to shower on the table,' Rachel said laughing.

'My children, you have done far better than I expected.' Madame smiled graciously on them. 'The little story is good, and the music is beautiful. The dances are worthy of Mary Damayris of *The Goose-girl* and will be applauded by everyone, and they are most excellently danced by you two young people.'

'And I'm understudy for both of them, so nothing can go wrong!' Mary Damayris said gleefully.

'I shall bring Antoine to watch your little ballet, and we will ask the composer to come and see his music brought to life. And when we go on tour, in two weeks, your ballet shall be in the programme.'

'Oh, Madame! We're made for life!' Damaris seized Daphne and Irina and whirled them round in a wild *pas de trois*.

Madame laughed. 'Now what will you call your child?'

'We thought just *Sili go Dwt*, Madame.'

'No, it is not good. It is too hard to say, and people will not know what it means. A ballet must have a simple name—easy to say, easy to remember.'

The four looked at one another in dismay.

'But it is *Sili go Dwt*!' Daphne urged.

'*The Widow and the Fairy*?' Irina began.

'That is better. One can understand and remember it.'

'I suppose,' Rachel's eyes danced, 'we couldn't call it *Rainbow Corner*?'

'Gosh, Ray! I believe you've hit it!' Damaris gasped. 'Rainbow—the changes of the widow from tears to laughter—and of the fairy from triumph and teasing to rage and despair!'

'It was born at Rainbow Corner,' Rachel added.

Madame looked thoughtful. '*Rainbow Corner*? That is good. But how was it born there, Sister-Mother?'—which was her constant name for Rachel.

‘It’s where we live, Irina and I,’ Daphne said eagerly. ‘They came to see our flats—mine is green, but it used to be blue, and Irina’s is red, so we call it Rainbow Corner. That was the first time we talked about the ballet.’

‘So! Sister-Mother, you have named the little ballet. *Rainbow Corner* it shall be.’

‘Then the name will be my share,’ Rachel said laughing. ‘I like it. It’s a good name for a ballet—tears and laughter!’

‘The whole idea was yours,’ Damaris reminded her. ‘We’ve done it between us. I like the name too.’

Madame, thoroughly satisfied, arranged her private performance for Antoine and John Grant Grandison and a few special friends and critics, who would prepare the way for the new ballet. Irina’s mourning dress was discussed, and Daphne’s robes were designed so that, as the fine lady in the cottage, she could throw off a dark cloak and dance mockingly before the widow in a rainbow-coloured gown, short and full, which again covered the scanty white tarlatan she would wear for her solitary revels as the woodland fairy.

Madame decreed one night’s holiday and sent them all off to Sadler’s Wells, presenting them with tickets for the stalls.

‘You need not tire yourselves and waste your time standing in a queue for the gallery,’ she said, when she heard their plans. ‘You cannot choose your programme, as you must go when you are not needed for *The Goose-girl*, but you will do very well—*Carnaval*, *Checkmate*, and *Façade*. Oh yes, you have nothing to complain of there! It is good for you to see all these.’

All three were new to Daphne, though the others had seen them before. She revelled in the light-hearted mockery of *Carnaval*, the gay masked figures flitting in and out, poor tragic Pierrot lying on the ground; and lost her heart to merry Papillon, claiming this as the part she would like to play some day. But *Checkmate* stilled her into something like awe; the drama of the red and black pieces, the pathos of the helpless old Red King, the failure of the Red Queen to protect him, the gay dances of the pawns, the contest between the Red Knight and the terrible, beautiful Black Queen—the great moment when; with the Queen at his mercy, he spared her life, and her treacherous repayment with the vile stab in his back—his funeral cortège, and the final tragedy of the poor lonely Red King in the hands of his enemies; it all left Daphne stunned and silent. Afterwards she admitted that it would haunt her for days.

‘There’s no part in it for you, my girl,’ Damaris told her later. ‘Some day Irina Ivanovna might be the Black Queen, but you never will.’

‘That awful woman! I’d never want to be like that.’ Daphne shivered.

‘Oh, tosh! It’s a glorious part!’ Irina said laughing. ‘I’d give all I have to be her understudy.’

Façade was a relief to close the programme, and all four girls laughed till they were sore over the Polka, the Yodelling Song and the Popular Song, the Country Dance, and other items.

To end an evening of great enjoyment, Daphne begged the rest to come to her Green House for coffee on their way home. ‘It’s early yet. I’d like it so much, if you would,’ she urged. ‘You haven’t been back to Rainbow Corner since that first time, and I couldn’t offer you anything then, because we’d just had tea. I’ve left everything ready—cakes and sandwiches and biscuits. Please come!’

‘Well, just for a few minutes,’ Rachel said sternly. ‘If Marry starts talking she won’t go to bed to-night, and there’s a matinée to-morrow.’

‘Bully! You see how strict she is!’ Damaris wailed. ‘We’ll come, Daphne Dale, if it’s only to stop you thinking about the Black Queen. I’m afraid you’ll dream of her and wander round

the corridors stabbing people in the back.'

The rack in the entrance hall held a letter from Elsa, and Daphne carried it upstairs in delight. 'I haven't heard from the kid for over a week.'

'Read it and tell us her news,' Rachel suggested. 'We always like to hear about Elsa and Michelle and the family.'

'I want to know how she is,' Daphne owned. 'I'll do the coffee and then read it.'

'I'll see to the coffee.' Irina had slipped into the Red House for a box of chocolates, to add to the feast.

Daphne tore open the envelope. Then a cry of wild surprise broke from her, as a cheque fell from between the folds of a letter.

'Five guineas! What is Elsa playing at?'

'Gosh!' cried Damaris. 'Has she found a gold-mine? Or robbed a bank?'

'Tell us quickly, Daphne!' Rachel exclaimed. 'Something thrilling must have happened!'

'She doesn't tell me,' Daphne wailed. 'It's only a few lines. She's had a bit of luck—she thinks her fortune's made—this is just a beginning—she'll send more soon. Later on she'll tell me all about it!'

'Oh, the little brute!' Damaris shouted. 'She doesn't explain?'

'Not a word more than I've told you—look!'

Damaris scanned the letter eagerly. Suddenly she gave a shout. 'Sandylands! I suppose you know our season in the provinces opens at Sandylands?'

Daphne stared at her. 'It's Madame's old home. She lived there for years, when she gave up dancing. My aunt knew her and asked her advice about me, and Madame took me into her school. Are we really going to dance there?'

'That explains it. It's a sort of tradition with Madame and Antoine. They start the tour at Sandylands, then Bristol, and then Bournemouth, Southampton, Portsmouth, and Brighton. After that they go north; Madame told me. Sandylands is a big place, isn't it?'

'A sort of Brighton in the West. All the best concerts and touring parties go there, and there's a big autumn and winter season,' Daphne explained, looking dazed. 'Then—are we going to dance at Sandylands? Will we show *Rainbow Corner*?'

Damaris gave her a keen look. 'I'm certain we will. First public performance. Why?'

Daphne sat down suddenly and stared at them. 'At Sandylands! Gosh!'

Rachel's face lit up. 'Elsa will be able to come! And we shall see her! Oh, what priceless luck!'

'But I'll be terrified! I know people there, and they'll know me, because of Aunty. She had heaps of friends in the town. Oh, wouldn't you like to be the Rainbow Fairy, while we're at Sandylands?' Daphne cried, turning to Damaris in despair.

'My child, I shouldn't think of it. It's your big chance, though none of us knew it would happen. You'll dance before all your friends and show them what you can do, and the whole of Sandylands will come to see you. It's a wonderful opportunity,' Damaris said earnestly. 'You must make the most of it.'

Daphne looked at her, flushing and then growing white. 'I don't think I've the pluck for it.'

'Oh, tosh and bosh! Don't be an ass! Once you've started you'll love to feel your friends are watching. The music will carry you through. When you see Irina Ivanovna mourning over her baby and then looking up as your funny little tune is played, you'll forget all about Sandylands and rush into the cottage and hurl your gold on the table, and before you know it

you'll be pirouetting round on your points with your rainbow skirt whirling about you, and thoroughly enjoying yourself.'

'I hope so, but I don't believe it. I'll be too frightened.'

'Oh no, you won't,' Rachel assured her. 'You'll remember that Elsa and Michelle are sitting with me, waiting to cheer your triumph. I shall beg them to let me join them; I want to see how Elsa enjoys it. I'm thrilled to know we're going to see her at last.'

'You're coming on tour with us, then?' Irina asked.

'I must go with Marry. She might do any mad thing if she went alone. And I want to go; I shall love seeing all sorts of places.'

'She must come for the first performance of *Rainbow Corner*,' Damaris added. 'Quite half of it is hers.'

'I wouldn't claim half,' Rachel laughed. 'But part of it is certainly mine. Daphne, where do you suppose Elsa found that money?'

Daphne picked up the cheque and stared at it and then at Rachel. 'I haven't the slightest idea. I thought she needed every penny for the winter and wet weather.'

'Don't ask her!' Damaris cried. 'Tell her we're all going to drop on her in two weeks and she must tell us the whole story then.'

'She must have had some big bit of luck,' Irina said. 'It's frightfully mysterious!'

'And very intriguing. I like Elsa!' Rachel said laughing. 'You can think about her in bed, instead of the Black Queen. Come home, Mary Damayris!'

PART IV
THE CAVE OF CAER-OGO

CHAPTER XX

ADVENTURE FOR ELSA

‘Oh, Miss Dale! My little boy has lost his ball, over on the island, and he is so distressed about it! We’ve hunted everywhere; that’s what has made us so late. Would you mind looking round, next time you go?’ A young mother put her request anxiously, as Elsa brought the boat across to take her home.

Elsa raised her eyebrows. The small boy’s tears showed how unwilling he had been to come away without his treasure.

‘Of course I will. But it was a big ball; I shouldn’t have thought you could lose it. Where did you miss it?’ She remembered noticing the large blue and scarlet football.

‘On the far side, where the little bay is, and the stream tumbles over the cliff; where the strange rocks are.’

Elsa nodded. ‘It’s called Shepherd’s Combe. Leave your address at the house; I’ll send a card if I find the ball.’

She was thoughtful all the evening, but a late party of Scouts kept her waiting at the ferry, and by the time they had gone it was dusk and she knew she could not see anything on the island.

Early next morning Michelle heard her moving and leaned over the stair to call down to her.

‘What’s up, Elsa? It’s hardly light. Mor’s barking woke me.’

‘Mor’s a noisy boy. I’m going to the island to look for that ball.’

‘You’ve been thinking about that ball all night. Why does it matter so much? May I come too?’

Elsa, stick in hand and rucksack on back, looked up at her. ‘Well, Miche, it is odd! Where could a ball of that size and colour get to? No, don’t come, old girl. You get breakfast ready; but not yet. I’ll be an hour or two. There are queer stories about the island; the ferry-man, Brown, told me of a shepherd who lost several sheep in that cleft, and that’s why it’s called Shepherd’s Combe. Perhaps the ogre caught them; I told you the old name of the island—Car-Ogre? “Car” might be “Caer”, meaning a camp or fort; I’ve never met the ogre, but perhaps he’s invisible. He may account for the football and the sheep.’

‘Where do you suppose they really went?’ Michelle asked, wide-eyed.

‘Hole in the ground. I’m going to look for it.’

‘Do you mean a cave? Do be careful, Elsa! Don’t disappear like the ball and the sheep!’

Elsa laughed. ‘No fear! I’m on the watch for the hole. Michelle, my dear, our island is a spur of the Mendips, sticking out into the sea; we’ve always known that. It’s limestone; you’ve seen the crags on that side—“the strange rocks”, people call them?’

‘Weird shapes. Then do you think——?’

‘I ought to know all there is to know about my island. If the hills round Wells and Cheddar can have caves, and if the island is an end of the range, why shouldn’t it have a cave too? It’s the same formation—and there’s the little river. Those caves are supposed to have been made by rivers,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘Don’t worry, Miche! I’ll be careful. If I fall in and can’t get out I’ll send Mor home for help!’

She was very wary as she approached the bay on the southern side of the island, where the cliffs were fashioned by weather and water into fantastic pinnacles and battlements. It was the

only corner of the big green hump that had any interest beyond that of wide views, smooth turf, screaming sea birds, and invigorating wind. Most tourists glanced down from the top and commented on the rocks; but they had seen much finer specimens and a far greater quantity among the inland hills. A few venturesome boys tried to climb the spires and were admonished by their guardians or companions. There had never been an accident, and there was no great height to fall.

Elsa stood looking out and swinging her stick. The mother and small boy would not climb about on the rocks; and they would not trouble to scramble over the difficult shingle on the shore below. The ball must have been lost on the top.

Cautiously she began to prod among the gorse bushes. A ball of that size and colour could not be overlooked, if it were here; it was not like a tennis ball.

‘If last week’s rain loosened some earth and washed it away, an opening might be uncovered,’ she said, chasing off the excited Mor, who was eager to help. ‘No one has ever searched here. We’ve all taken it for granted there was nothing to look for.’

Time after time her stick went into holes, but they were only hollows and they held no ball. Mor grew bored and went off to bark at the gulls. Elsa glanced at her watch, shook her head dolefully, and allowed herself ten minutes more.

‘Gosh!’ she gasped suddenly. ‘There’s no bottom to this hole! My hat! Have I found it?’

Try as she would, she could find no end to the gap in which her stick was groping. She sat on her heels, took a ball of stout cord from her rucksack, tied one end round a lump of stone, and lowered it into the opening among the bushes.

Down it went, and down. Elsa, looking startled, drew it up and changed the stone for a small torch.

The light, as it descended, glittered on coloured rocks. Lower and lower it glowed, meeting no obstacle, till it shone like a tiny spark in a large dark place.

Elsa drew it up, sat on her heels again, and pondered.

‘This is where the ball went—and those poor sheep! I need a rope, and somebody to hold it. But that means bringing someone else in; that won’t do?’

Already her ‘organizing mind’ was grasping the possibilities of this discovery. On fire with eagerness, she sprang up and dashed down the sheep-track to the shore, where the stream, rising in the centre of the island, leapt over the cliff in a single straight line of shining water.

‘If that river made the cave and has changed its course, as so often happens, there might be another entrance somewhere near the water. It’s just a chance. It would be much easier than going in from the top. I shall have to be late, that’s all. I hope poor Michelle won’t have fits; I couldn’t leave this now!’

The gap she sought was so cunningly hidden by rocks and bushes that she almost missed it. She would never have suspected the innocent crack in the cliff if she had not been looking for that exact thing. It had escaped the casual glances of tourists and exploring Scouts, for it opened behind a protecting boulder, which successfully masked the narrow cleft.

Elsa, pushing into every corner, went to inspect the crack. She wormed her way in, turning and twisting to pass jagged limestone crags, and flashed her light down a widening passage. A few steps, and it was broad enough for her to walk in comfort; a few steps more and she was in fairyland.

High above was the gap among the bushes, letting in a ray of sunshine, which shone on grotesque coloured shapes; at her feet lay the blue and scarlet ball. Her light swept round, and

on every side strange crags and pinnacles sprang into view, some hanging from the roof and seeming to sway down towards her, some thrusting up to meet them from the floor. Gleams of vivid colour, green and brown and red and white and yellow, showed in the torchlight; shadowy corners suggested galleries leading off from the central cavern.

‘Just like Cheddar!’ Elsa murmured, as she wandered, entranced, about the fairy palace. ‘And we never dreamt of it! Our fortune’s made!’

She paused before one of the dark openings. ‘I’d better not explore too much to-day. It will have to be opened up properly before people are allowed to come down, and we’ll need lights. What’s that odd thing over there?’ and she sped down a passage to look at a strange formation, like a fringe of icicles drooping from the eaves of a house.

‘Oh, lovely! And there’s another!’ and she hurried on to see the next wonder.

Her light flashed into basins in the walls of the gallery and showed beautiful coloured gardens in stone. Some were filled with clear water, which made still mirrors for the wonders above and intensified the vivid reds and greens. Everywhere the stalactites hung trembling over her and the pillars thrust up to meet them. Sometimes only an inch separated the two; in one place she could hardly have slipped a sheet of paper between; and yet, she knew, it might be a thousand years before they met. She had marvelled at similar wonders in other caves, but these seemed to be her own and already she loved each delicate beautiful ancient growth. Flowers and ferns in stone were there, and waterfalls and forests, and more icicles everywhere.

‘This won’t do! I’ve been hours. I must go home,’ she said firmly, and turned to retrace her steps. ‘My torch isn’t too bright; gosh, I hope it isn’t going to let me down! I can’t see those high things as I could before.’

Anxious for the first time, she began to run, her light on the rough path, where fragments had fallen in many places.

‘Careful, Elsa Dale! If there’s one thing you don’t want, it’s a sprained ankle in here!’ and she forced herself to go more slowly.

Then she stopped. ‘I don’t remember this corner! I was so keen to see everything. Which way do I go?’

Two paths faced her; she must turn to right or left. There was no indication which would lead her to the central cave.

Elsa stood and thought; she flicked off the failing torch and found herself in darkness which felt solid, like a fog.

‘This is simply foul,’ she said aloud. ‘I’m lost. Yes, I am; I may as well face it. One of these ways may be right, but it may not; I may have passed the turning already. I don’t remember this place where three ways meet. And my torch won’t last much longer. I may run into anything if I go on without a light.’

She sat down where she stood. To wander in the dark, with those hanging streamers of rock all about her, was impossible. How long the torch would last she could not say; she might waste it wandering through wrong galleries.

Elsa felt suddenly very cold. ‘Looks like a long wait for me,’ she said, in a jaunty tone. ‘Michelle knows where I am, of course. It’s a good thing she woke and challenged me! She’ll fetch help and they’ll find me, but it may take a long time. I must keep a little light in my torch; what an ass I was not to bring an extra battery! Oh, if only—! But that’s no use,’ and she pulled herself up quickly. ‘My dear, you may be an ass, but you’re not going to be a baby.’

That torch must be saved; I must be able to know the time. There's nothing for it but to wait right here. When I hear somebody coming I'll shout, but there's no point in it at present.'

She planted her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands and steeled herself to endure a long and trying wait. The silence was terrifying. A steady tapping startled her, till she realized it was dripping water. She began to whistle and then to hum; anything to make some human sound in the quiet place.

'I mustn't lose my head. I might quite easily begin to crawl round in circles. I'd better say all the poetry—what was that?'

She started up, her face ablaze. Never had that sharp staccato bark sounded so sweet before.

'Mor! Mor! Oh, come here, my angel! Oh, Mor, you darling boy!'

A little black friend, terrified but valiant, leapt upon her. Elsa hugged him and covered him with kisses. His wet nose nuzzled her face joyfully; he had been badly frightened of this strange place, but quite determined to track his mistress.

'Did you smell me out, angel?' Elsa sobbed, breaking down for an instant in her relief. 'Brave boy! You're a real hero! Now, Mor, get me out of this! With luck the torch may last, if we don't wander about; and of course you won't get lost, darling. Home, Mor! Rabbits! Catch the rabbits! But don't go too fast, my dear!'

Mor, with a joyful bark, set off, following his own scent. He had been afraid she would insist on exploring farther and he did not like this odd place. He was glad she was showing sense. He ran a little way and then looked back and barked again.

Almost at once, it seemed, they were in the dimly lit central hall. Elsa picked up the ball and hurried down the passage to the entrance, the torch just a faint glimmer in the darkness.

'Mor, my pet, I'll never say again that your name doesn't mean "the great one"! You've earned your title; you're Mor Mawr—Mor the great!' Elsa cried gaily, as she darted up the path and along the level top of the island. 'Oh, good! It's going to rain. We shan't have anyone at the ferry to-day. I can't have trippers poking round my marvellous underground palace! But they wouldn't come complete with torches or candles, and they couldn't go far in the dark.'

For a moment she stood on the highest point, the wind blowing back her hair, the damp mist cooling her face, and rejoiced in the light and freedom and space.

'Gosh! It was super-beastly to be buried! But it's a great find. Come and tell Michelle, Great Mor!' and they raced together down to the sands and along the raised dyke to the boat.

CHAPTER XXI

A PEPPERCORN RENT

‘Michelle! Oh, Miche, our fortune’s made! And darling Mor has saved my life!’ Elsa hurled herself on Michelle in the doorway. ‘I know you’ve been worried, and I’m sorry, old girl, but wait till you hear my adventure!’

As she fell ravenously on the food Michelle placed before her she told her story in breathless haste.

‘Now, Miche, do you see what it means? People will come to see the cave, all the year round. It changes everything; it’s what we were wanting. There’s something real, and very fascinating, to go to the island for now. I’ve seen the other caves, at Cheddar, and Wookey, and I’m certain ours is as fine as any of them.’

‘But is it ours?’ Michelle suggested cautiously. ‘Will you have the right to show it and make money by it?’

Elsa paused. ‘I hadn’t thought of that. You’re a jewel, Miche; I’m glad you said it. I must see the Red Admiral; it’s his cave, but he hasn’t known anything about it. I believe he’ll give the rights to me.’

‘It’s your discovery,’ Michelle assented. ‘I should think he will, but you’ll need to ask him.’

‘It’s raining beautifully,’ Elsa said happily. ‘Nobody will come near us; I needn’t wait till the evening. Mor will enjoy the walk, and he deserves a happy day! Haven’t you a large juicy bone he could have? I might still be sitting shivering in the dark, but for him.’

‘It must have been awful,’ Michelle shuddered. ‘What did you do?’

‘Whistled, and sang, and said poetry. But I’d only just started on “Excelsior” when I heard the most wonderful sound in the world—a lonely little bark. Mor and I fell into one another’s arms and wept.’

Min came daintily in by the window-sill, placed a white foot on her knee, and sprang into her lap.

Elsa laughed and stroked his smooth head. ‘You’d have liked to rescue me, too, wouldn’t you, Minny? But you don’t like me to call you that; it sounds too much like a lady. You can’t stay there, my boy; I’m going to call on an Admiral.’

Sir Rodney listened to her story and her request with interest. ‘I had heard legends of a cavern on the island, but no one seemed to know anything about it. Certainly you shall have all rights in the cave; it is your discovery, and I congratulate you, my dear. It may well prove a gold-mine, which will build up your family fortunes. I will have the entrance enlarged and electric light put in; the waterfall outside will give you all the power you need. We will build a shed to cover a small electric plant, and your cave will be well lit for ever. I will make over the rights of the whole island to you, so that you can have no competitors; you shall have a ninety-nine years’ lease, at a rent of £1 a year—a mere peppercorn rental.’

‘Peppercorn?’ Elsa asked, her eyes wide. ‘What does that mean? And you couldn’t ask only £1 a year?’

He smiled. ‘That is what a peppercorn rent means; a nominal rent, which secures the final rights in the property to me and my heirs, but leaves you in possession. The island will still be mine, so long as you pay rent, but the rent can be as small as I please. No doubt in the old days a peppercorn was accepted in lieu of rent.’

Elsa's eyes danced. 'What a lovely idea! When I pay my £1 a year, I'll bring a peppercorn as well. You've been terribly kind to me, sir.'

'On the contrary, we are all going to be grateful to you for your discovery. I shall make an effort to come to see your cavern, when the way is opened a little. You are not having many clients for the ferry now, I suppose?'

'Not many, since the middle of September. The schools have started, and the evenings are shorter. But some people still come, and Saturdays are busy.'

'You will be busy every day, once your discovery becomes known. I shall send my men to fence off the corner which has the two entrances, until you are ready to show the caves. It will take a little time to erect the plant and put in wires for the lights; it shall be done very carefully, with lights at points you shall select, to show off the beauties and marvels to the best advantage. When it is ready I promise you will have a steady stream of visitors; if the cave is as wonderful as you say, it will cause a sensation and you will have no lack of custom. You'll need help; you can't attend to the ferry and show the caves as well.'

Elsa laughed. 'I shall be an employer of labour and the head of a business! I'll find a boy to row the boat across. I must be the guide to the caves.'

'That will be wise. It will be a flourishing little business, if you continue the refreshment department as well.'

'I shall make my fortune! I shall send Daphne a cheque, just to show her what's coming,' Elsa cried. 'She's getting on awfully well, sir. I do hope you'll have a chance to see her soon. She's understudy to the new dancer, Mary Damayris, and some day perhaps she'll take the part. And she's meeting such jolly people! She's very happy in Town.'

'I'm afraid my doctor will not allow me to travel during the winter. But I'm glad to hear she is doing well.'

On Sunday afternoon, ten days later, Sir Rodney's car came round by road and brought him to the foot of the island, where it rose from the sands, and Elsa came by appointment in her boat to meet him. Helped by his chauffeur, he made his way along the shore to the entrance, and guided by Elsa went in for a tour of inspection of the caves.

'I shan't lose you,' she said gaily. 'Michelle and I spent last Sunday doing a thorough exploration, with heaps of torches and candles, and I made a map of the galleries. I haven't been all the way down all of them, of course; some are blocked by fallen stuff and will need to be cleared. But I know enough already to be able to show the caves to people.'

The Admiral's interest in the discovery was keen, and her eagerness over it all delighted him. 'You'll be a good guide, child,' he said.

'What makes the lovely colours?' she asked. 'Miche was breathless with amazement; she expected it to be all grey stone, and she found every colour of the rainbow. I suppose it's something in the rock?'

'Minerals,' he explained. 'I am not a geologist, but the rusty red is obviously iron and the green will be copper. We must have an expert to teach you all these details. The colouring is lovely, and there are some wonderful formations.'

'I'm going to give them names, but I'm waiting till Daphne comes. We'll christen the rocks together. Such marvellous news, sir! I only heard yesterday. Daphne is part of the Antoine Ballet Company, and they're coming to Sandylands in a fortnight, for a week. She'll be dancing several times—not every night, of course. She and her friend have a special little ballet all to themselves. You will go to see her, won't you?'

‘If she comes here I shall certainly try to see her,’ he promised. ‘I am anxious to know if your trust in her future is justified. What does she say about this new adventure of yours?’

‘I haven’t told her. I’m saving it up to show her when she comes. I sent a cheque for five guineas, out of what Michelle and I had saved for the winter. I said it was only the beginning and that there would be more to come. And I said if she could win fame and fortune for the family, I’d supply the cash and be the banker in the background. She can’t imagine what I mean; she thinks I’ve robbed a bank. She’s written a frantic letter, asking what has happened.’

Sir Rodney laughed. ‘It will be an excitement for her to dance in Sandylands, but you will provide at least an equal surprise for her.’

‘Thrills for both of us! Miche and I are going to meet her new friends, who write ballets and train her. It’s going to be *the* week of our lives!’ Elsa cried joyfully.

‘They will be interested in your discovery. You know the old name of your island? I notice you never use it.’

Elsa reddened. ‘I don’t like it. Car-Ogre! It’s silly, and it’s horrid. I’m sure that beautiful island never had an ogre! The “Car” part may be “Caer”, like in Caer-leon—an old Welsh word; but I can’t see what the “Ogre” has to do with it.’

‘It is probably a corruption of something else. If “Car” is the Welsh “Caer” you would hardly expect the more modern word “Ogre” to be coupled with it.’

‘That’s true!’ Elsa’s eyes grew wistful. ‘Then perhaps it isn’t “Ogre” at all. I should be glad! But what do you think it could mean?’

‘It’s a mere guess on my part,’ Sir Rodney said cautiously, amused by her eagerness, ‘but there is an old Celtic word, from which Wookey Hole is supposed, by some people, to have taken its name—“Ogo”, a cavern.’

‘“Caer-Ogo!”’ Elsa gave a shout. ‘Oh, that’s marvellous! Thank you so much! I shall always call the island Caer-Ogo now!’

‘I’m only guessing,’ he protested, with a laugh.

‘But I’m sure you’re right. It’s a wonderful name! May we call it Caer-Ogo, to the public? “Come to the Cave of Caer-Ogo!” It’s heaps better than “Come and see the cave on the island!”’

‘It certainly sounds better. As the island is mine I can give it a name, whether we know for certain it is a revival of the old name or not. “The Cave of Caer-Ogo” it shall be.’

‘I could dance for joy!’ Elsa cried, as they reached the car.

CHAPTER XXII

ELSA SHOWS HER TREASURE

‘And you still haven’t coaxed Elsa to explain that five guineas?’ Rachel Ellerton asked.

‘I can’t get a word out of the kid!’ Daphne wailed. ‘She keeps writing that there’s more to come—as if she picked it up on the sands! She says she’ll tell me when she sees me.’

‘Well, I say! Don’t go without us!’ Mary Damayris pleaded. ‘We want to know just as much as you do. Are you going this afternoon?’

‘We can’t go to-day, Marry,’ Rachel protested. ‘Daphne hasn’t seen Elsa for three months. Let them have one day together.’

‘Oh, but she wants you to come, and so do I!’ Daphne cried. ‘We’re all to go there for tea. We won’t have time to walk along the sands, but if we bus to Hillside we can be at Min-y-mor quite quickly. Elsa’s dying to see you two, and I’m dying to have her meet you, and Irina’s dying to see Michelle and the house, so to save all our lives you will come, won’t you?’

‘We’re dying to see Elsa—to say nothing of her family,’ Rachel said laughing, ‘I want to nurse Min!’

‘Mor for me,’ Damaris proclaimed. ‘Don’t be daft, Ray! Of course we’re going to see Fairy’s sister to-day. We couldn’t be in her town for a night without having seen her. And to-morrow there’s work; rehearsal in a new house, my children!’

‘You’ll come, won’t you, Widow?’ Daphne looked at Irina.

‘Indeed now, and I can’t do that, look you,’ Irene Jones spoke from the corner of the railway carriage, in which, early one Sunday morning, they were travelling together to Sandylands. ‘I’m going to run across to Cardiff; it only takes an hour. I’ll have the afternoon with my people and be back in Sandylands by ten.’

‘That’s sensible,’ Daphne admitted. ‘I forgot Cardiff was your home.’

‘If you don’t turn up for to-morrow’s rehearsal I shall be the Widow at night,’ Damaris warned her. ‘I’d love to dance with Fairy, and I know the Widow inside out.’

Irina laughed. ‘I’ll not lose the last boat. I want to dance in Sandylands.’

Daphne’s face was troubled. ‘Damayris, you ought to be the Fairy sometimes. Not the Widow—she’s not your part; but you’d be a lovely Fairy. Won’t you take her here? Honestly, I’m terribly frightened of dancing in Sandylands.’

‘Ass!’ Damaris laughed. ‘You won’t be nervous once you start. But I’ve had an idea. Somewhere on this tour—but not here—you and I will change parts. You’ll do the Goose-girl and I’ll do Fairy. It would be good for us both.’

‘Not unless you advertise it!’ Daphne exclaimed. ‘I’d love to do the Goose-girl, after all those rehearsals; but only if people know beforehand that it’s not to be you. It’s your part and people know your name; they mustn’t come expecting you and find only me. And I don’t want them to think I’m you. If the house is half empty, it will show they were coming to watch you.’

‘It wouldn’t be empty. People come for a ballet, not a person,’ Damaris retorted. ‘You’re going to show your friends what you can do and convert all the local critics.’

Daphne, really nervous of the ordeal, shook her head and stared out at the biscuit factory at Reading.

‘One thing’s worrying me,’ Rachel remarked. ‘I wanted to take Elsa by surprise. If she knows we’re coming, I’m afraid she’ll have dressed for the occasion. I want to see her as she

really is.'

Daphne, diverted from her fears, said ruefully, 'It's exactly the idea that will occur to Elsa. If you took her by surprise on Sunday afternoon you might find her dressed and tidy, but if she's expecting you she'll say that to dress up would be swank and she'd prefer to be just herself. We'll probably find her in her slacks and jersey.'

'That's what I'm hoping for,' Rachel said laughing. 'She wouldn't be my idea of Elsa in a Sunday frock and stockings, and perhaps a hat!'

Madame Roskova had refused Daphne's plea that she might stay with her sister during the visit to Sandylands. Min-y-mor was too far away; Daphne and Irina must live in the town. She had suggested a small hotel, as she knew the accommodation the place could afford, and 'Widow' and 'Fairy', as they were often called, had gladly accepted Rachel's idea that they should go to the same house. The friendship had ripened rapidly, and all four, inexperienced in this business of touring, were glad to be together.

Travelling on an early train, in spite of a performance of *The Goose-girl* the night before, they reached Sandylands in time for a late lunch, and soon after three were setting out by bus for Hillside, leaving unpacking till night. Irina had already gone off, to catch a boat for Cardiff and to have a meal during the short crossing.

'Lovely sea smell!' Damaris cried, as they took front seats on top of the bus. 'Oh, we can see everything! Look, Ray—the whole big bay! Is that green lump Elsa's island?'

'But where is the river?' Rachel asked.

'You'll see it when we get to it, and not before.' Daphne was looking round with eager eyes, from the sea and the sands and the island to the inland hills. 'It's jolly to see the old place again.'

From the bus stop in Hillside two minutes' walk brought them to the end of the road, and the wide freedom of the sands lay before them, with the green slopes of the island blocking the southern view but with a great open stretch of sea in front, reaching away to the west.

'Oh, glorious! What a wild free spot!' Rachel exclaimed. 'I don't wonder Elsa came home! Fancy being a typist in Town, when you could have all this!'

'I want to race across those sands and plunge into the sea, and sing, and shout, and dance. I'll rush down there and do a bit of *The Goose-girl* in a minute,' Damaris proclaimed.

'And sprain your ankle. Remember Mary Damayris; you must be fair to the girl,' Rachel scolded. 'Oh, Daphne-Fairy! Is that the little house? Isn't it pretty? But this isn't Elsa!'

'No, it's Michelle Barker. Hello, Michelle! Where's Elsa?' Daphne called.

Michelle came to meet them from the gate. Before she could speak there was a shout, and the guests turned in response to an eager hail.

'Daphne, ahoy! Hello there!'

Elsa came racing across the sand, long-legged in her slacks, her hair blown wildly about. 'I am so glad to see you all! Daph, how nice you look! That's a new hat; it suits you. Doesn't Michelle look well? I've cured her and I'm proud of her. I say, will you excuse my working kit?' She addressed the strangers, her eyes sparkling.

'It's exactly how we hoped we'd see you,' Rachel assured her laughing. 'We've heard so much about you, and we always think of you like this. We hoped you wouldn't look too proper.'

'It makes me long for the little blue shorts I wore on the fells,' Damaris sighed enviously. 'I shall throw Mary Damayris to the winds and go back to my hens and bees. Then I could wear slacks and no hat too.'

Elsa looked at her, with bright, eager eyes. 'Are you really Mary Damayris? I'm longing to see *The Goose-girl*. Miche and I are coming to-morrow night; we're counting the hours. Daph, are you really going to be the Rainbow Fairy? I don't know how I shall bear it!'

'I'm a bit nervous,' Daphne admitted, her face clouding for a moment.

'You'll be all right, silly. I'll stand by you, Elsa. I've been through it,' Rachel promised. 'Daphne's lovely in the part. You won't be nervous once she's started. We're fearfully proud of our little ballet! To-morrow's the first public performance, you know.'

'I shan't sleep to-night for thinking about it,' Elsa said soberly. Then her face lit up with characteristic eagerness. 'I want to show you my island and the ferry. We've prepared tea over there, as it's such a summer day; the south side is sheltered and really hot. Michelle has made plates and plates of Mickies; I do want you to sample them. Everything's ready, so won't you let me put you across?'

'On the island?' Damaris gave a shout. 'What a thrill! We didn't know we were coming to a picnic.'

'But the family! We want to see Min and Mor! Oh, what a darling!' and Rachel darted to the house, where Min had just sprung up on to the wall, and was gazing at them critically.

She took him in her arms, with coo-ing words of love, and he burst into ecstatic purring and rubbed his sleek head on her cheek.

'Kindred spirits! Ray loves cats and they love her,' Damaris said. 'You won't be able to separate them now.'

'Mayn't he come to tea too? Does he go to the island?' Rachel came with Min in her arms.

'Loves it. He stalks rabbits; I sometimes take him on Sundays. He's well trained; he comes when I call.' Elsa led the way to the boat. 'Mor's keeping guard over the feast.'

'The last thing I hear every night is Elsa's—"Min, dear Min! Oh, won't you come in?" And he always comes,' Michelle said laughing.

Min settled himself comfortably on Rachel's arm, his white feet on her shoulder, and sang loud psalms of joy, while Daphne explained Irina's absence from the party.

As they walked along the bank to the island, already on very friendly terms, Rachel put the question that was in the minds of all the visitors. 'When are we going to hear about your gold-mine? We're sure you must have found one.'

'It's on the island. I'll show it to you now at once.' Elsa's eyes danced.

'Really?' They all looked at her.

'Do you go "picking up gold and silver" over there?' Damaris asked.

'Something like that. Now here's where we climb the rocks. I want you to see the view from the top. Then we'll go down to tea in Shepherd's Combe.'

Mor heard their voices and came gambolling up the path to fling himself upon them, giving noisy greetings to Daphne after her long absence. Damaris welcomed him with open arms, and after a startled glance at Min, remote and superior on Rachel's shoulder, he attached himself to her and trotted along at her side.

From the highest point they looked round their little world and then down at the tea-party, spread on the shore. Michelle went to attend to the kettle on the oil stove, in a sheltered corner, and the others followed when they had enjoyed each side of the green island and had looked out over the rocks at the point to the Atlantic and the Welsh hills.

'Don't break your legs going down this track, you dancers!' Elsa warned them. 'Now which will you have first, tea with Mickies, or my secret?'

'Secret!' There was a shout from the Ellertons and Daphne.

‘Where’s Mor gone? He ran right into the cliff,’ Damaris exclaimed. ‘Oh, is there a cave?’
‘First prize to Mary Damayris! There *is* a cave. I found it. Are you going to carry Min all the way?’ Elsa looked at Rachel.

‘Min had better wait here.’ Michelle came to take him, and Rachel surrendered him, with a kiss on the top of his smooth head.

‘My gold-mine,’ Elsa said quietly, handing torches to the three girls and leading them to the cliff face.

In awed amazement they followed her down the enlarged passage to the great hall. Elsa switched on electric lights, and the fairy palace was illuminated.

‘What a marvellous place!’ Rachel whispered. ‘I never saw anything like it!’

‘And we never guessed!’ Daphne said. ‘Elsa, how did you find it?’

‘As she does most things, by being kind to somebody,’ said Michelle, from behind. ‘All Elsa’s bits of luck begin that way.’

‘A small boy lost his ball, and I came to look for it. It had fallen from the top, up there. I was so wildly excited that I rushed about looking at things and lost myself, and I might have been here yet if Mor hadn’t tracked me and shown me the way out.’

‘He’s a perfect lamb,’ Damaris bent to rub Mor’s shaggy back.

‘He’s a brave boy,’ Elsa said. ‘He hates the place, but he always comes in with me. He keeps close to me and won’t let me out of his sight. He’s afraid I’ll never come out if he leaves me alone.’

‘That’s being a real hero. You’re right, Elsa! This place will prove a gold-mine,’ Rachel exclaimed. ‘May we explore? But don’t lose us! Think of M. Antoine to-morrow, if his Goose-girl and his Fairy were wandering underground!’

Elsa laughed. ‘I’ll show you round. I’ve mapped out a good deal of it; the rest is waiting for later on. I’m going to be the guide; I’ve found a nice lad who’s just left school, to attend to the ferry. We’re opening to-morrow, but only from ten till four, so we’ll be able to come to the ballet at night. Part of the cave is cleared and wired—quite enough for a beginning. In a few months we shall open another section, and then everybody will have to come again, to see the new bits.’

‘The business mind!’ Damaris mocked. ‘Very astute! You’ll make everyone come twice over. Do people know about it? Will you have a rush to-morrow?’

‘We’ve made it known. Sir Rodney has written to the local paper, telling about it and giving to-morrow as the opening date. The cave, and your ballet, are the twin sensations for next week! Sir Rodney is the owner of the island, but all the rights in the cave, and anything else I find, are mine. I’m to pay him a peppercorn rent of £1 a year.’ And Elsa explained the odd expression.

‘What a sporting landlord!’ Damaris cried. ‘Now show us all the wonders, Guide!’

‘Are you going to give names to these weird things, as they do at Cheddar?’ Daphne asked.

‘They must be named, of course. I’m waiting for you to give me ideas.’

‘I’m sure you’re never without ideas!’ Rachel exclaimed.

‘But we’ll love to help find names, if we may.’

‘There’s Grandmother’s Shawl; the thing with the fringe!’ Damaris began excitedly. ‘That’s a Goose, hanging up in a shop window; it will remind you of me and the Goose-girl. Here’s a String of Sausages and a Pair of Stockings; exactly like both of them! This is a Bunch of Jewels——’

‘That’s better,’ Rachel remarked. ‘I was going to say your ideas were very unromantic. Oh, Elsa, call this little hole Rainbow Corner! The loveliest colours, and it will remind you of your London home!’

‘You could call the whole place Rainbow Cave,’ Daphne said. ‘It’s like frozen rainbows everywhere.’

Elsa glanced at her. ‘Oh, but it has a real name now! I saved it to tell you when you’d seen it. You remember old Car-Ogre, that we disliked so much? The Ogre’s Fort?’

‘What a shame!’ Rachel cried. ‘You couldn’t call it that, Elsa!’

‘An ogre might have lived here, though,’ Damaris looked round at the shadowy corners.

‘We think it ought to be Caer-Ogo, the fort of the cave. It’s Sir Rodney’s fine idea.’

‘Oh, I like that!’ Daphne exclaimed. ‘Then the ogre of our childish days was quite a mistake!’

‘Yes, he wasn’t there at all. I never used to call the place Car-Ogre; I always said “my island”. But now I often call it Caer-Ogo; it sounds much better.’

‘Heaps!’ Daphne and Rachel spoke together.

Only Daphne, of the three girls, had been to Cheddar. The Ellertons had never seen a stalactite cavern, and they wandered enraptured round the hall and through the galleries, exclaiming in delight as the cunningly placed electric lights were switched on and the strange shapes and vivid colours sprang into view.

‘You’re a good guide! It’s one of the most wonderful places I’ve ever seen,’ Rachel said, with a sigh of appreciation, as, thoroughly weary, they sat down to tea on the rocks in the late sunshine, and enjoyed their first Mickies. ‘Of course, your fortune’s made. You’ll be rolling in wealth in no time.’

Min laid a white foot on her knee and sprang into her lap. Rachel laughed and welcomed him with a kiss.

‘As I told Daph, if she can win fame I’ll supply the fortune.’ Elsa waited on her guests. ‘Have another Micky!’

‘Oh, but you’ll be famous too!’ Damaris said, feeding Mor. ‘Everybody will talk about you, as the discoverer of the marvellous island cave of Caer-Ogo!’

‘If they come to see it and pay their shilling entrance fees, that will be more use to me,’ Elsa retorted.

‘It’s a big shillingsworth! May we pay our way?’ Rachel asked.

‘Certainly not! You’re our guests. But you may sign the Visitors’ Book. I expect to have the signatures of masses of famous people; my book will be a valuable collection of autographs.’

‘Produce the book!’ Damaris cried gaily. ‘We’ll be your first celebrities. Ray’s going to be a noted authoress before long, and Daphne Dale will have made her name as a dancer, and I as a writer of ballets, before this tour is over.’

‘You’ll sign as Mary Damayris, won’t you? Both as a dancer and a maker of dances,’ Elsa said earnestly. ‘I can’t tell you how sporting I think it is that you’re letting Daphne dance in your new ballet. It isn’t as if you weren’t a dancer yourself! You must be aching to do the dances properly.’

‘Shame! Oh, what a shame!’ Rachel cried. ‘Daphne makes a lovely fairy and she dances beautifully.’

‘Perhaps, and perhaps not,’ Daphne retorted. ‘But all the same Elsa’s right. It’s just terribly sporting of Damayris to let me have that part. She’d love to be the fairy in the wood.’

‘Of course I should. That’s why we’re going to change places sometimes. But I love to see you do my dances,’ Damaris assured her.

‘I’m frightened.’ Daphne gave a shiver that was not all pretence. ‘If only it wasn’t in Sandylands! My first time in public!’

Elsa glanced at her. ‘I’ve seen the posters. You don’t dance every day, do you?’

‘Some part of every day,’ Damaris explained. ‘On Wednesdays and Saturdays we’re in the afternoon programme and then there’s no *Goose-girl* or *Rainbow Corner* at night. Madame’s very strict; she calls us her babes and she’s determined not to tire us out. It’s our first tour and we’ve two months to do, and then a season in London at Christmas. So—once a day only, and we’re supposed to go to bed early when we have an afternoon show!’

‘I’ve come on tour to see that they do it,’ Rachel added.

‘Then will you come to Min-y-mor after the matinée on Wednesday?’ Elsa suggested. ‘We’ll know about all our adventures by then—Daphne’s dancing, your ballet, my cave! Come to late tea; the cave isn’t open after four. We’ll compare notes on our marvellous successes, and have a celebration tea. Bring Irina Ivanovna; I want to see her and she must sign my book. We’ll let you go, home early.’

‘Will you give us Mickies?’ Damaris demanded. ‘Right! Then I’m coming, for one!’

CHAPTER XXIII

DAPHNE DANCES

In the darkness of the theatre Elsa touched Rachel's arm, in a mute appeal for comfort. The curtain was rising on *Rainbow Corner*.

Rachel drew the frightened hand into her lap. 'It's all right, Elsa. Daphne will have been badly scared, but now that's over and she'll enjoy herself. I've seen it happen before with her; she forgets everything when she starts.'

'Lovely music!' Michelle murmured.

The Widow was bending over the cradle. She showed her despair and her empty cupboards in dancing and mime, then stopped, at a knock on the door.

'Is that Daphne?' Elsa whispered, amazed. 'But she's beautiful, Rachel!'

'She is, when she dances. Yes, she does look nice.'

Daphne wore a blue cloak, and her golden plaits were drawn forward to hang on her breast, thick and long and shining. When she dropped the cloak and began to whirl about the stage on her points, between the Widow and the gold, with raised bare arms, her rainbow skirt swung rich and full about her.

In the woodland interlude she was the traditional fairy in white, with gauzy wings, and she danced in a pool of light on a dark stage. As the scene changed back to the cottage, applause rang through the theatre, and it broke out again and again at the end.

Irina and Daphne came out to bow. The clapping went on, and Daphne, with blazing eyes, caught Mary Damayris by the hand.

'It's you they really want. You made the ballet and they know it. Come with us this time! It's all your work!'

'Fairy, how can I?' Damaris protested. 'Look at me!'

'They know you're going to be the Goose-girl in a moment. Come on!'

Damaris looked at Madame. 'Mad, isn't she?'

'I think not. Go, my child!'

'In my tattered gown? Oh, well—!' and the Goose-girl slipped through the curtains, hand in hand with the Widow and the Fairy.

'Oh, splendid!' Elsa cried. 'I wonder whose idea that was? Author—good!' and she joined in the storm of greeting.

'Fairy's, I expect. It would be just like her. Doesn't Marry look a sight?' Rachel laughed. 'Now we'll settle down to enjoy *The Goose-girl*. She'll have another big welcome when she appears!'

'Daphne was all right, wasn't she?' Elsa asked shyly. 'She seemed awfully good to me, but I know so little about it.'

'She was perfect,' Rachel exclaimed. 'Everybody's pleased. It sounded to me as if all your aunt's old friends had come to see her. They'll feel she has justified her training.'

'That's what I've been hoping for,' Elsa sighed in happy relief.

In the entrance hall, as they went out, Sir Rodney and his daughter came up to her. 'My dear, I congratulate you. My doubts are gone. Your sister is a true dancer, and it is right that her gift should be used. It would have been tragic if it had been lost to the world.'

'Oh, how kind of you!' Elsa cried, with shining eyes. 'I did so hope you were here!'

‘How are you going home? Bus? Then may we take you as far as Hillside in our car? It is not much out of our way. Thank Miss Daphne for the great treat she has given us, and give her my warm congratulations. And now, my dear,’ as the car whirled them homewards, ‘what of your venture? Have you had a busy day? Do people like your cave?’

Elsa’s face lit up again. ‘They love it! We’ve had shoals of clients. I’ve had to take them in parties of six or eight, and make the next lot wait till we came out. There’s been a stream of people all day; and reporters came, so there will be columns in the papers. It’s a gold-mine, right enough. Don’t you think the rent should be raised? Two peppercorns, perhaps?’

‘One will be sufficient,’ he assured her gravely.

Next day Elsa, returning from her last trip to the cave, after showing round a large party who had arrived just before four, found Rachel Ellerton sitting on the wall of Min-y-mor, nursing a contented cat.

‘I’d have come for morning coffee, but I knew you’d be over there,’ she said. ‘I want to congratulate you again on Daphne’s dancing, and to bring you news. Everybody’s pleased; M. Antoine and Madame are purring with satisfaction, as loudly as this dear Min, and Damaris is very happy that her first ballet has been so well received. We had a scene at supper last night, after the show! My young Damayris insists that Daphne shall dance *The Goose-girl*, here in Sandylands, one night, while she criticizes from the stalls. Daphne refused flatly, saying it was Marry’s part and people would be disappointed. So to satisfy her it’s put off till Friday, and there will be printed strips stuck across all the posters—“At Friday’s performance the part of the Goose-girl will be taken by Daphne Dale.” Fairy says she’ll blush whenever she passes one. I tell her that the theatre—far from being half empty, as she expects—will be packed to the roof.’

‘Friday?’ Elsa said, wide-eyed. ‘Daphne’s really to be the Goose-girl, Damayris’s own part?’

‘It’s not really the thing to watch your understudy, but Marry says she’s also Daphne’s teacher, which is true. She’ll feel much happier once Fairy has done the part in public, and where could be a better chance than this? She’s won her place already, with *Rainbow Corner*; people know her and like her. I’ve bagged seats for you and Michelle, with Marry and me. It will be fun to watch somebody else do *The Goose-girl* and to hear Marry’s comments!’

‘You are kind!’ Elsa cried, quite overwhelmed.

‘Oh, I’m not! I love you two and your adventures. How’s *Caer-Ogo*?’

‘Packed with excited people. I can’t answer half the questions; I’m going to find some expert in caves to give me a lesson. It’s the thrill of the autumn!’

‘So is the début of Daphne Dale as a dancer. There will be bits about *Rainbow Corner* in the London papers, because the ballet was made by Mary Damayris. The critics are interested in anything she does just now. When Daphne dances the Fairy in Town the way will be nicely prepared for a big success!’

Elsa leaned on the gate and gazed at her and Min. ‘I can’t tell you how grateful I am for the way you two have given her such a good start. I feel so much that I could never put it into words.’

‘She’d have started all right. We’ve only lent a helping hand. You’ll come to see her in *The Goose-girl*, won’t you?’

‘Oh, rather! I’ll tell Sir Rodney; he’ll come again. And—Rachel! Suppose we put off that special tea till Saturday? Then we can make Daphne’s *Goose-girl* part of the celebrations.’

‘Good! But we’re coming as customers on Thursday afternoon, when there’s no matinée, to see Caer-Ogo again and to pay our way and be given a Micky-tea by Michelle. And one morning I’m going to see Cheddar and compare it with your cave. Now, dear, I’ll have to go.’ She kissed Min’s sleek head and set him on the wall, and he sat up and began to wash his white feet.

Rachel laughed and laid her hand gently on his head. Then she waved to Elsa and set off on her tramp along the sands.

CHAPTER XXIV

SUCCESSFUL ADVENTURE

Elsa took the oars from her boat, for the last trip of Saturday afternoon was over, and ran to the house to help Michelle in her preparations for the celebration tea.

As she reached the gate a shout made her look round. Daphne was racing across the sand from the bus-road, waving something above her head. When she saw that Elsa had heard, she broke into a dance of triumph, heedless of the staring tourists coming from the ferry.

‘Daph, don’t be a goat!’ Elsa cried laughing. ‘You’re giving my clients a free show! What’s the matter?’

‘Never saw them.’ Daphne checked her joy-dance but spoke in eager excitement. ‘Elsa, my girl, such a thrill! Madame let me off early, to tell you before the rest come. They’re still in the middle of *The Goose-girl*, but as Damayris was quite definitely all right and able to dance Madame said I might come as soon as *Rainbow Corner* was finished. I hurled myself on to a bus and came speeding to you; I haven’t had you to myself at all.’

‘I was thinking the same thing,’ Elsa acknowledged. ‘The others are frightfully jolly and I love them both, but you are you, after all, and this is home. It’s marvellous to have you alone for an hour. And you’re coming to spend Sunday morning with me and Michelle, aren’t you? Now what’s all the noise about?’

‘Well—look!’ Daphne flourished her envelope and then drew out a sheet of foolscap paper. ‘Look, Elsa Dale! A contract for a year from Antoine, and they’ll probably renew it for another year or two. I’m a proper member of the Antoine Ballet, like Irina and Damayris and everyone else!’

‘Oh, Daph, how gorgeous! That makes your future safe!’

‘I’ve felt I was only an extra,’ Daphne explained. ‘*Rainbow Corner* is a little thing, and but for that I’m just an understudy. This means, Madame says, that they’ll use me regularly in the *corps de ballet* and sometimes perhaps as a principal, because they like my dancing so much. It’s the very best luck I could have hoped for.’

‘Oh, not luck!’ Elsa argued. ‘It’s the result of the good work you’ve done.’

‘I owe that to Damayris. I’ll never forget. Hasn’t this been a marvellous week?’ Daphne cried. ‘Both our futures made safe! For old Caer-Ogo will look after you now.’

‘Yes, I shall be all right.’

Daphne glanced at her. ‘What’s up? You sound not quite satisfied.’

Elsa gave herself a shake. ‘I’m a pig. I’m really terribly glad about your contract. Only—well, I wanted to help you for a while. Caer-Ogo and I were going to supply the fortune, while you won fame for the family. You won’t need me now.’

Daphne took her by the arm and pushed her gently towards the house. ‘Dear idiot! It’s awfully like you to feel that way. I shall need you all right; don’t worry! There’s no wealth to be made in the *corps de ballet*; the fortunes are for the ballerinas and that’s a long way ahead. It’s going to be simply marvellous to feel that you’re here, keeping Min-y-mor going, and that I can come home to you sometimes. I’ve thought a lot since I’ve been alone in Town; you can’t imagine how I’ve missed you! I know now that Irina was right and it will make all the difference to have you and a home in the background. I’m out for adventures, and I’m ready to go round the world with the ballet, if I’m asked, but I must have an anchorage, and you’re It!’

Elsa laughed and the shadow left her face. 'I want to feel I'm being some use to you. I can't pile up a big bank account just for myself.'

'Besides,' Daphne coloured, 'you are helping already, you know.'

Elsa looked at her quickly. 'Did you speak to Madame, as I asked you?'

Daphne nodded soberly. 'She said there was no need for you to pay back what she'd lent me, but that if you would feel happier she'd accept it. She won't take any fees for classes; most of my work lately has been with Damayris, and no one can ever repay her for what she's done.'

'No, that's not a matter of money. She's been the brickiest of bricks, but she's enjoyed it too. Madame's different; I couldn't bear to feel you owed her money. I'll send a cheque, if you tell me how much.'

'You're sure it's all right?' Daphne looked troubled. 'I'm older than you; why should I have your money?'

'It's our money, from our island. I want to begin saving in earnest, but I can't do it while you're in debt to Madame. We'll pay that off and both start clear. I'm making pots of money! Daphne, you're to give me a solemn promise that if you ever run short you'll let me know. I can't enjoy the thrills of my growing business unless I feel you're all right.'

'You are awfully decent!' Daphne said, deeply touched. 'I'll promise. I'll never mind asking you for help.'

'I should think not! We must go shares. Come and help me now, to get ready for the crowd. Put that precious contract away safely! Do the others know about it?'

'Not yet. Madame gave it to me just before we went on, this afternoon. I started to rush to Damayris and tell her, and then I thought it would be fun to save it for to-night. I wanted to tell you first, anyway.'

'Oh, good! We'll tell them when they come.'

They were working happily together in the kitchen with Michelle, when there came a knock at the door.

'It's too early for our crowd.' Daphne glanced at the clock. 'Must be somebody for you, Elsa.'

Elsa frowned. 'I can't take anyone to Caer-Ogo now! It's far too late.'

Looking stern, she opened the door. Then her face broke into eager welcome. 'Oh, you've come back, as you promised! I am pleased to see you! Daph! Miche! It's Miss Lohengrin!'

'I know I'm too late to see your wonderful cave, but perhaps you'll show it to me on Monday,' Nell Masterman said. 'I'm staying with friends, and I couldn't get away any earlier. I felt I must come to congratulate you, both on your discovery and on something else. You were so enterprising that you deserved success! And somebody else has had a big success too. I went to see the Antoine Ballet last night; I arrived from London just in time.'

Elsa's face lit up. 'You saw Daphne dance *The Goose-girl*? Did you know she was my sister?'

'I heard she was the sister of the girl who found the cave. I congratulate you on her performance,' Nell said earnestly. 'My friends, who had seen Mary Damayris in the part, were delighted with your Daphne, and thought her a most efficient understudy; and in the little ballet, as the Fairy, she was quite charming. You must be proud of her.'

Elsa's eyes were glowing. 'I am! Can't you see the conceit radiating from me?' She turned to the kitchen. 'Daphne, don't be shy! I've told you about Miss Nell Lohengrin.'

'I'm not shy, but I was a bit messy. I've been cleaning up.' Daphne appeared in the doorway, wearing Elsa's old blue overall.

Nell gave an exclamation. 'This is an unexpected pleasure! Miss Dale, you gave us a very great treat last night. Both as the Goose-girl and the Fairy I enjoyed every moment of your dancing.'

'That's very kind of you! I was terribly nervous until I'd started.' Daphne laughed. 'I know I'm an ass, but I'm always terrified before I go on. But everybody's saying nice things to-day, so it can't have been too bad.'

'Bad! It was quite beautiful. But I mustn't stay; you want to be alone with your sister. I'll come back on Monday to see the cave.'

'Oh, you must let us give you tea, after your walk!' Elsa exclaimed. 'It's so extremely suitable that you should turn up to-day, to see how we're getting on! You were here at the very beginning of things; you made Michelle and me start giving teas, and your brother and the Scouts suggested the ferry. But for them I should never have found my cave.'

'Which is going to make your fortune, I understand. Aren't you glad you were kind to the Scouts and hospitable to me?'

Elsa laughed. 'And now you turn up to join in our very special tea! Daphne moves on to Bristol to-morrow, so some of her friends from the ballet are coming presently to celebrate her success last night and my finding of the cave. They're partly responsible for her doing so well and you're partly responsible for me; it's exactly right that you should be here!'

'But I can't butt in on a party like that!'

'You can, and you must,' Elsa said firmly.

'And you shall,' Daphne added. 'I'd like you to meet——'

'It's only some girls from the ballet,' Elsa broke in, a gleam in her eyes. 'Sit down by the fire, Miss Lohengrin; they'll be here soon now. We'll bring you tea and Mickies; you haven't tasted Michelle's Mickies yet! They've been an enormous help to our venture. Had you seen *The Goose-girl* in Town?'

'No, I meant to go, but I missed it. I shall go when the company comes back from the provinces. I must compare your sister's performance with the original Goose-girl's. Everyone is talking about this new young dancer, Mary Damayris.'

'Damayris trained Daphne very carefully; there's just the difference of personality between the two Goose-girls. Each of them puts something of herself into the part.'

Nell nodded. 'Of course. Otherwise your sister would be merely a gramophone record, and I'm sure that isn't so.'

Elsa drew Daphne into the kitchen. 'Don't tell her who are coming! She's met them before, as I told you in my letter. We'll see if she knows them again.'

'There they are,' Daphne exclaimed. 'I can hear Mary Damayris chattering.'

Elsa went to the door. 'Daphne's friend is coming, the tall dark girl who was the Widow—Irina Ivanovna.' Her lips twitched in amused anticipation as she crossed the tea-room, followed by Daphne.

'Indeed, Elsa, and Daphne was a lovely Goose-girl,' Irene Jones said heartily, on the doorstep.

Daphne gave her a quick shy look of thanks, but said nothing. The secret had been kept; she had not told Elsa of Irina's outburst.

'Tea! Give us tea!' Mary Damayris cried.

‘Take the big table by the window. I’ll fetch a fresh supply of Mickies. We kept a reserve stock for you,’ Elsa assured them. ‘Daphne was simply marvellous! I wouldn’t have believed anyone could be so exactly like Mary Damayris!’

‘Oh, but I trained the child! I’m very proud of her.’ Damaris took possession of the window table.

Rachel went towards the kitchen to look for Min. ‘I can’t be quite happy until he’s in my lap. Still washing those white stockings, darling? Don’t you ever take a day off?’

‘I had a day off last night!’ Damaris chuckled. ‘I enjoyed it. It was priceless to see Daphne being me!’

Nell Masterman had risen and was staring—at Damaris by the window, at Rachel holding Min. ‘My girls from the fells! Rachel and Damaris, from Hikers’ Halt! But how grown-up and changed!’

‘Gosh! It’s our first customer!’ Damaris shouted.

Rachel set Min down gently on a chair, and sprang to meet her. ‘Miss Nell! What fun to see you again! Then you remember us?’

‘I chattered too much, and Ray forgot the salt!’ Damaris chuckled. ‘Have we changed? You look just the same!’

‘It’s two years, and we’ve been in France and Italy, and all sorts of things have happened,’ Rachel said breathlessly.

‘It’s lovely to see you again! I was terribly disappointed when we went back at Whitsun and found you’d gone,’ Nell began. ‘But I don’t understand! Princess Elsa said she expected her sister’s friends from the ballet.’

‘I bet you don’t understand!’ Damaris grinned.

‘We are the friends from the ballet. You should have seen Daphne dance last night!’ Rachel cried.

‘I did,’ Nell said promptly.

‘It was made much worse for me by the thought that Mary Damayris was sitting there with Elsa, watching every movement,’ Daphne said. ‘I’m only the understudy; I ought not to have to do it unless she’s ill, and if she’s ill she ought to be in bed, not criticizing from the stalls.’

‘Very true!’ Damaris mocked. ‘I thoroughly enjoyed my evening off, Fairy! You were a very pretty Goose-girl.’

Nell whirled round and stared at her. ‘You *don’t* mean—? Damayris—Damaris! Is it a stage name? Are you Mary Damayris?—my friend Damaris from Hikers’ Halt?’

‘Who gave you tea, and talked too much, and wore a shirt and shorts.’ Damaris made a stage curtsey.

Nell looked at Rachel. ‘Is it true? Or am I——?’

‘No, it’s true.’ Rachel laughed. ‘Damaris is Mary Damayris. You must come and see her dance in London.’

‘I most certainly shall! But I still can’t believe it!’

‘It seems unlikely, I know,’ Damaris admitted.

Nell’s eyes rested on Irene Jones. ‘I’d know you anywhere; you’re the Widow. But Damaris is a surprise to me! What about you?’ to Rachel. ‘Have you turned into something exciting too?’

Rachel laughed and, picking up Min in her arms again, came to sit at the table. ‘Nothing so thrilling as Marry!’

‘Only an authoress. She’s had two stories accepted and she’s going to start on a book. I’m fearfully proud of her,’ Damaris proclaimed. ‘We’d better tell you how it happened, Miss—Nell?’

‘Miss Lohengrin,’ Elsa called from the doorway. ‘Tell your story quickly, for tea and Mickies are ready! Come and help me, Daphne!’

‘It’s lucky for Daphne to have Elsa behind her,’ Irene Jones was saying to Michelle, in a corner of the kitchen. ‘Daphne will have the thrills and the publicity; the crowds and the bits in the papers. But there will be times, look you, when she’ll be glad to know Elsa is standing by to help.’

Michelle nodded gravely. ‘Elsa’s tremendously proud of Daphne. This visit, and Daphne’s dancing here so beautifully before all their friends, have made her very happy.’

‘And you like being here? You don’t miss London?’

‘I’m glad to miss London!’ Michelle laughed. ‘I love this place—and Elsa!’

Mary Damayris appeared at the kitchen door. ‘Where’s our tea? Daphne Dale, don’t stand there gossiping with your young sister!’ she said sternly. ‘Remember you’ve been Fairy Sili go Dwt this afternoon; you should be starving. I wonder we don’t call you Silly instead of Fairy! It’s only just occurred to me. Can’t we have our Mickies?’

‘If you’ve finished talking,’ Elsa retorted, and came to supply their wants. ‘No, don’t help any more, Daphne. Sit down with the rest of your crowd and tuck in.’

As the last Micky disappeared the postman’s knock sounded and Elsa went to take in the letters.

‘Gosh!’ cried Damaris. ‘D’you mean to say Posty comes to this lonely spot?’

‘He cycles across the sand from the village.’ Daphne was watching her sister’s face. ‘What is it, Elsa?’

Elsa laughed, her eyes shining in delight. ‘What luck that these came to-night! Or—as in the case of Miss Lohengrin—how extremely suitable! This is congratulations on last night from Sir Rodney Barron; he went a second time, on purpose to see you as the Goose-girl. This other is even more thrilling; it’s from Mr. Courtier. He’s our lawyer,’ she explained, for the benefit of the guests, ‘and he’s always been violently against Daphne’s dancing. He was prejudiced, and he hated ballet-dancing and didn’t want her to go on with it.’

‘He wanted me to be a hairdresser.’ Daphne laughed. ‘I nearly died at the thought. What is he writing about? I say, you don’t mean——?’

‘Yes, I do. He came to see you, out of curiosity, and by good luck he chose last night, so he had a double dose and saw you both as the Goose-girl and the Rainbow Fairy. He’d seen reports of *Rainbow Corner* in the local papers; they made a bit of fuss because Sandylands was having the first performance. They gave your name and he came to see for himself. He was frightfully impressed, and he takes back all he said and wishes you every success. He’s completely converted by the beauty of your performance; that’s how he puts it.’

‘Very kind of him!’ Daphne cried, laughing. ‘I seem to have won over everybody! Sir Rodney didn’t like it either, did he?’

‘He was different. He loves ballet and he was sure you’d never be good enough. He’s taken it back too. You’ve conquered them both.’

‘Oh, cheers!’ Daphne began to pirouette among the tea tables.

Damaris went to the piano. ‘Move the furniture, Irina Ivanovna! Daphne shall do the Fairy’s dance in the wood, just for us. May I use this beautiful thing, Elsa? I’ve been longing to try it.’

‘Please do!’ Elsa’s eyes were bright with pride in Daphne’s achievement. ‘It’s in good order; I have it tuned regularly, for Auntie’s sake. She loved her piano.’

Damaris nodded. ‘Change your shoes, Fairy! Now show Miss Nell the dance I made for you!’

‘You’ll do something for us afterwards, won’t you?’ Elsa pleaded.

Damaris shook her head. ‘I’m only the music to-night. This is Fairy’s show.’

‘But Miss Lohengrin has seen Daphne dance and she hasn’t seen you. And you are Mary Damayris!’

But Damaris was firm. ‘Not to-night, Cave-Girl. This is Daphne’s day.’

‘Damaris is right,’ Rachel said quietly, as Daphne fetched her shoes from her attaché-case and Damaris played from memory the Fairy’s dance among the trees. ‘Let Fairy have to-night, to triumph over her critics and rejoice in her success.’

‘Not forgetting Princess Elsa and her great discovery,’ Nell Masterman added.

‘That’s what I’m going to dance about,’ Daphne retorted. ‘The Fairy was gloating over the Widow when she danced in the wood, I’m going to gloat over Elsa’s cave. That’s the biggest thing to rejoice about!’

‘Not quite,’ Elsa said to herself, and when the last triumphant whirling turn was over she slipped something into Daphne’s hand. ‘You’ve forgotten this, Fairy!’

Daphne’s eyes blazed. ‘Not forgotten, but I was saving it for a final thrill. Damayris—Rachel—look!’

‘What is it? Oh, Daphne! They’ve given you a contract! Oh, cheers!’ Damaris cried joyfully.

‘All due to you,’ Daphne said breathlessly.

‘I’m jolly proud of you, Fairy!’

‘Congrats, Daph!’ Irina exclaimed.

‘They want to make sure of you,’ Rachel, the business woman, said shrewdly. ‘All the same, you’ll be glad to have the contract.’

‘Glad! I should say I am!’

‘It secures your future, as the cave does Princess Elsa’s,’ Nell Masterman agreed. ‘I congratulate you both very heartily. I’m so glad I came at the right moment to be here to do it!’

‘Ladies!’ Damaris sprang on to a chair. ‘I ask you to give three cheers for these young people! Success to all their ventures!’

‘The success is coming very fast. Congratulations, both of you!’ said Rachel.

‘Very successful adventurers,’ added Miss Lohengrin.

‘Only because we’ve had such good friends to help us,’ Elsa exclaimed.

‘Not at all. You set out to have adventures and you’ve won through. It’s hard work and enterprise, not good friends or luck,’ Damaris cried. ‘Three cheers, everybody! For Daphne Dale and Elsa-of-the-cave—hip, hip, hurrah!’

[The end of *Adventure for Two* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]