

Margery
MEETS
THE
ROSES

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BY
*Elsie J.
Oxenham*



LUTTERWORTH
PRESS

BY *Elsie Jeanette Oxenham*

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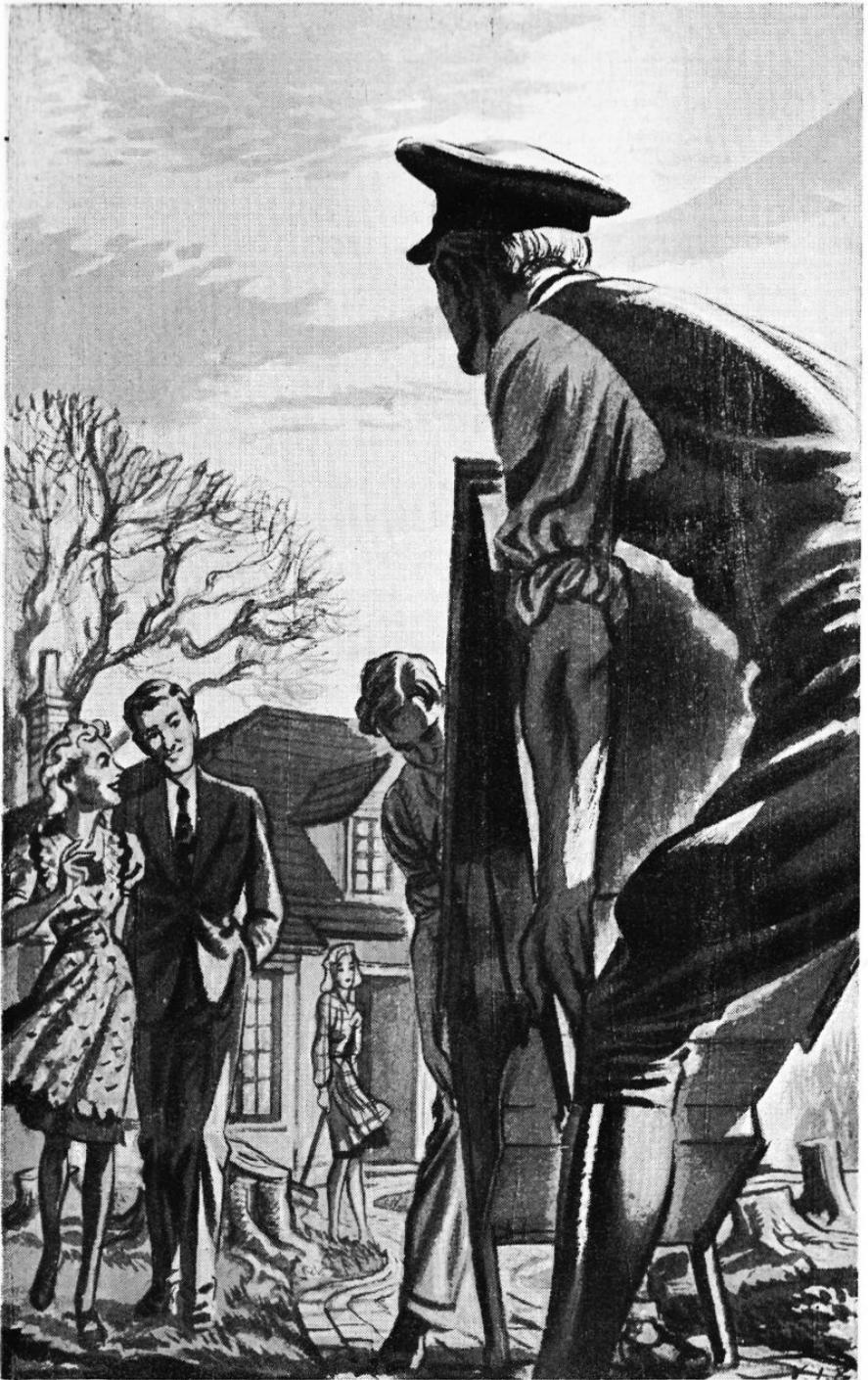
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"Everybody's helping," Nanta cried gleefully

MARGERY
MEETS THE ROSES
ELSIE JEANETTE OXENHAM

Published by Lutterworth Press, 1947.

To
ELINOR M. BRENT-DYER
with love
and all good wishes

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CHAPTER ONE

ADVENTURE FOR MARGERY

“I shall have to find somebody else for the ferry,” Elsa Dale said to herself, as she dismissed her boy assistant and shouldered her oars. “Billy ought to be learning a trade. He’s quite satisfied; I shall have to shove him off gently, for his own good.”

She went up the sands towards the red cottage just above high-water mark. “Somebody sitting on the wall, cuddling Min. It’s Margery—good girl! She’s come to tell me about the wedding. Margery, ahoy! Did it go off well?”

Margery put down the sleek black cat and came to meet her, and Min began to wash his white front feet, as if afraid contact with her might have soiled them.

“I want to talk. Do you mind? I couldn’t think of anyone I’d rather go to.”

“That’s what I call a beautiful compliment, but it sounds lonely.” Elsa looked at her with real sympathy. “I suppose that’s about the truth, Polly Paine?”

“There’s no one left to call me that now. Yes, I am lonely,” Margery admitted.

“You’re staying the night, of course?”

“You told me to come any time. But if it doesn’t suit, there’s that late bus. I could go home at nine-thirty.”

“Far too late. Besides, I want you,” Elsa said briskly. “I’m lonely, too; Michelle has gone to France to see her cousins. She’ll only stay for a day or two, I hope. Our tea and coffee business has to be closed till she comes back, and people are disappointed to find they can’t buy her special mickies. I hope Min welcomed you properly?”

“Very. He thinks I’ve come on purpose to be sat on. Where’s Mor?”

Elsa pointed to a black spot far along the sands. “Seeing Billy off the premises. He always takes him to the beginning of the road. Come and nurse Min again, while I beat up eggs. I need supper badly, and I expect you’re hungry too.”

“Min thinks I’ve muddied his white feet.” Margery held out her arms, and Min raced up and leapt into her lap.

Elsa laughed. “Did you see his joyful smile? He always hurls himself on anybody who seems in the least welcoming.”

“Can’t I help? It seems so lazy to sit here, when you’ve been showing the caves to trippers all day. You ought to nurse the gent and let me do the work,” Margery suggested.

“I’ll nurse the gent later on. Sit still and talk to me. How did the wedding go? I was sorry I couldn’t come, but I couldn’t down tools and desert my island.”

“No, one has to carry on. But I shut up shop for the day. It all went splendidly.”

“Did Nancybell look lovely?”

“Yes, I really think she did; white suits her. Robin was off his head with happiness—in a quiet way, of course, but I could tell.”

“And Nancybell?”

“Oh, rather! She couldn’t be happier. They’ve gone to North Wales; Nance has always wanted to see Wales, so they’re hunting out the villages where her ancestress lived in Charles the Second’s reign.”

“Good idea! I suppose the cousins came to see her married?”

“Sure,” said Margery. “Annamaria pretended to weep, because Nance wasn’t being married to Gilbert. She wanted to keep her in the family.”

“Was Sir Gilbert in tears too?”

“No, very cheerful, unfortunately.” Margery’s face grew sober.

Elsa glanced at her. “He has other ideas. What about it, Polly Paine?”

“Nothing. He’s silly. I’m not going to marry a baronet, now or ever.”

“Because he’s a baronet? Are you frightened?”

“I’d be frightened if I meant to do it. But that’s not the reason; if I wanted to marry him, I’d face up to it. I just don’t want to marry Gilbert. I don’t like him well enough.”

“That’s definite! You can’t do it if you feel like that. It would be a big job,” Elsa acknowledged. “You’d be Lady Seymour, and you’d have to manage that great house. Summerton’s a lovely place, but it might be quite a burden. You could only take it on if you really cared for Sir Gilbert.”

“Well, I don’t. I’ve thought about it a lot. I’ve been sure of what he was thinking for some time.”

“Oh, yes!” Elsa agreed, bending over her eggs. “It’s been plain what he thought, but I’ve been doubtful about you.”

“You needn’t be. I’ve known, and I’ve thought, and I’ve decided.”

“Good for you! I like people to know their own minds! Come and eat, and tell me your plans. Are you going to carry on the ‘Nance and Polly’ alone?”

“That’s what I want to talk about.” Margery came to the table, in the big window that faced a golden sunset. She set Min on a chair beside her, patted the black Aberdeen, Mor, who came dancing and barking in from the sands, and looked hopefully at Elsa. “I want advice. Now that I’ve lost Mother and Nance is married, I’ve only neighbours or the Pouffe to talk to, and Pouffe really isn’t any help. He just grunts and turns over and goes to sleep again.”

Her huge brown-and-white cat was well known to Elsa, who stroked her own sleek Min and laughed. “I can’t imagine the Pouffe with good advice to give. What’s the trouble? You still have the ‘Nance and Polly’. You must find another partner, now that Nancybell has forsaken you.”

“But I haven’t the ‘Nance and Polly’. It’s gone, or at least it’s going.”

Elsa laid down her fork and stared at her. “Margery Paine! What do you mean? It’s your own little shop, and you’re making a good thing of it. Nancybell was so glad it was well established before she had to leave it to you. What has happened?”

“The Council has bagged it. You know how those houses stick out and make an awkward corner, with my ‘Nance and Polly’ in the middle? They want to widen the road and smooth off the angle, and they’re buying the properties, to pull them down. We who own them haven’t any choice. We’ll be paid compensation, but we have to give up our houses.”

“What a blow! I am sorry, Margery. You were fond of that little place.”

“I loved it. It was my father’s shop, and then my mother and Nance’s mother ran it for years, and then we took over.”

Elsa nodded. It was a year since Margery’s mother had died, but with her lifelong friend, Nancybell, to help her in the shop which had borne their names, Margery, or “Polly Paine” from her schooldays, had not been too lonely. Now, with Nance married to Robin Farnham and gone for a honeymoon, Margery seemed likely to be very lonely indeed, with only a mass of sleepy, happy, brown-and-white fur for company.

“So you’ve lost your ‘Nance and Polly’!” Elsa said at last. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” Margery said frankly. “Nancybell wants me to bank the money and live at Farnsfield. But I can’t do that.”

“No, you wouldn’t like it. Leave her and Robin to get used to one another alone. Can’t you start a new ‘Nance and Polly’?”

“That’s what the Council suggested. They said nice things about how well we had catered for children, and they hoped I’d open another shop. But I think I’d rather start somewhere else. I’ve lived in Priorsbury all my life.”

Elsa gave her another of her quick looks. “You want to get away from Sir Gilbert?”

“And not tell him where I’ve gone,” Margery cried. “It would be best for both of us. I’m tired of his teasing!”

Elsa looked thoughtful. “I do think you’re wise. Where would you go?”

“I don’t know. Right away, so that he wouldn’t find me quickly. But it’s such a big thing,” Margery said forlornly. “I’ve the whole world to choose from. The whole world—and just me and Pouffe to attack it.”

“It sounds a real adventure! Haven’t you ideas about any particular place?”

“Not one. It makes me feel very small and lonely.”

“How much are they paying for the ‘Nance and Polly’? Is it fair to ask?”

“Eight hundred pounds. They said it was old property, and of course I knew it was. But—well, I’ll have to confess. I’ve sent half of it to America, so I’ve only four hundred left. Nancybell was wild, when I consulted her. I had to ask her, because half of it should have been hers. She wouldn’t touch it, but she didn’t want me to send it away.”

“I should think not! Four hundred isn’t much. Why did you do it, Polly Paine?” Elsa asked severely.

“I had such a pathetic letter from Aunt Peg, Mother’s sister; her husband started a good little business, and then he died, and she’s left with three children—all small girls. She said if she had just a little more capital she could buy the business and then she’d feel secure. I was sorry for her, and I knew Mother would have helped her. I haven’t anybody depending on me, except the Pouffe, and he doesn’t cost much. Aunt Peg seemed to need the money more than I did.”

“You are a brick,” Elsa said gravely. “I don’t say it was sensible, but it was kind and plucky. I can quite understand that Nancybell was mad, but it wasn’t her aunt who asked for help.”

“Mother was so fond of Aunt Peg. I knew she would want me to do it.”

“Yes. Let me think!” Elsa commanded. “We’re talking too much and forgetting to eat. I’m thrilled by your problem and the way you set about solving it by giving away half your capital!”

Margery laughed ruefully. “I don’t see what else I could have done.”

“No. It makes your adventure much bigger and more worth while. You’ve made such a splendid start, by setting up your aunt in business.”

“You’re very comforting! Nancybell scolded me.”

“Oh, but you had to do it. It’s still more of an adventure! If you’d refused your aunt, you’d have felt handicapped; the thought of her with those little girls would have dragged you down. You’ve done the right thing, and now you can go ahead,” Elsa exclaimed.

“Yes, but where? And what can I do with four hundred pounds?”

“Not a great deal, I suppose. Still, it’s something behind you.”

“Not enough to buy a new business.”

“No, perhaps not. You’re facing the world with only half your weapons. It *is* an adventure, you know!”

Margery laughed. “Oh, Elsa Dale! I’m glad I came to talk to you!”

CHAPTER TWO

THE STORY OF RAINBOWS

“I’ll make up Michelle’s bed for you,” Elsa said, as they washed cups and plates. “No, don’t come to help. She’d rather I put her things away. You talk to the family; they love attention.”

Michelle’s room was a big attic running all the length of the little house, with a front dormer window looking on the sands, the wide bay, and the sunset. Elsa, glancing out, saw Margery sitting on the low wall, with Mor perched beside her, while Min pushed a white paw into her lap and quietly insinuated his long black body after it. Margery, her thoughts far away, put an arm round him and stroked him gently, and he sang a psalm of joy and gratitude.

“Pretty girl! I don’t blame the baronet,” Elsa said to herself, gazing at Margery’s fair bobbed hair and blue eyes and the blue frock that matched them. “But she has sense for the two of them, and she knows it wouldn’t do. It’s too big a change from her little sweet-shop.”

“What will you do with your Pouffe?” she asked, as she called the family in from the half-dark. “Will he consent to move to a new ‘Nance and Polly?’”

Margery turned troubled eyes to her. “I’m bothered about Pouffe. I can’t take him wandering round. I wondered if I might leave him with you till I find a new home, but I don’t know what Min would say.”

Elsa looked doubtfully at Black Min. “I don’t know either. Wouldn’t he be happier at the farm with Nancybell?”

“That’s a better idea. There are lots of cats at Farnsfield, and it’s a big place. Nance might be able to keep him in a room by himself.”

“Dull for the Pouffe!” Elsa laughed. “Polly Paine, we’ll be up early and we’ll talk about your plans in the morning. There’s an idea in my mind, but I want to think about it before I say anything.”

“How mysterious!” Margery’s eyes were shining. “Is it something hopeful?”

“It might be,” Elsa said cautiously, and drove Min out to the sands for his evening walk.

Half an hour later Margery, comfortably in bed, heard Elsa open the door and call softly, “Min, dear Min! Won’t you come in?” and then, a moment later, “Oh, good boy! Come along; my bed’s ready for you.”

Margery gave a sleepy laugh. “I mustn’t tell my Pouffe! He’s much too heavy to be allowed on a bed!”

“Did your idea turn into anything good?” she asked, during breakfast.

“That’s for you to say. I’ll tell you while I work; it’s a story, and I think you’ll be interested, whether it’s any use or not. I must do a certain amount of tidying, as Michelle isn’t here to take care of me.”

“I had Michelle’s bed. I shall do her chores, while you go off to your caves,” Margery said firmly. “I needn’t go home till the afternoon; the girl next door is feeding Pouffe. I shall clean your house and leave everything tidy. Do tell me the story!”

“I’ll love you for ever! I’m not keen on dusting. Here you are, then; the story of Rainbows! Three years ago I lived in London in a big hostel; Daphne was there too—you’ve heard about Daphne, my sister who dances in the ballet?”

Margery nodded. “I’d love to see her.”

"She's working very hard. There was a girl in the hostel called Doranne Hardie. Not Doreen—Doranne; she was called for her Aunt Dora Anne. The old lady died and left Doranne a huge estate and a great mansion called Rainbows, and any amount of money. It was a blow to her; she was an ordinary girl, like you or me, and she'd had no preparation for great wealth; she hadn't known her aunt had money. At first she wanted to run away and shirk the responsibility, but presently she began to make plans, and Daphne says she's carrying them out marvellously. The big house has been turned into a centre for all sorts of jolly things, and she's building a village in the park, for people who want the country and can't find small nice houses to live in. Now, Polly Paine, why shouldn't you start the 'Nance and Polly' in the new village, and be part of Doranne's adventure?"

Margery gazed at her hungrily. "How I'd love it! There are sure to be children. Does she have shops?"

"I don't see how they can get on without some shops. You could sell small toys, and books for tinies, and pencils and beads, as well as sweets."

"But I haven't enough capital to start a new business." Margery's face fell. "I wish—no, I don't! I'm glad I helped Aunty Peg!" she said defiantly. "But all the same it would have been possible to buy a little place with eight hundred pounds. With four hundred I can't do it."

"You can rent, dear idiot."

Margery knit her brows. "I hate paying rent. I want to feel my house is my own. You aren't secure if you only rent; the owner can refuse to renew the lease. I've known cases where that happened. Then you're turned out, and you've lost all you paid in rent. I feel so terribly alone; I can't risk being homeless, with nobody to help or advise me."

"Doranne Hardie wouldn't do that. She's married now, by the way; she's Doranne Dering. But I know what you mean. You feel safer if the house is your own. I've always been thankful Aunty bought this place and left it to me. But there's a plan by which what you pay in rent, goes towards the price of the house, and in time it becomes yours; that wouldn't be so bad. You'd feel you were buying it gradually, instead of all at once. Will you keep the name, now that Nancybell has gone? Or will it be just 'Polly's'?"

"I'll keep the name. If anybody asks I'll say Nance is married but Polly's still there. But I haven't found my shop yet. Tell me more about this village! Where is it? Is anybody allowed to go and live there?"

"I believe it's at the north end of Sussex, not so very far from London, but in the heart of the country. No, not just anybody; Doranne—but I ought to call her Mrs. Dering!—is very keen to have the right people; those who really want a country life, or who need a home and can't find one. You're exactly the kind she wants."

"I'd have to ask her," Margery said doubtfully. "I like the sound of it tremendously, but I can't take it for granted she'd have me. Could you ask Daphne to find out for me?"

"I could, but I don't advise it. Daphne will promise and then forget all about you for weeks. They're working on a new ballet and she can think of nothing else. She'd mean to help, but you'd be shoved into the background. But I know Doranne too; she won't have forgotten me. I shall write and tell her about you, and ask if she thinks her Selection Committee will accept you. I'm not in the least doubtful, but we may as well do things properly."

"Oh, would you?" Margery cried joyfully. "That would be far better than asking Daphne!"

"Much better. If you'll really tidy my house, so that I won't have to work at night, I'll write the letter this evening. How long can you stay?"

"I'd like to get a bus after tea. I can't leave Pouffy alone for another night."

"No, poor dear. Right! If I have luck and a quiet time, I'll rush up for a meal about one; I'm usually able to snatch an hour. If there are tourists on the island they want to have a picnic; I close the caves and come home for a hurried lunch."

"I'll have it ready for you. I've seen where you keep things."

Elsa nodded, took up her oars and strode off, a businesslike figure in her blue slacks and jersey, bareheaded to the wind. Margery watched her as she met Billy by the ferry and Mor danced barking about them. Then she turned to put the house in order, with an occasional friendly word to Min, basking on the window-sill. While she worked, her thoughts were busy; with the old happy days in the "Nance and Polly" in Priorsbury, with the new village of Elsa's story and her hopes for the future—and even a little with Gilbert Seymour and his big house at Summerton.

In a burst of confidence she spoke again of the matter to Elsa, as they lunched together outside the porch, where Elsa had placed a table so that she could keep one eye on the ferry.

"Do you think I'm mad to turn Gilbert down, Elsa?"

"Not if you don't love him," Elsa said matter-of-factly. "It's the only thing you can do."

"Some people could think they loved him, when he has an estate and a title."

"But not you, Polly Paine."

"Thanks," Margery said gravely. "But I can see that it's tempting. I should be frightened at first, but I'd get used to being Lady Seymour of Summerton."

"Oh, easily! He'd help you. You'd have a lovely home and no more worries—about money and the future, I mean."

Margery shot a look at her. "But there would be other worries. Gilbert's thrown in; I'd have to put up with him always."

Elsa's laugh rang out. "Polly Paine, don't think of it again—ever! If that's how you feel about poor Sir Gilbert, you can't possibly marry him. Don't worry, he'll find somebody else; heaps of people."

"Perhaps—in time. But I'm afraid he's rather keen at the moment," Margery confessed.

"He'll get over it. You can't marry him if you feel, even at this stage, that he'd be a burden on your whole life."

"I've sometimes thought I could make myself like him."

"Don't try!" Elsa said sharply. "It wouldn't last. He's not the man for you. It wouldn't be sensible, Polly Paine," she added more gently. "He and you have lived in such different worlds; your points of view would clash all the time. You'd need a lot of love to make it bearable."

Margery's sober face brightened. "That's what I feel. He, with Oxford and his public-school education, and his friends and neighbours all over the county, and his ancestors and his estate—and I with my little sweet-shop in a small street in a country town! He'll say it doesn't matter, and that anybody can marry anyone in these days, but I think it matters, in the difference in our outlook and the way we've been brought up."

"I'm sure you're right. You'd look at everything differently, and it would be a tremendous strain on the love you started out with. It might break down altogether."

"And if there wasn't any love to start with?" Margery asked defiantly.

"Impossible, of course. Don't consider it for a moment. If I were you I'd do something much more drastic than just trying to disappear. He'll find you and he'll try to talk you round. Couldn't you have it out with him?"

“How can I? I can’t ’phone him, ‘Come and propose to me, so that I can refuse you!’” Margery urged.

“No, you can’t quite do that,” Elsa admitted. “But you could talk to his sister. She’d pass it on to him. Tell her you’re going away; she’ll put up a howl about Gilbert, and then you can be definite. I *am* glad you’re turning him down! It makes your adventure so much more real.”

“How do you mean?” Margery frowned.

“It would be only half an adventure if you knew it was just for a time, and that presently you’d marry and leave your new ‘Nance and Polly’. It really wouldn’t matter very much where you went, or what sort of place you found. But if it’s going to last, it matters enormously.”

“It does!” Margery was emphatic.

“You’re like somebody starting on a race and throwing off your coat and anything that would hold you back—your aunt, and Sir Gilbert. You’ll get rid of them and go straight ahead. Oh, Margery, it’s a lovely adventure! Nothing at all to drag you down!”

Margery laughed. “That’s one way to look at it! Nothing before me, either; everything vague.”

“That’s how it was with me when I came here. I didn’t know about the ferry; I hadn’t found the caves. It was a real plunge into the dark; I had my house, and I was going to weed gardens and mind children and do odd jobs to earn a living.”

“You’ve done better than that. You’ve built up a jolly little business.”

“And so will you. I’m as much thrilled about your new start as I was about my own. I love people who go out to make their fortunes! Especially when they’ve cut themselves adrift from everything, as you’re doing.”

“I’d made up my mind to do it,” Margery observed, “but I wasn’t particularly thrilled about it. I was a little frightened and lonely. You’re making me look at it in a new way.”

“Oh, you must be thrilled too! You must adventure gaily; go out singing to meet the world.”

“I wonder if I could! I didn’t feel much like singing when I came here.”

“You only needed to talk it over with somebody. Don’t keep everything bottled up; it isn’t good for anyone. You’ll find lovely friends in Doranne’s new village. I’d envy you if I wasn’t so keen on my own job. But get rid of Sir Gilbert once and for all, Polly Paine!”

Margery changed the subject abruptly. “Tell me more about Daphne. I wish I could have seen her when she danced in Sandylands, but Mother was ill and I couldn’t leave her. Does Daphne never come home for holidays?”

“She has a day now and then. Before they began on this new ballet Madame—Daphne’s teacher—said they must take a few days off, to get freshened up. Daphne had a great treat; she told me about it when she came for a week-end. She doesn’t really care about being here; she’s bored stiff in no time. She wants a lot going on, and there’s nothing here to interest her.”

“What was the great treat?”

“On their first free day, before she came here, her friend, Mary Damayris, whom she understudies, invited her to go for a day to Kentisbury Castle in Sussex. She knows Lady Kentisbury; she once lived in the Kentisbury town house, with the housekeeper, and she’s often been to the Castle. A car fetched them, and they spent a whole day seeing the State Apartments and the park and the gardens and the lake. Daphne says it’s a simply marvellous place.”

“What a lovely time they’d have! Did they see Lady Kentisbury?”

“No, she was away with her husband, in Scotland. But they saw the children; two little boys, and twin baby girls, called Lady Rosabel and Lady Rosalin.”

“What pretty names!” Margery exclaimed.

“Old family names,” Daphne said. “All the girls have Rose as part of their names; it may be Rosemary or Rosalind or Rhoda, or it may be used with some other name, like Rose Margery, or Elsa Rose! But there has to be Rose in all the names.”

“What an odd idea! What do they call the boys?”

“Geoffrey. The heir is Geoffrey-Hugh. Daphne says they’re lovely children, very fair, with blue eyes, all very much alike. The Kentisburys were second cousins, so the family likeness on both sides comes out in the children. Daphne enjoyed the day enormously. I’m afraid Min-y-mor”—Elsa glanced round at her little house—“and the sands and the island seemed very tame after Kentisbury Castle! However, a day or two’s rest did her good, and she went back to town very keen to get on with the new work. But I must go across to my caves,” and she stood up. “If I’m rushed I won’t be able to come for tea, so slip off when it’s time for your bus. Give my love to the Pouffe! I’ll write to Doranne Dering to-night.”

“Thanks for all you’ve done,” Margery said fervently. “Not only for the idea of Rainbows and the letter, but for telling me I’ve done right to help Aunty Peg. I feel good about it now.”

Elsa nodded. “You’re off on an adventure, with the world before you, and you’ve made the best kind of start, by leaving nothing behind you to regret. I hope you’ll go to Rainbows. I’ll ring you up the moment I hear from Doranne. And I shall call you Margery Whittington, because you and your Pouffe are setting out together to conquer the world. Good luck, Polly Paine!”

CHAPTER THREE

A WELCOME FROM DORANNE

“Your creature has missed you,” said the girl next door, as she handed over the key of the “Nance and Polly”. “I put him out for his walk and he was quite good and came back, but then he looked for you everywhere. As he didn’t find you, he curled up and went to sleep, to wait for you.”

Margery thanked her and went to her own side door. “Poor Pouffy! Changes before him too. But he’s very placid; if Nancybell will have him he’ll be all right.”

She went to the back room, where the great brown-and-white monster lay curled up in a big chair, his plume of a tail covering his nose. His ears were cocked, however, for he had heard the key in the lock. If it was only that next-door person there was no need to show any excitement; but there was always the chance that it might be the one-and-only lady, who was his special property.

At sound of her step he raised his face, still large, though no longer framed in its winter ruff, and gazed at her sleepily over his shoulder. Then in one wild leap he rushed to her, singing his heart out in joy, and rubbing on her legs.

“Oh, darlint!” Margery took him in her arms and staggered to the chair, and dropped herself and him into it. “Dear, it needs two people to lift you! Pleased to see me, Pouffy? Was it a very long time?”

“A terrible long time, lady, but it’s all right now,” the Pouffe sang loudly. “And what about supper?”

Margery put her head down on his. “A lovely welcome to a lonely lady, my dear. Oh, Pouffy love, we’re all alone and the whole world is waiting for us. Elsa says it’s an adventure, but it’s a bit alarming. I wish you could talk about it, boy.”

The Pouffe was talking rapturously about something else as he snuggled up to her. “Let’s celebrate! Fish—milk—lady home again!”

Margery laughed. “You want your supper. You shall have it, lad. Can you smell Black Min?” as he began to sniff her hands.

“Mistress, you’ve been stroking somebody—not me. Who was it?” The Pouffe sniffed again and looked up at her reproachfully.

“A very nice pussy, but not like you in the least. It would need six Mins to make one Pouffe.” Margery supplied his wants and then attended to her own.

She thought much during the next few days about Elsa’s suggestion, and began to hope for news long before any was likely to come. She would hardly leave the house for fear of missing a ’phone call, but there was much to do and she kept hard at work while she waited. Her next home might not be found, but this one had to be broken up, and she was busy turning out drawers and cupboards, and packing for the removal which was inevitable, whatever might be her destination. The Pouffe watched her activities with interest, but he could see no sense in them, so he curled up in his chair and slept, and she thought ruefully how pleasant it would have been to have a companion who could talk and be some help and comfort.

She was tearing up old letters when the ’phone rang at last. The scraps of paper flew over the room as she sprang to answer the call.

“Yes? Margery speaking.”

“This is Elsa. All’s well, Polly Paine. I’ve posted on a letter from Doranne to you. She says you sound just right and she’ll love to have you at Rainbows. But you’re to see the place before you decide, as she’d hate you to be disappointed.”

“I’m not likely to be disappointed. I’ve been thinking about her village ever since you told me, and it gets nicer all the time.”

“You’re to go and see it before you make up your mind; she tells you in her letter how to find the place. She also says she’s a forlorn widow, so she understands how you are feeling in losing your pal. Her husband has been sent to America for a month or two, on business for his aircraft firm; she couldn’t go with him because she has so much to do at Rainbows. She’s getting all the doings properly started.”

“How good of her to stick to it and let him go without her!”

“She says it’s her job and she mustn’t throw it over. Later on, when things are running smoothly, she might be able to leave, but not when it’s all so new. Good luck! I know it’s going to be a success and an enormous thrill.”

“Thrill, indeed!” Margery said, as she put down the receiver. “Do you hear, Pouffe? You’re going to have a new home. I hope Mrs. Dering likes cats! What if she won’t have them in her village? That’s a terrible thought! I must ask her as soon as I see her!”

The letter which came next morning more than satisfied her in its friendliness. Doranne wrote:

Dear Margery Paine,

I am asking Elsa Dale to send this on, as she did not give me your address. I am so glad she told me about you. A children’s meeting-place is just what we need, and I’m sure your shop will be a charming centre for them. We have quite a number of babes already and there are more in the old village, a mile away.

But you must see us before you decide. You may not like us, and you might not care to say so or to run away! If you take a train to Reading, and change into one for Dorking, you’ll find buses which will bring you right to Rainbows. Let me know which day to expect you; Tuesday would suit me, if it would do for you. The train reaching Dorking at three is a good one, if that is convenient for you.

I’m looking forward to showing you my enormous inheritance. I was terribly afraid of it at first, but it isn’t quite so frightening now. I hope you’ll come to help us build our community, which is still in its infancy. We want the right people to lay the foundations, and I feel sure you will be one of them.

Looking forward very much to seeing you,

Yours sincerely,

Doranne Dering.

PS. You will need to stay a night or two, so I will make arrangements. One of my fiddlers, Virginia Rose, will put you up. She has three sisters, so they are a jolly crowd. I’m sure you’ll soon make friends.

“What a lovely letter!” Margery laid it down and addressed the Pouffe. “She manages to make it sound as if I’m going to help her, not she to help me! What a wonderful way to look at it! She must be both kind and nice. I wonder if I could help, even a tiny scrap! Could I add something to her village? That’s what she means. A children’s centre! I’d merely thought of a new ‘Nance and Polly’; an ordinary little sweet-shop. But the kiddies here have been hanging

round; perhaps if I encouraged them they'd use the shop as a sort of club. If I had an extra room"—and she began to see visions—"I might keep it for them, with small chairs and tables and a few picture-books and magazines. It would be great sport! I shall ask Mrs. Dering as soon as I see her—after I've found out about my Pouffe! He's all I have; he must come first. I'm fascinated by the idea of a children's club!" And she laughed as she remembered shrill voices heard outside her shop-window: "Meet me at the 'Nansanpol'!" "Race you to the 'Nansanpol'!" "I got a penny for the 'Polly'." "Billy's coming to the 'Nance' to look for us."

"The 'Nance and Polly' club was beginning here, and I never understood. I must make it a real thing," and, singing under her breath, she cleared away her breakfast dishes and went to the sink.

"Elsa said I must go forward singing. I feel more like it now. There really seems to be an adventure before me. There are several interesting things in that letter. 'One of my fiddlers'! What does she mean? What a lovely name for the fiddler who's going to put me up—Virginia Rose! I suppose Rose is a surname sometimes. I wonder what the sisters are called? They'll need to have pretty names, if they're to live up to Virginia Rose! Oh, Pouffy dear, I've asked you not to do that! Dozens of times I've put you down! You'll be as wet as wet."

The Pouffe, afraid of losing her again, had jumped on the drip-board beside the sink and was gazing at her benevolently, his shaggy fleece trailing in the damp, while he sang happily.

"You're not the least help. In fact, you're very much in the way," Margery said severely. "I know you think you're encouraging me, but I could do without you quite well at the moment."

She was not hard-hearted enough to move him, however, so he sat among the plates and cups, making the small available space much smaller, and she arranged things round him and left him undisturbed.

Her mind was busy as she worked, and under the influence of her new eager attitude to the future she suddenly flung her tea-cloth over the Pouffe's big head and ran to the telephone, leaving him to struggle out as best he could, in great disgust.

"Elsa was right. I'd better be rid of Gilbert for good and all. If I haven't been definite I'll feel he's dragging at me. I'd far rather go to this fascinating new place and plunge into adventures than be engaged to him and know I'm going to spend my whole life at Summerton! I've just realized it."

She had, indeed, grasped the contrast between the two ways that faced her. She believed that she could bring Gilbert to a decision quickly; his interest in her had been marked during the last few months, much more so than she had confessed to Elsa, but the thought of giving up the opening way before her just for Gilbert Seymour did not appeal to her at all. She knew what that meant; he, and his big house and his title, seemed a very poor second-best. Obviously she did not care enough for him, and there was only one thing to be done.

She rang up Summerton and asked for his young sister, Annamaria.

Mya's voice came joyfully in reply. "Polly Paine! How nice of you to ring! You're just in time. I go back to school to-morrow."

"I rather thought so. Could you come to tea with me to-day? Or are you terrifically busy?"

"We-ell! I ought not to, but perhaps I could do it. I couldn't stay long."

"I shan't be here next holidays. I'm moving."

"What?" Mya screamed.

"Moving. Going away, Anne-Marie."

"But what about the 'Nance and Polly'?"

"Shutting up shop."

“Polly Paine! Tell me what you mean!”

“This afternoon. That’s why I want you to come.”

“Oh, I will! But can’t you tell me now?”

“Not possible. Good-bye!” And Margery rang off.

“I hope she doesn’t bring Gilbert with her. But I don’t believe he’s at home,” and she picked up the towel which the Pouffe had flung angrily on the floor.

Then she groaned. “Oh, you bad child! Now you’ll need to be dried!” For he was sitting in the sink, looking reproachfully at her over the high side.

Margery hauled him out, found his own special towel, and rubbed his long under-hair and tail. “Naughty boy! You wanted to annoy me. Well, you did it. Now go away and let me tidy this kitchen! I can’t do it with you about.”

“You are moving!” Mya cried, as she hurled herself into the small back sitting-room that afternoon. She was seventeen, but was young for her age; at seventeen Margery and Nancybell had been growing into capable, if inexperienced, business women. Like her brother, the baronet, Mya was very dark, taking after an Italian mother; their cousin, Nancybell, with light brown hair and blue eyes, was a true Seymour, and to Mya’s mind it was the greatest mistake that she had married her farmer friend, Robin, instead of yielding to Gilbert’s first fancy and marrying back into her family. It had been a bitter disappointment to Mya, but when Gilbert had begun to turn towards Margery she had been comforted, for she was very fond of Polly Paine.

The room was littered with signs of packing, but the table was laid for tea and the big chair by the fire held only the Pouffe, curled into a huge ball.

Mya plumped herself in the chair and lugged him into her lap. “Tell me what this means!” she commanded.

Margery brought the tea-pot, and pushed a plate of scones towards her guest. “I know you can’t spare long. Shall I take tea out to Mr. Martin?”

“No, he’s running the car round to the hotel. He’ll see to his own tea. Tell me, Polly Paine!”

Margery told how her shop had been wrested from her and how she meant to make a fresh start in a new place.

“But why?” Mya wailed. “Why not find another shop here, where everybody knows you?”

“I want a change. I’ve always lived here.”

Mya gazed at her with sharp black eyes. “But what about Gilbert?”

Margery’s colour rose, but she faced her steadily. “What has it to do with him?”

“Everything. Don’t pretend!” Mya said indignantly. “You know jolly well what Gilbert wants. Are you trying to get away from him?”

“Yes,” Margery said simply.

“Do you mean that—that you won’t——?”

“Not ever. I can’t tell him, because he hasn’t asked me, but you can do it for me. I want him to stop wasting his time.”

“Don’t you like him?” Mya urged.

“Not very much. Not enough to put up with him always.”

“Oh—Margery! I wanted you at Summertown. I’ve always wanted a sister; I thought you’d do splendidly.”

Margery laughed. “Sorry if I sound heartless, but you are such a kid, Anne-Marie; and Gilbert’s another. I don’t marry to be a sister-in-law.”

“Gilbert thinks you’d do splendidly too. He really is in earnest, Polly Paine.”

“Is he—this time? I don’t marry just because I’d ‘do splendidly’, either. That isn’t the real thing, Mya dear. Gilbert will grow up some day, and when he meets the right girl he won’t say she’ll do splendidly. He’ll know he can’t live without her. I’m not going to marry him, now or ever. You’d better tell him.”

“You can tell him yourself!” Mya raged.

“I can, but it won’t be pleasant for either of us. It will be much easier for him, if you’ll tell him to stop being silly.”

“He won’t believe it from me. Polly Paine, wouldn’t you like to live at Summerton and feel it was yours?”

“Not if it meant I had to be Gilbert’s.”

Mya groaned. “I should have thought anybody would like it better than a poky little shop.”

“Perhaps the new place won’t be poky,” Margery said cheerfully. “This is an old house; a very old house! I know it’s dark and gloomy. The new ‘Nance and Polly’ may be a lovely place.”

“Where are you going?” Mya demanded.

“I don’t know for certain. It’s still vague.”

“Do you mean you’re going to disappear?”

“That’s the idea, Annamaria.”

“Gilbert will find out. He’ll come after you.”

“He’ll waste his time. Have some more tea?”

“No, thanks; I’m going home to write to him. I loathe you, Polly Paine. I’m as mad as I can be.”

Margery smiled at her kindly. “If you write to Gilbert, give him my message. And don’t bounce about in rage like that; you’ll make Pouffy seasick, and then you’ll be sorry for yourself. He’s not used to switchbacks.”

Mya lifted the Pouffe with great care and put him into the chair. “I’ll go to meet Martin. I shouldn’t wonder if I’m ill in the car going home, because you’ve given me such a shock. It’s quite spoiled my tea.”

“I thought you’d grown out of that trouble.”

“I thought so too. But I’m sure I haven’t digested those scones.”

“Don’t blame the scones! I made them on purpose, when I heard you were coming. I know they’re good.”

“They may be, but I feel sick,” Mya proclaimed bitterly. “Won’t you think better of it, Polly Paine?”

“I can’t, Mya. Put it—put me—right out of your head.”

“But I *like* you!” Mya wailed. “And so does Gilbert!”

“Oh yes! And I like both of you. But that isn’t enough.”

Mya shot a look at her and saw that words were useless at present. “Oh well! Perhaps you’ll change your mind. Good-bye! I’ll write to Gilbert. Good-bye, Pouffe! I like you, anyway!”

Margery went with her to the door. “Shall I see you into the car?”

“No, thanks. Won’t you tell me where you’re going?”

“I haven’t decided. Truly, Mya, I’ve ideas, but nothing is fixed.”

“We’ll find you. You can’t expect to disappear.”

“I’ll try to find a nice girl for Gilbert, shall I?”

Annamaria flung away from her and stalked up the street, and Margery turned back to her little dark room to go on with her work.

“How silly some people can be, Pouffy!” she sighed.

The Pouffe snuggled down and wrapped his tail over his nose and snored gently, and Margery sighed again.

“You mean well, darlint, but you aren’t much comfort! But I know you do your best,” and she touched his big soft head as she passed him.

CHAPTER FOUR

MARGERY MEETS TWIN ROSES

Margery sat waiting for the bus to start. Her journey had been easy, thanks to Doranne's directions, but she had been keenly conscious of her inexperience. She had never been farther from home than Bristol, so a real adventure had begun for her when she changed into the train for Reading and then once more for Dorking.

"I should have felt a country cousin if I'd married Gilbert!" she said to herself.

She identified the bus and found her favourite seat empty—in front but not behind the driver. "I always feel it's my private car when I sit here," she thought, and prepared to enjoy the run through new country, which seemed likely to be hilly and wooded and much more beautiful than the marshes and long rhines and polled willows around Priorsbury.

The bus was just starting when a shout and the sound of flying feet made the conductor pull up again.

"Almost too late," he grumbled. And then—"Gosh! Any more of you?"

"No, only two," a clear voice assured him. "Thanks for waiting. Jolly decent of you!"

Two tall girls, laden with parcels, wriggled their way up the aisle and dropped into the front seat behind the driver, with, Margery was sure, a resentful look in her direction.

"They evidently like it as much as I do. But they can't expect it to be kept for them! They only just caught the bus. Oh, how odd! They must be twins; they're exactly alike. No wonder the man asked if there were any more coming!" Margery thought, much amused, as she shot a look at her fellow-travellers.

They seemed about her own age, with bare black heads of short hair, flung about by the wind, and very dark eyes; they wore long blue slacks, like Elsa's, and white blouses. One dumped her shopping-bag on the floor, took out a comb, and began to smooth her wild curls. She produced a scarlet scarf and tied it over her hair, twisting it round into a turban.

"Better repair damages, Mandy," she said. "You look a perfect fright. Put on your gipsy headgear, girl."

There was a fascinating touch of accent in her oddly soft voice. Margery, unable to help hearing and not attempting or wishing to try, wondered if her sister would have it too and where they came from. What was the odd name? Mandy? What could it mean?

"I guess that's right, Minty," said the other girl, in the same drawl and the same accent, and she pulled out an emerald kerchief and tied up her head also.

Much intrigued, Margery forgot to look at Dorking and its surrounding country. Minty? Mandy? Were they foreigners? Their talk seemed English enough, except for that fascinating touch of accent.

"That nice?" asked Mandy, eyeing her head in a tiny mirror. "You do keep your big sister in order, don't you?"

"Not too bad. Somebody has to look after you. You'd go about looking like a Hottentot."

"Oh, not a Hottentot!" Mandy grinned. "Two to Rainbows, please," to the conductor.

Margery's eyes gleamed, but she gazed steadily at the road ahead.

"Old or new?" asked the man. "A penny more to the old village."

"Do we look like the old village?" Minty threw a teasing glance over her shoulder at him.

He laughed good-humouredly. “New, I guess. Here you are. I haven’t been on this route before.”

“I thought it was odd you didn’t know us,” Mandy remarked.

“Rainbows, please; the new village,” Margery said shyly, as he turned to her. “Will you tell me when I get there?”

She was conscious of two pairs of dark eyes gazing at her.

“We’ll tell her,” Mandy addressed the man. “We’ll all be getting out together.”

As he went back down the bus, Margery looked across at the other seat. “Thank you very much. I don’t know where I am at all.”

“Long way to go yet,” said Mandy, and turned to her sister. “We must look after the revolting female, Minty. She’ll be irretrievably lost if we leave her to wander about by herself.”

“Mandy, you’re rude.” Minty leant across her and addressed Margery, who was gazing at them with astonished eyes and flushed cheeks. “I apologize for the child. It’s only that she wanted your seat; she likes to look out of the window. She doesn’t mean any harm. She’s a revolting woman herself.”

Margery broke into helpless laughter, while the twins surveyed her gravely, but with dancing eyes.

“I think we’re introduced!” she gasped. “And I won’t give up my seat. Please tell me—are you twins? What do your names mean? I couldn’t help hearing.”

“Are you, by any stroke of luck, Margery Paine?” asked Mandy.

“How did you know? I am, but nice people call me Polly Paine.”

“We’re extremely nice people, in spite of Mandy’s manners,” Minty said promptly. “We heard you were coming. Matter of fact——”

“Don’t tell her, Minty,” Mandy commanded.

Minty raised her black brows. “O.K.! Yes, we are twins; I wonder how you guessed?” Her grin was friendly. “You don’t mean to say we’re alike? Am I like *that*?”

“Hard on me,” Mandy grumbled.

Margery’s eyes were laughing at them. “If you didn’t wear different-coloured scarves I wouldn’t know you apart.”

“We’ll mix ’em to-morrow,” Minty threatened. “This child’s older than I am, but only by a few minutes. I don’t allow her to presume on it. We’re eighteen.”

“So am I. And your odd names? Do please tell me.”

Minty pointed at her sister’s chest. “Amanda Rose; Mandy for short.” She pointed at herself. “Araminta Rose; Minty for short.”

“Amanda and Araminta? Gosh!” said Margery. “Where did you find names like those?”

“We didn’t. It was our mother,” said Mandy.

“Our dad was English, but he settled in Virginia, in the southern States, you know.” Minty’s explanation tumbled out. “He called the first of us Virginia, after the State—oh, you’ve heard of Ginny?”

“Mrs. Dering spoke of her and said she had sisters. I’d guessed you must be the sisters,” Margery laughed. “I’m going to stay with you, if you’ll have me. But Mrs. Dering said Virginia Rose, not Ginny.”

“I bet she didn’t say Ginny!” Mandy grinned. “We’re not supposed to, for outsiders. You needn’t tell Virginia.”

“And don’t tell her Mandy called you a revolting female. She wanted your seat, you know.”

“I won’t tell, of course. Will your sister have me to stay with you?”

“Oh yes! We knew you were coming. That was what Mandy said I wasn’t to tell you. But you’d soon have known. But I was telling you about things. Dad named Virginia; he hoped we’d be a boy, but when two more girls turned up, he said Mother could choose the names. She was a Virginian, and she gave us old Southern names. Amanda and Araminta were her aunts.”

“Dad called us Rose, of course,” Mandy added.

Margery stared. “I suppose so. You had to have a surname.”

“Ass!” said Minty sharply.

To Margery’s surprise Mandy reddened. “Sorry, I am an ass,” she said humbly.

Minty turned to Margery and hurried on with her explanation. “There’s one more of us—the kid. She’s sixteen. She was another blow to Dad; he gave up hope of a boy after Nanta came. Mother called her Atalanta, but that was too much for us when we were infants, so we turned her into Nanta, and she’s been Nanta ever since.”

“Amanda—Araminta—Atalanta,” Margery marvelled. “What a family! But I suppose you can be thankful you didn’t have Arethusa as well. Is Nanta like you?”

“No, she’s English—like Dad; we take after Mother. Virginia and Nanta are fair. And they’re musical—we aren’t.”

“Mrs. Dering called your eldest sister ‘one of my fiddlers’. Does Atalanta play the fiddle too?”

“That’s the idea. It’s her heart’s desire to get into the orchestra, and she won’t be happy till she’s there.”

“Mrs. Dering’s orchestra,” Mandy added. “She has a little one and they give concerts. Virginia’s first violin, unless Mrs. Dering plays herself; she usually conducts.”

“They have a second violin, of course, and Nanta hates her like poison, because she wants her place. I believe she prays that the girl will have pneumonia or be run over by a bus.”

“More likely a plane will fall on her,” Minty commented. “They’re over us all day long. Did you know we’ve an aerodrome at Rainbows, Polly Paine? I hope you don’t mind planes. They’re coming in and going out all day and night. They make a terrific row.”

“Why are you called Polly?” Mandy asked. “It isn’t short for Margery?”

“No, for Mary. Mother was Mary, but she was always called Polly. When I went to school the girls called me Marzipan, because Mother had a sweet-shop—Margery Paine; Marzipan. I got tired of it, so I put them on to Mother’s name, and they soon called me Polly Paine. Where is the aerodrome?”

“Beyond the old village, which is a mile farther on than the new one.”

“Is Rainbows Village nice?”

“Might be worse, might be better, like most places,” Minty said.

“You don’t sound very enthusiastic,” Margery remarked.

“It’s not too bad. Are you really going to have a tuck-shop? It’s needed frightfully badly.”

“You’ll do heaps of business,” Mandy grinned.

“Are there many children in the village?”

“Quite a lot. They go to school in the old village near the church. They’ll tell the rest about you and they’ll swarm round.”

“It sounds good, for me,” Margery said happily.

“There’s Rainbows.” The twins spoke together. “That huge place on the hill. The village is round the corner. Will you come home with us? Or will you go up to the house?”

Margery’s eyes fixed eagerly on the white mansion perched on a green hill. “What an enormous place! Doesn’t Mrs. Dering feel lost in it?”

“Oh, she doesn’t live in the whole of it,” Minty told her. “Look here, we must get out or we’ll go too far. Get up, girl!” to her sister. “He’s forgotten all about us.”

“No, he hasn’t. There’s the bell; he’s stopping. Don’t be fussy, little one. Have you packs of luggage, Polly Paine?”

Margery picked up her case and followed them from the bus. “This is all. I’ve only come for one night.”

“Look out, Man!” Minty shrieked, as they stepped from the bus and Amanda turned to cross the road behind it.

A motor-cycle and sidecar rushed down upon them and swept past, hooting a warning; its rider, in old overalls and goggles, was hatless, his fair hair tossing wildly in the wind. He swerved from the road into a lane and disappeared, giving noisy notice of his coming.

“Were you addressing me or him, Araminta?” Mandy drawled.

“You, you ass. What use would it be screaming at him? We call him the Wild Man of the Woods,” Minty said to Margery. “He lives in a hut on a very woody bit of the estate. His name’s David Woodburn, and he’s been making eyes at Virginia.”

“He did once, but he’s stopped. He looks through her now if they meet,” Mandy said. “It wasn’t ever serious, even on his part, and she hadn’t any use for Wild Men.”

“Why does he live alone?”

“Oh, birds!” Minty said vaguely. “He feeds them and protects them and draws them and photographs them.”

“We can’t stay parked here for ever. What will you do?” Mandy asked, as they stood by the roadside. “This lane leads to the village. For the house you climb up that road. We’re going home; shall we take your case and dump it for you?”

“Don’t be mad, woman!” Minty said scornfully. “She’s got all her worldly wealth in that bag. Is it likely she’s going to hand it over to you, when she’s only known you for ten minutes? And you started by calling her a revolting female. I ask you, is it likely?”

“She’ll trust us. She knows I didn’t mean it.” Mandy gave Margery a flashing smile, showing beautiful teeth.

“Oh, I will! If I’m to climb that hill I’d be terribly grateful if you’d take the case,” Margery cried, laughing. “I must go to see Mrs. Dering first. Will she be at the house?”

“Sure. You’ll find her dancing.”

“Dancing?” Margery’s eyes widened.

“In Ginny’s class; unless she’s playing for them. Virginia teaches and plays, but Mrs. Dering sometimes plays to make it easier for her.”

“But dancing? At half-past three on a Tuesday afternoon?”

“Why not? Oh, you don’t know Rainbows! Run along and get introduced.”

“Will you really trust us with your bag?” Mandy gave her another smile.

Margery thrust it towards her. “Thanks very much. I must find out all about this.”

“You’ll be seeing us,” the twins responded, and turned and strode off down the lane, Minty carrying the case.

Much intrigued, Margery turned to the white road that climbed the hill to Rainbows.

CHAPTER FIVE

VIRGINIA, AND ANOTHER LITTLE ROSE

“So I’m to find Mrs. Dering dancing! What did those twins mean?” Margery pondered, as she toiled up the hill. “I’ve a terrible picture of her doing an Irish jig or a ballet dance on her lawn. Mandy might have said a little more! Was she pulling my leg? But she said something about Virginia teaching a class—and I can hear music,” and she paused.

The thin sweet notes of a fiddle came from beyond a screen of birch-trees below the house. A footpath led through the thicket, and Margery followed it, drawn by that lilting tune and her great curiosity. Then she stood gazing, eager and delighted.

The great house stood before her. Below a terrace was a level lawn, with banks of rhododendrons and azaleas in flower, enclosing it like walls.

Two lines of people were dancing, and Margery remembered country-dances learned at school—“Haste to the Wedding” and “Speed the Plough”.

“Country-dancing! But these aren’t children? Is it the whole village? I can’t see any kiddies—yes, there’s one schoolgirl, with yellow plaits. But all the rest are grown-up. I didn’t know grown-ups cared about it. Is that Virginia Rose? She seems to be the teacher.”

A tall girl, with yellow hair rolled up on her neck, wearing blue, was certainly teaching. Her voice rang out, as she called the movements: “Corners set, fall back, and turn; use both hands! Ones lead down the middle and back, and cast. Four claps and change places—both hands again; now the ring—and clap and change back to your own side. That’s not too bad. Carry on.”

Margery could follow what was happening. She saw the familiar lead down and heard the four brisk claps, and there was no mistaking the jolly, but slightly riotous, ring. “I believe I could join in. It looks rather fun. I like Virginia; her directions are very clear. How beautifully she moves! She’s very graceful. Living in Rainbows is going to be sport. But which is Mrs. Dering? The twins said she might be playing.” And her eyes went to the violinist, who was giving just the right lilt to the little tune.

She was a girl of perhaps twenty-four, dressed in green, bareheaded, with brown curls and deep brown eyes which followed every movement of the dancers.

“She’s younger than I expected,” Margery said to herself. “If that is Mrs. Dering! It must be a big job to run a place like this. She’s seen me—and they’re stopping.”

Doranne Dering said a word to the teacher, who called “last time”, and the panting dancers dropped on rugs spread near the bushes, and fanned themselves. Doranne handed the fiddle to Virginia Rose.

“When they’ve rested, couldn’t we have a few more turns, to let me join in? You won’t need to call; they ought to know it now, and I think I can scrape through. I’ve watched them carefully.”

“You’ll be all right, if you have a partner who knows it.” Virginia took the violin.

“I may have a partner who knows nothing about it. I fancy we have a new recruit,” and Doranne crossed the lawn. “Is it Margery? I am so glad to see you. You want to join in, don’t you? I saw your wistful face, and you were keeping time to the music. Are you a dancer?”

“Only at school, a very little,” Margery admitted. “But it looked great fun.”

“You must try with me, when we start again. I’ve never done this one; Virginia has only just taught it. It’s called ‘The Comical Fellow’. She went to classes in London, so she knows the dances thoroughly and a great many of them. She’s immensely valuable to us, for her music is first-class. She’s going to put you up for the night—Virginia!”

“How do you do, Miss Paine.” Virginia’s voice was clear and pleasant, but had none of the soft drawl which had attracted Margery in the twins. She was no more like them in speech than in face or colouring.

“Oh, please!” Margery began.

But Mrs. Dering was before her. “Virginia!” she said, in a shocked tone. “She’s going to stay with you. She’s Margery.”

“I’m sorry,” Virginia said meekly, but with laughing eyes. “I can’t get used to the Rainbows habit of instant adoption.”

“I don’t adopt everybody at sight,” Doranne protested. “But I know Margery’s going to be one of us. One look at her was enough. If she likes us, that is.”

Margery laughed. “I’m sure I’m going to like you all very much! I’ve met your sisters.” She turned to Virginia. “They were in the bus, and when they heard I was coming to Rainbows they offered to take care of me. What’s the matter? Have I said something I shouldn’t?”

Virginia’s face had clouded. “Is that where they were? They weren’t supposed to go to town to-day. They have jobs, but they run away from them when they feel like it. I’m terribly sorry,” and she turned to Doranne Dering. “I don’t know what to do with the twins.”

“They’re very young,” Doranne said tolerantly. “They’ll settle down presently. I expect Miss Stewart has managed without Amanda, and Mary without Araminta. Were you amused by their names?” She looked at Margery.

“Terribly much. But I’m sorry I told you,” she said to Virginia.

“Oh, that’s all right! They’ll own up as soon as I go home. There was shopping to do and they’ll make that an excuse. But they ought not to rush off just when they feel like it.”

Doranne interposed. “Could we have a little more ‘Comical Fellow’, Virginia? And then I’ll take Margery for some tea. You’ll try with me, won’t you, Margery?”

“I haven’t done any dancing for years. I’m frightened,” Margery confessed shyly. “I never saw country-dancing done by all sorts and ages of people. I thought it was for children.”

“Oh, are you one of those people?” There was a scornful note in Virginia’s voice as she tuned the fiddle.

Margery flushed. “What do you mean?”

“Thinking folk-dancing is a childish stunt. How little you know!”

“You’re rather brutal, Virginia Rose,” Doranne remarked. “We haven’t all had your chances of going to London parties and classes. I was ‘one of those people’ till you taught me better; I’d always thought of country-dancing as a school lesson, a part of gym. You’ve made us see it as something much bigger, and we’re grateful. Margery will agree when she’s been here a little while. As she’s danced at school, she’ll get on all right,” and she held out her hand to Margery and led her to the lawn.

The lines formed again, and Doranne murmured hasty directions. “I’ve been watching while I played. You’re the woman, so I start and you repeat what I do. Then I lead you down and back and we cast. After that I think I can take care of you.”

“Oh, what fun! And how beautifully she plays,” Margery cried presently, when Virginia called “last time”. “Our school piano didn’t sound like that.”

“I believe you,” Doranne responded. “Virginia has danced with the best people in London, and she knows how the music ought to sound. You’re very good. You picked it up quickly and your step and setting are excellent. You’ll be a fine dancer in no time—another addition to poor Virginia’s problem! I’ll tell you about that later. Yes, my dear?” to Virginia, who was coming to them. “Margery’s good, isn’t she?”

“She has fine natural balance. She’s built for dancing; she’ll do well. You won’t forget Nanta, Mrs. Dering?” There was an anxious note in her voice. “She’s eaten up with worrying.”

“I am sorry! I had forgotten her, in the excitement of meeting a new dancer,” Doranne confessed. “Bring her along, and we’ll set her mind at rest.”

She turned to Margery. “Virginia’s little sister wants to play to me. You won’t mind a few minutes longer, I’m sure.”

“I want to see Nanta. Oh, I’d noticed her already!” as Virginia called the schoolgirl, with the yellow plaits framing her face, who had been watching Mrs. Dering with anxious blue eyes.

She came forward shyly, taking the violin from her sister. They were as much alike in face and colouring as were the twins, but there was a tenseness and a look of fixed purpose in Atalanta’s grave expression which did not seem right for her age.

With her eyes on Doranne she played a little tune.

“Oh, lovely! Couldn’t we dance?” Margery cried. “It’s just right for dancing.”

“Nanta, that’s as good as Virginia!” Doranne exclaimed. “Play some more. Play something we know.”

Nanta played “The Comical Fellow”, and Doranne nodded. Then Nanta went from tune to tune—“The Old Mole”—“If all the World were Paper”—“Parson’s Farewell”—“Argeers”.

“They don’t know those last two,” Virginia laughed.

“Nanta, will you play for our dancing?” Doranne asked earnestly. “Then I can dance and Virginia will be free to teach. Half-a-crown an hour; I’ve played for ballet classes in town and I know the right fee! But you won’t be able to dance yourself,” she added.

“I’d rather play.” Nanta, unexpectedly, had the soft voice of the twins. “But I don’t want to be paid for it.”

“Of course you’ll be paid, if it’s a regular engagement. But that’s only if you stay here,” Doranne said doubtfully.

“I want to stay. Oh, please!” There was acute anxiety in the soft Southern voice. “Oh, Mrs. Dering, don’t let them send me away! I’ll work like anything at my music. Some day I may be good enough—you know what I want.”

“To play in the orchestra with Virginia.” Doranne spoke with understanding sympathy. “Yes, my dear, and I think you could do it, but I can’t send Freda away, when I’ve brought her here on purpose for the orchestra.”

“I know. But if I play for the dancing it will be something, and perhaps some day——”

“We might enlarge the orchestra, quite soon,” Doranne said thoughtfully. “You shall have first chance if we take in any more, Nanta. But Virginia hasn’t decided yet to let you leave school.”

“I don’t want to go back!” Atalanta said passionately. “It’s waste of time, except the music lessons. I’ve done all the history and maths I need.”

“We’ll think about it,” Doranne promised. “I don’t like to see you quite so keen on music, Nanta. Keeness is good, but you go too far; music’s burning you up. At school you’d have to

think of other things. You'll be making yourself ill."

"Oh, no, indeed, I won't!"

"I'm not so sure." Doranne smiled at her. "Play for us again, and see if you can keep it up while we dance. Your rhythm is perfect, but it must last through the dance."

Atalanta looked at Virginia. "What shall I play?"

"'Rufty Tufty'. They ought to know that, and you know it too."

"Oh, I know it!" Margery pleaded. "Her music's lovely!"

Doranne laughed and held out her hand. "Yes, the kiddy's good," she said, as they honoured at the end. "I'm very glad. It will make her so happy, if we can use her. How was that, Virginia?"

"Very mixed. Nanta's all right, but you people mostly gave wrong hands. Mrs. Dering, you weren't right once."

"Oh!" Doranne cried, in shocked dismay, though her eyes were dancing. "I *am* sorry. I didn't know I was wrong. Sorry, Margery."

"I didn't know, either." Margery grinned.

"It's so hard to think of right or left," Doranne pleaded.

"There's no need to think of right and left," Virginia said ruthlessly. "You're dancing man; give your nearest hand to your partner and lead her out—it's only polite. If you grab her by your farther hand, you have to pull her; very rude."

Doranne hastily experimented with one hand and then the other. "I see. It certainly feels more polite and much more like leading if I use the hand nearer to her."

"Because yours is behind hers. If you're dancing woman, put your hand across you and into the man's and let yourself be led."

"Meekly led," Margery added. "But what about when we go down the middle? I gave her—him!—my nearest hand. Was that wrong?"

"She's got you that time, teacher," Doranne chuckled. "I'm certain you taught us right hand."

"No, she hasn't. Right is correct. You couldn't turn the woman under with your left hand. It's the exception to the rule," Virginia said promptly.

"We are having a lesson. Thank you, Miss Rose!" and Doranne bobbed a curtsy. "Could we have a talk about Nanta later on? I love dancing to her music; I'm going to enjoy Tuesdays now, without feeling that I must offer to play, to relieve you. Come along, Margery! Mrs. Duffy's kettle will be boiling. You must be dying for some tea!"

CHAPTER SIX

THE PROBLEM OF THE ROSES

"I knew we couldn't run a place like this, with all sorts of people gathered together, without coming up against problems," Doranne Dering said, as she handed Margery a cup of tea. "But the problems have appeared even sooner than I expected, and the Rose girls are one of them. I can't quite make them out. Atalanta is obvious enough; she has one ambition and one object in life—music, and to play with Virginia, who is her idol. How to do what's best for her isn't quite so simple. But the other three puzzle me. There's something I don't understand about them."

They were sitting at a little table in the sunshine, on the broad terrace above the lawn, where the dancers still lingered, talking in groups. Doranne had pointed out the aerodrome, with its hangars and masts and flying sausage balloons, away to one side, and the old village with its church spire directly below. The new village was hidden by trees and a shoulder of hill.

"Have you known the Roses long?" Margery asked.

"A few months. I went to the Academy of Music, in London, for lessons in conducting, and the people there suggested certain students, to join the little orchestra I was forming; we work together and give concerts in the house here. It's only a string quartette so far, but I hope to enlarge it quite soon. It's one of the things I want to give to people—music. Homes are another; that's why I'm building a village. The Academy suggested Virginia Rose, and said she was quite good enough to be my first violin. I asked for her address and found she was my neighbour, though I hadn't known. Has Elsa Dale told you where we used to live?"

"In a big hostel, and you all had your own little flats and you gave them names. Elsa and Daphne lived in Blue House, because they had blue curtains. Yours was Lavender Cottage."

"The names weren't official. Blue House was in the passage called C, and my dear Lavender was in B. The whole of A was empty, but I found the Rose girls had taken it, sent there by the Academy when they asked for advice about rooms."

"Did they have names too?"

Doranne laughed. "Oh yes! They insisted on being part of Rainbow Corner, as we called our scrap of the hostel. I went to see them and found the twins living in single rooms opposite one another across the corridor, while Virginia and Nanta had the larger room at the end. Mandy's flatlet was called Honey Lodge and Minty's was Heather Lodge; they said they were only lodgers, and the two together would remind them of heather honey in Scotland. Mandy's curtains were pale yellow and Minty's were pinky-amethyst. I believe they wanted Virginia to call her room Haggis House or Shortbread Shack; but she put up soft blue curtains, quite different from Elsa Dale's deep blue ones which started the whole idea, and called her house Periwinkle Place."

"How wildly unusual!" Margery laughed.

"Yes, most original. They'd lived in Edinburgh, and there were periwinkles on the rockery in the garden there. But their aunt died, and they came to London for the sake of Virginia's music; she wanted the best. Atalanta was at day-school, and the twins went to a business college and were learning shorthand and loathing it. They loved the idea of living in the country and came here eagerly. I found jobs for the twins; Mandy helps Miss Stewart, who

came from the hostel to run a day-nursery for babies; Minty is assistant librarian—we've quite a decent library. But I don't think either is keen about her job. They turn up late, and they wander off as they did to-day, and they're slack when they are there. It isn't right, and it can't go on, for their own sakes. But they're such jolly kids! I hate to be unkind to them."

"I liked them enormously," Margery admitted. "I wonder why they behave like that? You'd think they'd be anxious to do their best and settle down."

"That seems to be just what they don't mean to do. I'm hoping you'll be able to help," Doranne confessed. "If you stay with them you may find some clue to their odd behaviour. You'll need to go somewhere, and the cottage of the Roses will be quite the nicest place for you."

"Then you'll let me stay?" Margery's colour rose as she spoke eagerly.

"You haven't seen the village yet," Doranne laughed. "It's still raw and new; you may hate the sight of it. But it's improving and I'm sure it has possibilities. I hope you'll stay, and I do want you to be friends with my difficult Roses. I'm inclined to forgive Mandy and Minty for playing truant, since they met you and introduced themselves. Was it so very funny?"

Margery's eyes had begun to dance as she remembered Mandy's offer to take care of "the revolting female". "Oh, well, they are funny, aren't they? But I liked them. Is Miss Rose—or may I say Virginia?—is she difficult, too?"

Doranne knit her brows. "I don't think she's happy. No, she's not difficult; her music's excellent, and she works well with the rest of the quartette and is always ready to help. The country-dancing was her idea; she'd danced in town and she wanted people to dance with her here. She asked if she might try to run a class, and I was delighted; it was just the jolly social kind of thing I wanted, bringing people together and giving them a good time. Virginia teaches beautifully and everybody loves her classes. You'd think she had everything she wanted, for she's as keen on music as Atalanta, though not so unbalanced over it. But then she has all the music she wants! Nanta feels she has to fight for hers, to get enough of it. She doesn't want to go back to school and be a boarder and live away from the other three. That's for Virginia to decide."

"But you feel Virginia isn't satisfied?"

"I'm sure she isn't. When she's thinking and not doing, a shadow comes across her face. There's something in the background which she hasn't told us."

"It doesn't seem to weigh on the twins."

"It does not! But Virginia leads the family; they'd leave all responsibility to her. She's young for it; she's nineteen."

"Is it that she worries over Atalanta, and feels she can't control Mandy and Minty? They're only a year younger."

"It might be that," Doranne agreed. "Or it might be money. They evidently have a little, though they're glad to earn more and it's taken for granted they'll all have jobs—whether they stick to them or not! Their father must have left them something. There's never any suggestion that they couldn't afford boarding-school for Atalanta; the only question is whether they can persuade her to go. They must have some funds behind them. They came to Edinburgh to their aunt—their mother's sister from the Southern States, who had married a Scotsman and come home with him—about six years ago, when their mother died; their father evidently didn't know what to do with them. He was coming to join them when he was taken ill on the journey and died in New York. They ought to have some guardian, but there doesn't seem to have been anybody but the aunt in Scotland. When she died, apparently Virginia took charge."

"It's very plucky. I expect the responsibility of the three younger ones weighs on her."

"It may be that. If you can find out any way that I could help I'd be deeply grateful to you."

"I've had one idea, a little one," Margery said shyly.

Doranne looked at her quickly. "I felt you were going to be valuable. You're beginning even sooner than I expected. Do tell me!"

"Young Atalanta. If they send her away, she'll be miserable and she'll probably waste her time. But if she stays here she'll practise all day long and make herself ill."

Doranne agreed. "Either would be bad for her. But is there a third way?"

"Couldn't she, as a condition of joining your orchestra, help me in my shop for half the day? I had a little girl to help at home. I've been wondering if I couldn't make the shop into a kind of children's club." Margery spoke eagerly, encouraged by the growing interest in Doranne's brown eyes. "I'd need help, and it would be good for Nanta. If I could make one room into a place where children could sit and read magazines and perhaps borrow a few baby books or some puzzles——"

"One stage further on than the day-nursery. Margery, what a lovely idea!" Doranne cried. "I see it all, and it's just what is wanted! We've nothing of the kind in the village. I'll provide tiny chairs and low tables, and we'll have pictures and pretty curtains. You must have Atalanta to help, of course. Oh, come and look at your house and plan it all! You'll let me be in it? You couldn't shut me out?"

"It was your letter that put the idea into my head." Margery laughed in delight at her enthusiasm.

"We'll go at once. You'd better have a look at my terrible inheritance," Doranne said solemnly, "but we won't waste time on it just now. All that wing," and she stood and pointed at the great white house, "is going to be a college for the boys at the aerodrome. The company who run the 'drome are thrilled by the idea, but they can't start it yet. At present they use the rooms for lectures and experiments, and for mess-rooms and rest places and concerts. One big hall is where we give our little shows, the orchestra and I, with quartettes and solos and sing-songs; the boys love them and they come crowding in. But my husband has gone to America to report on some new types of 'planes, and till he comes back they aren't using the house much."

"It's horrible for you to have had to let him go," Margery ventured.

"Oh, ghastly! I don't think about it. But so long as he's well I can just bear it. If he were ill I'd want to rush to New York at once. I've too much to do here; Rainbows is only finding its feet, and it might go off on all the wrong lines if neither of us was here to keep it straight."

"That's very likely," Margery agreed. "All the same, it's jolly decent of you to have stayed at home, just for Rainbows—if it isn't cheek to say so."

"It's very nice of you," Doranne assured her. "But we won't talk about it. All that other wing is given over to babies and old folk from the slums of North London; it's being made ready for them and one day soon we shall have an invasion. But they'll have their own gardens kept for them. The really interesting part of the house is the middle, where we do all sorts of jolly things. The old dining-room—look, a huge place!" and she led Margery to open French windows—"is the library, with a stage built at one end, for lectures and concerts. There's a quiet-room where people can rest and write letters, and a reading-room with newspapers and magazines, and a small room for discussion groups, and a music-room for the orchestra to use for practising. The big kitchens are left as they were, and they're useful when

we have socials or want refreshments. Mrs. Duffy is in charge of this part of the building, and Mr. Duffy of the gardens, with the necessary staff. I have rooms upstairs, and the rest of the orchestra live here too. Virginia has her own cottage because she brought a family with her! The central hall is a public lounge or rest-place, and anyone can have tea or bring friends; Mrs. Duffy's girls generally have some parties to look after. I think the lounge-restaurant is appreciated as much as anything! People feel it belongs to them and they value it very highly. Come and peep in!"

Margery looked through the open door, and saw Virginia Rose entertaining Atalanta and two dancers at one table, while other parties sat in the opposite corners and enjoyed Mrs. Duffy's tea and cakes.

"It looks very jolly and homely," she said. "I hope you'll let me come, too. I suppose we pay properly?"

"Oh yes! People wouldn't come unless they paid. We try to find jobs for everybody, so that they can feel independent; it seems much better than giving things away."

"Oh, heaps jollier!" Margery agreed warmly. "I'm sure everybody likes it better. Please, could we see my little house? I'm getting terribly keen."

Doranne laughed happily. "Then come along. We'll go down to the village and show you the worst. I meant it to be called Rainbow Corner, after our rooms in town," she added, as they turned away from Rainbows, "but it didn't catch on; people called it Rainbows New Village, and we accepted that as the name. It was tempting, when the old village is a mile away. So we're simple and matter-of-fact about it, and it's just the New Village."

"I like the name," Margery assured her happily. "It has an adventurous forward-looking sound."

Doranne gave her an eager grateful glance. "Yes, it is better than Rainbow Corner. I believe you're right. I love that idea; I shall like the name now. Thank you, Margery Paine!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

A NEW HOME FOR MARGERY

“Not by the road,” Doranne said. “This path through the park goes direct to the village. It was all parkland when I took over, two years ago; very lovely, but quite unused, except by birds and rabbits. We’ve shut off one corner, where the trees were thick, for a bird-sanctuary, and we’ve put up nesting-boxes, and our warden—such a nice lad!—says the boxes are being used this year, so we may rear our own bird babies. He won’t admit anybody, and particularly not children, till the eggs are hatched, because the birds are still shy; but he’s promised that we shall be allowed in soon to see the babies in the nests. There! Isn’t it awful? Can you bear it?”

There was a note of laughing regret in her voice as she led Margery through a screen of trees and pointed down. The ground fell steeply to a level stretch near the main road, and here the old trees had been cut down and little houses were going up. Tree-stumps stood everywhere, the undergrowth was gone, there were heaps of earth and sand. It was a scene of desolation, raw and new.

“Oh!” Margery said slowly. “Oh, what a pity!”

“I know. It broke my heart. When they felled the trees I ran away to Darthington and wept; I’ve a tiny house there that is really my own. This place isn’t mine in the same way; I feel it belongs to everybody, and I’m only in charge. There were trees everywhere; no room for houses. It will look better soon; it’s not so bad even now as it was when they tore up the ground to put in drains and gas and electricity. All those wounds are covered, and in time the rest will clothe itself again. We’ve left every tree that we possibly could.”

“Did it have to be just here? Wasn’t there any place where there were no trees? I hate to see trees go.”

“So do I. I could have cried over my trees. But we had to build where the authorities thought suitable; drains and gas are important! Come and have a closer view; it doesn’t seem so bad when you’re in the middle of it. The little houses are quite pretty, and the gardens are beginning to grow. I invited a nice girl trained in gardening to live here, Angela Baker, and she gives lectures on gardening, and advises everybody. There are plenty of trees left in other parts of the park, and it’s free for anyone to wander in, so long as they treat it properly. I can’t have it ruined for everybody by a few silly or careless folk. Over there, beyond the houses, we’re making public gardens, and laying out playing-fields; Angela sees to all that. The tennis courts are ready and are in use most evenings. We’ve done it as carefully as we could. And we have our little houses!”

Margery looked at her, for her tone was full of meaning. “The houses——?” she asked doubtfully.

“Little homes for people living in cities; for the Rose girls; for you.”

“Yes. The houses matter most,” Margery agreed quietly. “I didn’t mean to criticize.”

“I was so happy when Auntie gave me a home, to be my own when she went, that when I found all Rainbows was mine, as well as the tiny house I loved so much, I felt I’d like to give homes to other people. It couldn’t be done without sacrificing a bit of the park, but the homes matter more. I think we’re getting the right sort of folk; I’m very anxious about that. The red cottage on this path belongs to two not-very-young sisters, who are caring for an old aunt; that appealed to me, for it’s what I did myself. They were so glad to get away from London; they

weren't town people and they were craving for the country. They called their house Jasmine Corner; we must have names, because there are no regular streets and so there can't be numbers. Periwinkle Place, the Rose girls' cottage, is along that way; they kept Virginia's name, though I believe the twins tried to make it Heather-Honey Cot; but Virginia was firm. Where's your luggage, by the way? You didn't leave it by the roadside, I hope? Don't say it's up at the house and we'll have to climb the hill again?"

Margery laughed at her tone of acute dismay. "The twins took my case; I was very grateful. Minty said I hadn't known them long enough to trust them, but Mandy was sure I would."

"Of course you would. Oh, that's all right! Now, Margery Paine——"

"Nice people call me Polly Paine," Margery murmured.

"Elsa Dale told me. May I? Am I nice enough? Oh, good!" at the eager laughing look Margery gave her. "Then, Polly Paine, could you bear this one for your little shop? Or shall we try again?"

They had turned down a path, paved—as were most of the tracks winding among the cottages—with red bricks, which were a welcome relief from the soft soil and mud. A tiny, double-fronted bungalow stood under one of the trees that had survived the clearance, a wild cherry, at the moment a mass of glorious white blossom. The little house had grey rough-cast walls and a roof of purple-blue tiles; there was one small window in the pointed gable, and Margery's eyes fastened at once on the two bay windows downstairs.

Doranne saw her look. "One of those would do for your display of sweets, wouldn't it? We could put in plate-glass, if you'd rather have it."

"Oh no, please! I like the small panes and the casement windows. We could have steps below, so that even the littlest child could see in. And the other room could be the club-room! Oh, Mrs. Dering, I've fallen in love! But I can't afford to buy a house. Could we arrange it somehow? Would you really let me have it?"

"I want you to help in building up my village," Doranne said earnestly. "You're just the right person. I'd like to give you the little house, but I don't suppose you'd agree?"

"Oh, please! I couldn't! I'd never believe it was really mine. I'd feel you had lent it to me."

"Yes, I suppose you would. But if you paid a small rent and that went towards the price, in time it would be your own. Wouldn't that do?"

"I've asked people about that," Margery said frankly. "I've £400; I could pay £350 down, and keep £50 in hand for emergencies. I've a little saved that will help with the moving, and I've a fair amount of stock, and all my shop fittings, and some rather good old furniture. If you'd be willing to let me buy the house by degrees, that's what I'd like best."

"Done!" Doranne said promptly. "But I don't like taking your £350, when I have so much."

"But look at all the things you're doing for us! Even a fortune won't last for ever, at the rate you're going on!"

"Oh, I know! I do sell the houses and land when I can; one must be businesslike. We'll have papers prepared and we'll sign them, and you'll open your shop, and in time it will be your own. Seven hundred will buy it outright."

"I shall ask you to tea, when it becomes really mine," Margery promised solemnly. "Could we go inside? I'm dying to see the whole of it."

Doranne had brought keys. She opened the door and led Margery in. Then, with glowing eyes, she watched her. This was one of the great moments which her heavy inheritance had brought her, which gave her some compensation for its burden and duties. She never failed to look forward to, and to enjoy, the first sight of the new home on the part of her tenants.

Margery's reaction satisfied her completely. She ran from room to room, making plans, her eyes alight. "My big counter there—and the little one over here; shelves for my bottles of sweets on that wall; my lockers and chests down here. Now the club-room—oh, lovely, with those big windows! I can make a beautiful children's parlour of it. Kitchen?—yes, I see. And one small bedroom behind the shop. Is upstairs just a loft for storage?"

"Yes, but it's a big one," Doranne explained. "You could easily shut off one end for stores and still have space for another bedroom. You're quite sure you're willing to give up your second front room to the children? It's nice of you, and helpful! You were meant to have one large sitting-room and one good bedroom, and the back room was for a visitor or a lodger."

"I'd far rather have a crowd of kiddies than a lodger! I can sit in the club-room in the evening, and during the day I'll eat in the kitchen. It's such a lovely kitchen, with that big window looking on the garden. If you could see the dark little hole I wash up in at present! This is so clean and light that it feels like a palace."

"It's a small garden, I'm afraid."

"Quite big enough for me to look after. I shall need a lot of advice from Miss Baker, but I want to learn."

"You must see some other houses. You might like one of them better," Doranne began.

Margery turned in alarm. "But can't I have this one? I've fallen in love with it, as I said."

"Of course you can have it. But I can't let you decide on the first you see. You might be sorry later."

"Then could we see the others at once?" Margery pleaded, her tone resigned. "I want to feel it's fixed and this is really mine. I'll look at as many as you like; I love houses, and I'm always ready to go over them, empty or furnished. But you won't tempt me from my first love."

"All the same, we'll see two or three more," Doranne said firmly. "But this one's in the nicest part; we're still building on the other side. This is quieter and a little more finished, though the gardens and creepers and new trees still have a lot of growing to do."

Margery soon saw that this was the case. The narrow red paths ran in all directions, with a few wider tracks for carts and cars and vans; there were small houses near her own and no apparent space for more. Not all were occupied, and Doranne insisted on showing her several, pointing out the advantages of each and the ways in which they differed.

"I don't say there are no two alike, but we've tried to have variety, and there are a number of different styles. You wouldn't rather live joined on to somebody else? Some people prefer it, so we have them in pairs here and there. It's supposed to be warmer and more companionable."

"We're joined on both sides at home, one of a row. I'd like a single house, if you don't mind. I shan't feel lonely. What fun it must be to have all these dolls'-houses to give away!" and she looked at Doranne admiringly. "Don't you love fitting people into them?"

"I do love it," Doranne admitted. "It's the jolliest feeling I've ever known."

"You've found a marvellous way of using your legacy," Margery said impulsively.

"I've found a way of getting an enormous amount of fun out of it."

"For yourself? For other people, I think."

“For both. I love to see my village grow.”

“It’s going to be pretty, in time. The way the cottages are dotted about among the trees is fascinating.”

“I hope so. Nobody is far from the road, even if they live on a little red path. There are a few shops; a post-office, and a baker’s; and a plumber has come and lives in our midst, to our great joy. We’re only a mile from the old village, where the church and school are, and we can get most things there. Our post-office has a general shop attached, which is very useful. Now shall we see more houses?”

“As many as you like,” Margery said joyfully. “I love seeing them. But I’m not even beginning to change my mind.”

She held to this, and presently Doranne laughed and gave up the attempt to convert her. “We won’t waste time. You’ve evidently made up your mind. Come back to your house and tell me exactly what you want in the way of fittings—shelves and so on. Do you see the shimmer of blue everywhere? The whole place was a mass of bluebells, and they still come up like weeds in every corner; you’ll find your garden full of them.”

Margery could see the dim blue cloud that lay around the cottages. “How pretty! I’d been wondering what it was. I shall love my bluebells.”

“A month ago the place was yellow with primroses. I don’t suppose we shall ever get rid of them.”

“I shan’t try,” Margery said happily.

On the threshold of her house she paused. “There’s one snag,” she began in alarm: “I suppose you allow cats? I’ve a huge animal, and he’s all I possess in the way of a relation. May I bring him?”

Doranne laughed. “So have I, but he lives in my little house by the sea. You must meet Geoffrey some day. He’s a ginger, or rather golden. What’s yours?”

“I suppose you’d call him tabby. He’s white underneath and on his chest and legs, so I can always see him at night, but his top coat is dark till you ruffle him up and then he’s all soft brown and yellow; long waves and fleeces of fur. We call him the Pouffe, because he’s so huge. I couldn’t be parted from Pouffy!”

“Of course not! Bring anything or anybody you like. I hope he’ll settle down. I haven’t dared to move Geoffrey, for fear he’d run away and be lost; I couldn’t bear that. So I go to Darthington regularly to spend a night with him, and he is so pleased to see me! I go for other things as well,” Doranne admitted. “I’ve a little sister-in-law there who is being a brick, looking after a desolate grandfather who lost his wife a year ago; all her heart is in the aerodrome here, but she won’t let the old man down. And I’m having riding-lessons; Maureen and I go out on the hills together. But I always say I go to see Geoffrey Ginger. I shall come to make friends with your Pouffe. Now let’s talk business! Tell me all you want done to your house. And then I’ll take you along to Periwinkle Place and hand you over to the Roses.”

CHAPTER EIGHT AT PERIWINKLE PLACE

“What will you call your shop?” Doranne asked, when the business talk was over and Margery’s plans were approved.

“I’d meant to keep the old name, the ‘Nance and Polly’; it was called after me and my friend. But I’m hesitating,” Margery owned. “Since I’ve come here I feel a whole new start would be better. Nance belongs to Priorsbury; I want to look forward, not back.”

“Would your friend mind if you dropped her name?”

“Oh no! She said it was silly to use ‘Nance’ in a new place.”

“Where is she now?”

“On her honeymoon,” Margery laughed. “In Wales.”

“Then don’t tie yourself to the old days,” Doranne advised. “Call it ‘Polly’s’. Everybody, kiddies and all, would love that. You could have a name for your house as well, but ‘Polly’s’ would be the shop and the children’s room.”

“I believe I will. Thanks for the idea. That lovely tree; it’s a cherry, isn’t it? It seems to hang over the little house and kiss it.”

“A wild cherry—yes. In the autumn it turns the most glorious red. I hoped you’d like this house,” Doranne admitted. “I did want somebody nice to have that cherry-tree!”

“‘Polly’s. Cherry-Tree Cottage’—will be my address,” Margery announced. “How kind of you not to sell it to anybody else!”

“People have looked at it but have found some fault with it. I can’t see anything wrong myself. But they didn’t see the cherry in bloom. You must be meant to have this house, as you came just at the right season! Some folks want to be on the road, or to have another house quite close. They say this one is lonely.”

“I don’t mind,” Margery said joyfully. “I shall have cherry-coloured curtains, since it’s a grey cottage. It will look cheerful and welcoming. And cushions to match, in the kiddies’ room.”

“I’m longing to see your children’s club. Now come and find your bed for the night.”

Periwinkle Place was a white chalet bungalow, with a pointed red roof. All the windows had curtains of periwinkle blue, and beside the gate was a rockery, overgrown with periwinkles in full flower.

A twin, still in slacks and white blouse, was digging in the small garden. Margery looked at her head, which was swathed in a honey-coloured scarf. She remembered Doranne’s story of the rooms in the hostel, and said, “You’re Mandy.”

“You’re wrong. What makes you think so? But we’re not going to play schoolgirl tricks. I’m Araminta.” The twin smiled at her cheerfully.

“Mrs. Dering said Amanda used to have curtains of that colour,” Margery protested.

“Oh, sure! So she did; she’s the honey girl. But that doesn’t mean I’m never to wear yellow!”

“They shan’t tease you, Polly Paine,” said Doranne. “Mandy’s eyes are very dark brown; Minty’s are black. You can’t mix them. Minty, what about this afternoon?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Dering. But Mandy thought her hair needed trimming, and it was such a gorgeous day, and Virginia’s book was due at the library in town. We were sure you’d let us

go if we asked you, and it's such a long way up the hill."

"You might have asked, all the same. Mary had a very busy time at the library; people brought their books when they came to dance."

"Say, I never thought of that. I am sorry! Shall I offer to work all evening, cataloguing the beastly books?" Minty's smile was disarming.

Doranne's brows puckered, however. "I'm sorry you feel like that. You do, you know. It means you're in the wrong job, Minty. Books aren't beastly. I think we'd better find you something else to do. In the meantime you'll need to apologize to Mary for letting her down. Where is Mandy?"

"Sure, she's gone to apologize to Auntie Jean. She said I must tell Mary I was sorry. Mandy's going to bring a bundle of baby overalls and sew them this evening; Auntie Jean doesn't like sewing."

"That's all very well, but I wish you two would stick to your jobs," Doranne said soberly. "Has Virginia come in yet? I'll leave Margery with you. Some people want to speak to me; they've been hanging about, waiting till I was ready."

"We'll look after Polly Paine. Come and find Virginia, my dear!" Araminta thrust her spade into the ground and led Margery to the door. "I bet there are people wanting to speak to her," she said, as Doranne turned away. "She can't come down here without a crowd collecting; she's the heart and soul of the place. If she'd gone to New York with her hubby, Rainbows would have collapsed. Oh, child! What did your boss say to you?"

Amanda, in her slacks and green turban, had come up the path behind them. "She doesn't love me," she said mournfully. "Thought I ought to have asked leave to go."

"That's what Lady Rainbows has been saying to me. We aren't popular at present," Minty complained. "Oh, you poor brat! Are you going to sew all that stuff? I'll help—unless Mary gives me an evening job too. I want to talk to Polly Paine."

"Is it fixed up?" Mandy turned to Margery. "We need a tuck-shop most frightfully badly. And we'd like the tuck-shop to be you," she added courteously.

"Thank you very much," Margery said laughing. "'Polly's' will open at Cherry-Tree Cottage as soon as I can move my stuff."

"Oh, good! You'll see Minty and me often."

"But 'Polly's' is supposed to be for children!"

"You don't think Minty's grown-up, do you?" Amanda asked severely.

Araminta, at the door, was shouting—"Virginia! Ginny, where are you? Here's our new resident tuck-shop. Come and welcome the lady!"

Then Margery had one of the big surprises of the day. For Virginia, coming down the stair to the small lounge hall, received her with the gracious manner of a duchess inviting a guest into her castle.

"My new dancer! Do come in. We are so pleased to have you here. I hope you'll be comfortable with us; you'll soon feel at home, I'm sure."

"(I expected her to extend her hand for me to kiss. She might have been a princess," Margery said to Elsa on Sunday afternoon, when she told her all about Rainbows. "But it was quite unconscious, she wasn't putting it on. She made me feel it was an honour to be received by her; dignified doesn't begin to describe it! It was really immensely impressive!")

Mandy watched Margery's face and chuckled, but Minty broke out, "Oh, don't be so regal, Ginny! Cut out the V.R. stuff! Polly Paine's quite alarmed. She's really glad to see you, Margery. It's only her way."

Virginia looked startled. "Was I being stiff? I meant to be kind."

"Not stiff at all," Margery said stoutly. "Thank you for being so welcoming. It's good of you to put me up. May I see your house? Mrs. Dering let me look at several, but I chose the one I saw first—the bungalow under the lovely cherry. I shall call it Cherry-Tree Cottage."

"Guess what V.R. stands for, Polly Paine." Minty grinned at her twin.

Virginia stared at them coldly. "You children really are idiotic."

"Virginia Rose, I suppose," Margery commented.

"Victoria Regina. She's like the young queen receiving ambassadors," Mandy said blandly.

Margery's eyes danced, for this fitted in exactly with her own thought. But she turned from the twins to Virginia, who was looking embarrassed.

"They're very silly, aren't they? Do show me your house. We'll go away and leave the children."

The twins chuckled, having read her look aright. "All the same, it's how you felt too, Polly Paine!"

Ignoring them, Virginia led Margery over the little house. But again that strange touch of dignity appeared, so very different from the easy-going manner of the twins. "This is our lounge; we sit here a good deal. This is a nice little dining-room." She might have been saying, "This is the banqueting-hall. This is the ballroom."

"The twins have small rooms upstairs, but Mandy is turning out for you and sleeping with Minty. Oh, they don't mind! Nanta and I have the big room downstairs. We've always slept together; I should miss her terribly if she went to school."

"You won't send her, will you? I think she'd break her heart, and I'm sure she'd waste her time," Margery ventured. "Anyone who plays as well as she does should surely concentrate on music."

"I'm not sure yet." Virginia's tone was repressive. "Mandy, what are you doing?"

Amanda was kneeling by the hearth in the small lounge into which the front door opened, kindling a fire of pine cones. "Aw, Ginny!" she drawled. "It'll be real cold after dark. We want to talk to Polly Paine while we sew revolting overalls for Auntie Jean."

Virginia looked at Minty. "Have you apologized to Mary for being such a slacker?"

"Not yet. Guess I'd better see to it. Gosh, how I loathe that hill!" Minty groaned.

Mandy looked up. "You needn't climb the hill, honey. Mary's home; I saw her going into Applegarth."

"Oh, angel!" Minty cried rapturously. "I'll prance along in no time. Have supper ready, child, and then we can talk after."

"Where's Nanta?" Mandy asked, as her twin disappeared, whistling joyfully.

"Playing tennis. Mrs. Dering advised her to play for an hour, at least, and found Harriet Parry to play with her," Virginia explained.

"Harry Parry's always panting for a game. But she won't get a good one from Nanta, who's very second-rate," Mandy remarked, as she fed her fire with cones.

"She doesn't care about it," Virginia agreed.

"She doesn't care about anything but her fiddle. Did Ginny really make you dance almost before you were off the bus?" Mandy, still kneeling, looked up at Margery. "And after climbing the hill? She is brutal! My sympathy, Polly Paine."

"I loved it. And it was Mrs. Dering who made me join in." Margery sat on a cushioned window-seat, opposite the red brick fireplace, while Virginia disappeared into the kitchen.

“What a jolly room this is!”

“Cold in winter. We hang a curtain over the door. Do you think it was awful of Minty and me to dash off to-day?”

“People usually stick to their jobs,” Margery admitted.

Mandy sighed. “But what if they loathe the jobs? Araminta isn’t a bit bookish; and though I like infants well enough at a distance, I’m not a scrap keen on wiping their noses and picking them up when they try to kill themselves, and playing ‘Looby Light’ with them. That’s what Miss Stewart wants me for; to trot round in a ring yelling ‘When I was a schoolgirl’ or ‘Oats and Beans and Barley’. I get fed to the teeth.”

“What would you like to do? I don’t suppose there’s a great deal of choice. You might have to go away to find another job.”

“Tell you later, when Minty’s here. I ought to help Virginia. Chuck some more on this thing, if it seems like going out, there’s an angel! If Nanta comes in you can talk to her. And I say, Polly Paine, don’t hate Ginny for her V.R. air! She doesn’t mean any harm. It’s part of her.”

“I could see that,” Margery agreed.

“Everybody sees it. You’d think she was royalty who has come down in the world, but it’s just her way. Father was like that. We call her Countess Virginia when she puts on her V.R. grand manner.”

“Why not Princess? That was what I wanted to call her.”

“Oh, well!”

“Amanda!” Virginia’s voice came sharply from the kitchen door. “Remember you have to change before supper.”

“Coming, Ginny dear! Virginia won’t have us in slacks at night. She feels we’ve dressed for dinner, if we put on frocks,” and Mandy dashed away upstairs, leaving Margery thoughtfully feeding the little fire.

CHAPTER NINE

JOBS FOR TWINS

“Could there be anything in that idea?” Margery was saying to herself, when Atalanta came quietly in, carrying Virginia’s violin. “Mrs. Dering thinks Virginia has something on her mind. Could there be some family secret which she hasn’t told? She’s like their father, Mandy said. Could they be poor relations of some rich family? Not that it matters a scrap; and it certainly doesn’t weigh on the twins! But Virginia might feel a secret of that sort was a burden. I shall tell Nance and Elsa all about Rainbows and my cottage, and about the Roses, but not these wild ideas. It wouldn’t be fair. Oh, Nanta! I loved the way you played ‘Ruffy Tufty!’”

The shy girl shrank. “Thank you. I love playing. But I must speak to Virginia,” and she slipped away.

“I’ll make friends with her in time. She’s the only shy Rose,” Margery said to herself.

The relationship between the first and the last of the Roses was plain. Atalanta worshipped Virginia; Virginia adored Nanta. She said they had always slept together, and Margery could well believe it. Obviously, Virginia had made the baby of the family her special care and was proud of her; and Nanta thought there was nobody like Virginia.

“Jolly for them both, unless Virginia marries,” Margery thought. “She ought to; she’s very handsome. Nanta would break her heart. It would be good for her to care for something apart from music and Virginia.”

“You asked what jobs we’d like to have.” Amanda looked across at Margery, as they sat round the little fire after supper, one electric lamp switched on above the twins, who were stitching at blue overalls for Miss Stewart’s babies.

They had changed into frocks, Amanda’s pale yellow and Araminta’s bright green, and had combed their curls into order, and, as they worked with bent heads under the light, they looked as gentle and well-behaved a pair of twins as one could wish to see, and were as beautiful in their dark way as Virginia and Nanta in their fair one.

“Yes, do tell me! What did the librarian say to you?” Margery looked at Minty.

“Wanted me to work all evening at the catalogue we’re making. I begged off, because we had a visitor, and said I’d do it to-morrow night.”

“I’ll come and help, honey; we’ll do it in half the time. You’re sewing half my pinnies,” said Mandy.

“Darling girl, I knew you would,” Minty responded. “When we’ve done enough to soothe Mary we’ll have some tennis and a spot of supper. We’ll turn it into a picnic.”

“You ought not to get fun out of it, twins,” Virginia scolded. “You behaved very badly.”

“It’s all very well for you, Ginny. You’ve got the job you wanted, and Nanta’s going to have hers too. You’ve no business to rag us poor beggars.”

Nanta shot a look up at Virginia and smiled. She was crouching on the rug between her sister and the fire.

“About those jobs!” Mandy returned to the subject. “Oh, Polly Paine! We don’t care a hoot for the jobs we’re in! We’re both completely fed up.”

“I can see that,” Margery retorted. “What do you want to do?”

“Horses,” Mandy said simply. “Or dogs, to start with.”

“Boats,” said Minty. “And there’s no water for miles around.”

“Horses and boats?” Margery stared at them and then at Virginia. “What do they mean?”

“Don’t look as if you’d strayed among loonies,” Amanda protested. “I love animals, all but children. I’d like to train as a vet, but it means years of college and exams, and I could never stick it.”

“You’d never pass, if you did stick it,” Araminta added. “But you might be a kennel-maid, or get a job at a riding-school, if they trained you.”

“I suppose there are such jobs,” Margery admitted. “Or you might marry a farmer, Mandy.”

Amanda shook her black head vigorously. “I ain’t got no use for men.”

“Amanda!” Virginia cried.

“Margery knows a joke when she sees—or hears—it, Ginny. She knows I don’t talk like that. Some day I sure shall run away from Auntie Jean and her infants and apprentice myself to a horse-and-dog-man. Then I’ll be real happy.”

“I’ll go too, and I’ll find a man with boats and make him take me on,” Minty promised.

“What do you want to do with boats?” Margery demanded. “I can understand Mandy’s ambition and I suppose there may be jobs of the sort she wants. But what’s all this about boats?”

“I want to sail them,” Minty said vaguely. “I want the sea. We had the sea at Portobello—that’s Edinburgh, Polly Paine—at least, it was the river. I dodged school and got the fishermen to take me out whenever I could. I want to learn all about boats and sailing. And here I am handing out silly novels to sillier people! ‘Oh, Miss Rose, could you find me a pretty tale? Something with a happy ending!’—I get fed to the limit!”

“But how could you make your living by sailing boats? I suppose you want to make a living, like the rest of us?”

“If I knew that, I’d have cut all this and skipped off before now,” Minty retorted. “But sooner or later, and somehow or other, I’m going to have the sea and boats.”

Margery had a vision of Elsa Dale and her ferry. She looked thoughtfully at Araminta’s sturdy frame and long limbs. “I wonder!” she said to herself. “It would be odd if I could help her. Elsa’s looking for somebody for her boat.”

Aloud she merely remarked, “I’m another of the lucky ones. I never wanted to do anything but keep my little shop, and it was ready for me when I left school. I hope you two will find what you want. But you’d need to go away; what would Virginia say to that?”

Virginia had been staring into the tiny fire, with the bored look of one who had heard all this many times before. Margery saw she had not noticed the question, and realized what Doranne Dering meant by saying a shadow came over Virginia’s face when she was thinking.

“Something on her mind too, I do believe. They are an intriguing crowd! It isn’t the twins she’s bothered about, or she’d have been listening,” she said to herself. “Perhaps she’ll tell me some day; they’re ready enough to chatter, but she’s different; she may not trust me, or it may be too serious.”

“Wake up, Ginny!” Araminta urged. “Poke her, Nanta! Polly Paine wants to know if you’d let us go out into the world to seek our fortunes, Virginia.”

The head of the family roused herself. “Not unless I knew all about where you were going. Where do you want to go?”

“To find my boats, and Mandy’s horses. That’s all we know so far.”

“Then it’s not good enough.”

Margery interposed. "It hasn't come to that yet. I only asked what you'd say if they found the jobs they want and it meant going away from here."

"If the place was all right I should tell them to get on with it. They're doing no good here. But I don't know where they can find boats and horses."

"It isn't likely they could go together," Margery suggested. "Would that matter? Would they be willing to separate?"

The twins grinned at her. "Oh, sure!" They spoke together. "We aren't as devoted as all that."

"But it would be nice if we could meet occasionally," Mandy added. "I can live without Araminta, but I'd like to see her now and then, just to keep an eye on her as she grows up."

"Says the elder twin!" Minty mocked. "How Mandy would get on without me to look after her there's no saying, but it would be terribly good for her to try. She'll never depend on herself while she has me to fall back on."

Mandy fell back on her literally, rolling over into her lap. "Oh, darling child! It's wonderful to have you behind me. So solid, like a mountain of—what? Rock? Or fat?"

"Amanda Rose, you toad!" Minty cried wrathfully. "If anybody's stout it's you. Get up, you lump!"

"Then you wouldn't mind being separated?" Margery insisted, as the twins sorted themselves out and picked up scissors and blue cotton and pins.

"Not in the least," Minty assured her. "We're prepared for it. In some ways it would be quite a relief to get away from this Rosy family."

"So long as we weren't far apart," Mandy added. "It would be too alarming if I forgot what Minty looked like, and after long years a strange female with flashing black eyes came up and slapped me on the back and said she was my twin."

Araminta's eyes danced. "I'd be rather glad to forget what you look like. Polly Paine, do you mean you're going to find us jobs?"

"Well, not to-night! I had a little idea, but I can't tell you about it till I've talked to someone else."

"For both of us? Or only for this revolting Araminta?" Mandy asked anxiously.

Margery laughed. "Your idea isn't as clear as hers. But I have friends who might be able to help. I can't say any more till I've asked them."

"Oh, sweetest one! Do you mind if we hug you?" Minty cried.

"Both at once? Please don't!" Margery exclaimed in mock dismay.

"Don't leave me out and concentrate on Minty!" Mandy begged. "She really isn't good enough. I'm far more worth helping."

"Woman, remember you're sleeping in my bed to-night," Minty threatened.

"Um, that's so," and Mandy took up her sewing again. "What about you, Polly Paine? We've done all the telling."

"There's nothing to tell, except that I'd like to go to bed, to make to-morrow come sooner, so that I can rush home and write a cheque and post it to Mrs. Dering and feel my lovely cottage is really mine."

Virginia raised her eyebrows. "Are you going to buy it? Straight away?"

"Half of it; I don't know which half. I'm going to pay half the price now and the rest in instalments, as rent. I shall feel it's my own as soon as the cheque's in the post."

"Suppose you don't like it?"

"But I do like it," Margery said conclusively.

"You haven't any family?" Virginia asked.

"Only the cat. But he's rather outsize."

"Any boy-friend, Polly Paine?" Mandy hinted.

"No! I'll say not!" Margery almost snapped, with rather too great promptness and emphasis.

This time it was the twins who raised their brows. "'Ware questions, Mandy!" said Araminta. "There is a boy-friend, but she won't talk."

"There isn't," Margery insisted sharply.

"All right, honey, there isn't, and you don't want to talk about him," Mandy said soothingly. "I didn't mean to rile you. Some day you'll tell us all about him."

Margery swallowed her wrath and said more quietly, "There was somebody who wanted to be—that. But I turned him down. I'm like you; I don't want men about. There's no place for a man in my sweet-shop."

"Was he nice?" Minty queried.

"Quite nice enough, if I'd wanted him. But I didn't."

"There was sure to be somebody," Mandy observed. "You're every bit as pretty as Virginia, and she's had two or three hanging round, who had to be crushed."

"Mandy, you're terrible!" Virginia said indignantly.

"What about yourselves?" Margery turned the tables. "You're as old as I am, and much more thrilling to look at."

Mandy laughed. "Minty's flashing black eyes again!"

"Men don't come after twins," Minty said solemnly. "They feel there's one too many."

"Afraid they'll get mixed and marry brown eyes when they wanted black," Mandy added.

"Oh, dear girl, we haven't time for that kind of stuff!"

"Neither have I," Margery retorted.

"As for Ginny, she's in love," Minty announced.

"Araminta, how can you?" Virginia cried, her colour rising. "You really are revolting!"

"Just what I'm always saying," Mandy murmured.

Margery looked at Virginia quickly. This was a possible explanation of her burdened manner, though it did not seem to have occurred to Doranne Dering.

"She hasn't spoken to him. She doesn't know his name. Romantic—what?" Mandy drawled.

"She saw him at a dance—a country-dance, of course; Ginny hasn't time for waltzes and quick steps," Minty went on. "She was asked to a dance in a garden, a few miles from here, by a girl she'd met in town. And she saw HIM. He wasn't dancing; he'd come down from Oxford with the girl's brother for the week-end. They weren't introduced—awfully slack of Virginia not to manage that better! I'd have pulled it off somehow. He was terribly handsome, very dark—they'd make a thrilling couple!—frightfully distinguished, like a prince in disguise. We heard reams about him next day."

"And I wish I'd never told you anything!" Virginia said bitterly. "How was I to know you idiots would make up all that rot? I only told you about the party and some of the interesting people I saw."

"Pity you didn't have one dance with Cinderella—I mean, with the Prince. You were Cinderella," Minty observed.

"If she talked about him so much, she didn't fall in love with him," Margery remarked.

“With a man I didn’t speak to? Is it likely?” Virginia said scornfully, and rose. “You said something about bed. I think it would be a good idea.”

The twins grinned at one another meaningly, but Margery agreed with some relief. “Would you mind? I’m tired.”

“You go to sleep and dream about the boy-friend, Polly Paine,” Mandy drawled.

As Margery fell asleep, though her last thought was of Gilbert it was not one that would have encouraged him.

“I wouldn’t give up my ‘Polly’s’ and my Cherry-Tree Cottage for fifty Gilbert Seymours! Nor for a dozen Summertons! If he finds out where I am I’ll soon make him see I don’t want him. I’m going to stay in this intriguing place and help to build it and be its first tuck-shop, and I’m going to love every minute of it. Gilbert Seymour—boy-friend? No, Mandy Rose, not for me!”

CHAPTER TEN

A PLACE FOR ATALANTA

Breakfast was in progress at Periwinkle Place when a knock made Araminta run to the door. She came back and handed a letter to Margery.

"Mrs. Dering sent it down. Is it from the boy-friend? He didn't know you'd be sleeping with us."

"For me?" Margery asked, in astonishment. "From Elsa—c/o Mrs. Dering. She must be in a hurry! Do you mind if I look?"

"Oh, please do!" A chorus reassured her.

Margery tore open the letter and skimmed the few lines. Then she began to laugh, and laughed till she cried.

The Rose girls watched her in amazement.

"Hysterics, Virginia!" Mandy jerked. "Throw water over her!"

"I'll do it!" Minty started up.

"No—go away!" Margery cried. "Don't let them, Virginia! I'll tell you; it's not a secret. After what we said last night—yes, I will tell you."

Minty poised a jug threateningly over her. "Out with it! If you start again you'll get this on your head."

"If I do, you won't hear anything," Margery retorted. "This is from a friend. She's had a letter from the sister of—of the boy-friend, as you call him, but you'll need to stop. Mya—that's the sister—wants to know where I'm going to live; I wouldn't tell her, as I couldn't have him fussing round. She wants to write, to break it to me gently that—that her brother's found somebody else!" She went off into another peal of laughter.

Minty lowered the jug. "Look here, are you in earnest? Is it O.K. by you, really? Or are you hysterical with concealed grief?"

"Oh, it's all right! It's relief, not grief. I didn't want him. Now he'll stop plaguing me." Margery wiped her eyes and read the letter again.

Dear Polly Paine,

I must give you warning. I hope this will catch you before you come home. You're going to hear from Mya; she asked if I would send on a letter. And she told me I could break the news to you. Gilbert's fallen in love with another girl. You don't mind, do you? You really were in earnest about him? Ring me up to-night and tell me it's all right, Polly Paine; I'm just a scrap bothered about you. He saw this girl somewhere and without even speaking to her he knew she was the only girl in the world for him; that's what Mya says. It sounds as if it might be the real thing with him at last. He was much too placid and comfortable about you; too brotherly!

"That sounds all right," Margery thought. "I knew he wasn't in love with me. Gilbert must have some of his Italian mother in him; to marry a girl who would 'do splendidly' wouldn't have been at all the thing for him. If he's fallen for somebody at first sight it's much more hopeful."

The Roses were watching her face anxiously, as she thought the matter over.

"You're sure you don't mind?" Virginia asked. "I wouldn't like to feel you'd had your heart broken in our house."

"So that you couldn't bear the sight of Periwinkle Place," Minty added.

"Aw, Polly Paine, you'll come here often, won't you?" Mandy drawled.

Margery's laugh was sincerely heart-whole. "I tell you I'm glad. It's a great relief. And I shall come to Periwinkle Place as often as you'll have me.

"Oh, good girl! Tell us about him! You don't mind now, do you?" Mandy begged.

"Not a bit. He's a baronet, though he's quite young, and he has a huge estate and a big country house. I hated the thought of that sort of life."

"Gosh!" said Araminta. "I'd have made sure of him, if I'd been you!"

"He didn't love me; I was certain of it, and this shows I was right. And I didn't love him a scrap."

"I'd have made myself love him, if he had an estate and was a 'Sir', I guess." Mandy stared at her. "Say, are you quite right in the head? You'd rather have your shop?"

"Much rather," Margery said firmly.

The twins eyed her curiously. "Sure?"

"Certain. Now we can forget all about him. May I have some more of that delicious coffee, Virginia? And will you teach me how to make it? I want to hurry away so that I can get on with things and rush back. By the way," she said shyly, "you'll let me pay for my bed and my lovely meals, I hope?"

A chorus answered her; protest from the twins and explanation from Virginia.

"That's Mrs. Dering's business. She sent you to us. You can't give her five shillings for your bed and breakfast!" Araminta said.

"She planned the houses so that people would have room for guests, and she sends visitors where she thinks they'll fit in best," Virginia explained.

Mandy grinned. "So you came to us, Polly Paine!"

"It's very good of her, and of you," Margery began.

"We'd like to take you to Dorking and put you in the train," Minty said wistfully. "But perhaps, after yesterday, it wouldn't be tactful."

"Don't you think we ought to, Virginia?" Mandy pleaded. "She's our visitor! What if anything happened to her?"

"Between here and Dorking? I won't have you. Tell me the time of the bus and then run along to your jobs. Atalanta will show me the way to the corner, I know."

"I'll come with you to the bus." Nanta spoke shyly but with determination.

Margery had had a few words with Virginia the night before, and she had heard her voice and Nanta's as they went to bed. She was not surprised when the schoolgirl, taking possession of her case and leading her down the brick path, said shyly, "Virginia told me. I'd like to help you. I'll stick to the job. Thank you very much."

Margery laughed. "You won't run away, like the twins?"

"I won't let you down. But you'll leave me part of the day to practise, won't you?"

"Oh, rather! Music's your real job. But I'm sure you'll do better at it if you do something else as well."

Atalanta smiled rather wistfully. "People all say that. But I shall like helping you. Thank you for thinking of it. It makes all the difference."

"How do you mean?"

“Virginia will let me stay at home now. She didn’t think she ought to, if I was going to do music all day. But if I have a part-time job that will be all right. She didn’t want to send me away.”

“And you didn’t want to go?”

“I loathed the very idea,” Nanta said fervently. “I want to stay here, but I want to have a place of my own, and there didn’t seem to be any job for me. I was just ‘the littlest of the Roses’. Now I shall be in the orchestra and in your tuck-shop. I shall feel I’m doing something real and that I’m a proper part of Rainbows.”

“Then we’re all pleased,” Margery laughed. “I’ll be jolly glad to have you. Will you come and help me to settle in?”

“Yes, please. And I’ll be good to your cat. I know you’re bothered about him.”

“Poor Pouffy! He’ll be terribly upset, but I don’t want to be parted from him. It will help, if you’ll comfort him. Why do they call you Nanta? Why not Lanta?”

“Because Nanta was easier to say. The twins were just two and Virginia was only three.” Nanta smiled at her. “L is sometimes difficult for babies. They called me Nanta and it stuck.”

“I like it better than Lanta. What’s this? Not the bus, is it?”

As they reached the main road a motor-cyclist rushed hooting past in the direction of the town.

“It’s Mr. Woodburn,” said Nanta. “He goes to fetch food for some very special birds.”

“We met him yesterday. Mandy called him the Wild Man of the Woods.”

“I expect the food hadn’t arrived and they told him to come back in the morning. He lodges with Mary Garth, the library girl, and her mother, at Applegarth, but sometimes he lives in a weird little shack right inside the Bird Corner. I’ve heard the twins call him that.”

“Minty said——” Margery pulled herself up.

“What did she say?”

“I oughtn’t to repeat it. It was rubbish. Something about Virginia.”

“He looks at Virginia, of course; everybody does,” Nanta said simply. “But he wouldn’t want to marry her. Virginia wouldn’t be at all suitable for a shack in the woods.”

“No, Virginia needs marble halls, or a palace,” Margery agreed gravely.

Atalanta shot a quick look at her. “She’s splendid, isn’t she?”

“You’re going to be exactly like her.”

“Oh no! Nobody could ever be like Virginia.”

“Perhaps the dark man she saw at the dance was a prince and he’ll find her and marry her. Would you mind very much?”

“I’d be glad. She says I can live with her, if she ever gets married. I want her to have the best there is.”

“Good for you, Nanta Rose! The Wild Man has stopped. What’s the matter?”

The cyclist with the wind-tossed hair had left his machine and picked up a small dark object from the road.

“He ran over something. Come and see!” Nanta sped after him.

She was still carrying the case, so Margery had to follow. “I hope we don’t miss the bus! Perhaps he’s killed a mouse.”

Nanta was asking eager questions when Margery reached her. “Is it dead? Did you run over it?”

David Woodburn opened his clasped hands and showed a tiny bird. “It flew right into my screen. I couldn’t help it. I’m afraid it’s broken its neck. Poor little chap! That ’plane terrified

it; it's very young, and the 'plane was too low."

"Perhaps it's only stunned," Margery suggested. "Could Atalanta take it home and keep it warm till you come back? You can't take it with you."

He glanced at her and then looked at Atalanta. "Would you, Nanta? It may recover."

"I'd love to." Nanta dropped the case and held out her cupped hands.

He laid the warm little body in them, and her fingers closed over it gently. "I'll be very careful."

"What is it? A sparrow?" Margery peered at the tiny thing.

"A dicky dunnoek; a hedge-sparrow, you know."

"I thought there was only one kind of sparrow!"

He laughed. "Dunnocks have a beautiful little song. They trill at you from the hedges; not like chirping house-sparrows. You know the dark little dunnocks, don't you, Nanta?"

"You showed me one. Oh! Oh, Margery, I am so sorry!" Nanta cried.

The bus rattled past, paying no heed to Nanta's shout, but hooting angrily because they were standing in the middle of the road.

"That's done it! When is the next?" Margery asked in dismay.

"Not for two hours. Oh, Margery, what will you do?" Nanta wailed. "You'll lose your train! Will you get another quickly?"

"I've no idea. I'd looked up that one. I've two changes: it will throw them out." Margery looked much perturbed. She was inexperienced in travelling, but she knew that cross-country journeys were difficult, and that this disaster might make her very late in reaching home.

David Woodburn was watching their faces. "Were you going to the station? Had you far to go?"

"I have to get to Priorsbury. Reading—then Bristol. It's a difficult journey." Margery looked troubled.

"You'll be late home," Nanta ventured. "Come back and wait till to-morrow, Polly Paine! Virginia and the twins would be pleased. There's a jolly lecture at the house to-night."

"I must get home. But I can't sit here for two hours. I'll come back for an hour, Nanta, and then try again. But I simply mustn't miss the midday bus."

David Woodburn interposed. "If you'd trust me——" he began shyly. "I could run you to the station in no time."

Margery's face lit up. "Would you? Could I catch the eleven o'clock train? Oh, that would be splendid! Thank you just terribly much!"

He smiled at her delight and entire lack of hesitation. "Will you jump in? The sidecar's quite comfortable. It's tremendously brave of you to risk it, when you don't know anything whatever about me."

"I know heaps about you," Margery retorted, going towards her case, because Atalanta's hands were full of baby bird.

Woodburn strode after her, picked it up, and opened the door of the sidecar. "I'll tuck this in at your feet. Good-bye, Nanta Rose! Take the patient home and keep him warm. Feed him, if you can coax him to take anything. He would like a fat juicy worm, but crumbs might do. Oh, by the way, introduce me to your friend before you go!"

"She's Margery Paine. Thank you most awfully for taking her to the station! She's coming to live here," said Nanta.

They left her standing by the road, holding the bird, and raced off after the bus.

"Don't go too fast!" Margery gasped. "I've never been in one of these things before."

Woodburn moderated his speed. "I'll tone her down a bit. Are you really coming to live here?"

"I'm going to start a little sweet-shop for the children. I'm to have that bungalow under the lovely cherry-tree."

"It's a jolly corner. The kiddies will love you. Have you been staying with Miss Rose?"

"Just for one night. I came yesterday, to meet Mrs. Dering and to choose my house. She arranged for me to stay at Periwinkle Place."

"And what do you think you know about me, Miss Paine?"

Margery grinned at the windscreen. "You're a friend of Mrs. Dering's, or you wouldn't be living here. You know the Rose girls, and Atalanta knows I'm in your bike-car. If you don't deliver me safely, you'll have to explain to them. You're keen on birds and very gentle with them; and I think you keep the Bird Sanctuary, though no one has actually said so."

"Right in every point." His grin answered hers.

"Men who keep Bird Sanctuaries don't murder 'revolting females', as Mandy Rose called me. Besides, why should you? It would be very difficult on a crowded main road. I should shriek for help. And you'd have to dispose of the body; that wouldn't be easy either."

He laughed out. "Did Amanda really call you a revolting female? What had you done to deserve it?"

"Taken the seat she wanted. I met them in the bus."

"It sounds like Mandy," he assented. "They're a jolly crowd. Had the twins leave of absence, or had they just taken it?"

"Taken it, I'm afraid. Everybody told them what they thought of them."

"It's not the first time. They won't stick to their work."

"They don't like their jobs. Could you tell me about your birds?"

"I shall have to watch the traffic presently. The birds are all right; small boys are the trouble."

"Yes, I guess so. Do you keep a revolver?"

"I keep a very knobbly stick. Did you say your train was at eleven? You'll have half an hour to wait. May I give you a cup of coffee? You've a cross-country journey before you. There's a good place here."

"Aren't you in a hurry to get back to the stick and the bad boys?"

"They're in school; I've time enough. Let's look in here."

"Do you do anything besides protect birds?" Margery asked, as they sat with coffee and cakes before them.

"Why did you ask that?" he queried.

"Araminta said something about drawing and photographing them. I've a friend who takes lovely photographs; Knight's, the big firm, have used a lot of hers and they've paid her very well. I wondered if you worked for them too."

"Knight's! She must do jolly good work. It's quite an idea, but I haven't done anything for them yet. No, it's for a London firm, a publisher. They're bringing out a book on birds, and they've commissioned me to do the drawings and to supply photographs. I know the chap who is doing the text, so we've thrashed the thing out between us. I have plenty of time and quiet in the Sanctuary, and it's a job I love."

"How fascinating!" Margery exclaimed, in sincere interest. "If I bring Nancybell's photographs to show you, will you let me see your drawings? I'd be thrilled to the limit."

“It’s a bargain,” David Woodburn agreed. “When you’ve started the shop and put it on its feet, you shall come to Bird Corner and criticize my drawings.”

“I’ll love it. Atalanta’s going to help me in the shop.”

“She’ll enjoy that. She hasn’t seemed to have any real niche.”

“She said something like that. You won’t let me lose the train, will you?”

“I’ll see to it,” he smiled. “You mustn’t lose the same train twice. Let’s get along now. I’ll put you safely in, and then I can report to Miss Rose on my way home.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN GILBERT IS USEFUL

Margery banged the door of the “Nance and Polly” for the last time. She ran to the car, jumped in beside Nancybell, and slammed that door also.

“Take us away, Robin! I daren’t look at it again. Our little ‘Nance and Polly’—oh, Nancybell!”

“But think of Cherry-Tree Cottage and your nice Rose girls!” Nancybell pleaded. “If it wasn’t for Robin, I’d be envying you terribly.”

“I know. It’s going to be wonderful. But I hate saying good-bye; the old ‘Nance and Polly’ has been our whole life. If somebody was going to use it, I might come to see it some time. But it’s going to be killed—broken—and turned into pavements and kerb-stones!”

“Be jolly glad you won’t be here to see it.” Nancybell’s young husband took the sharp corner safely and then shot away into the country. “It’s high time that bad angle was straightened out.”

Margery sighed. “Put me to bed, Nance. I must get started on the new life. The old one’s over.”

Nancybell, busy getting her house in order—for Robin’s mother had died and Nance had hurried on her wedding so that she could take the vacant place at the farm—had nobly put aside her own concerns and come to help in closing the little shop. She and Margery had worked hard, with aid from Robin when he could spare time; but his father was handing over more of the responsibility to him and the young couple expected to be very busy.

“You’ve been bricks, you two,” Margery said gratefully, as they approached the farm. “I could never have done it without you.”

“I ought to come with you and help you to settle in,” Nancybell said, as she had said several times before.

“Thanks terribly much, but there’s no need. Virginia is going to see there are fires on, and Nanta will help, and I’m sure I can borrow the twins, if we want them.”

“I’d love to see those twins! And the whole place. We’ll come to look you up one day,” Nancybell promised.

“Give us time to get straight! I wonder how poor Pouffy will like it? I’m dreading the journey; he’ll scream all the way, and he is so heavy. But I’m glad he never saw his old home looking as it does now,” Margery said. “It’s been good of you to have him through all the mess.”

“He hasn’t been too unhappy. He likes me, and he’s been quite at home, since you brought his old red cushions,” Nancybell said. “But he’s been much happier these last few days, when you’ve been here to sleep with him; you’re his one-and-only real lady! You’re sure you wouldn’t like him to stay with us while you get his house ready?”

“I’d have to come and fetch him. No, thanks; I’ll manage somehow, and we’ll start life at Cherry-Tree Cottage together. I wish you could see it! It really is pretty, though Pouffy won’t care about that. I’m trusting to those cushions to make him feel at home.”

“You’re stiff with tiredness,” Nancybell said, as they drew up before the farmhouse. “Hop into a hot bath and then into bed, and I’ll bring you and Pouffy some supper. Then you can roll over and go to sleep.”

“Oh, *would* you? Is it fair?” Margery protested.

“Best thing to do. Run along and collect your Pouffe. Every time you disappear he thinks you’ve gone for ever.”

Margery was in her dressing-gown, almost ready for the much-needed bath, when the phone rang. She paused, wondering if it could be last good wishes from Elsa.

“Polly Paine!” Nancybell shouted and came racing up the stair. “It’s Gilbert,” she lowered her voice cautiously. “Shall I tell him he can’t speak to you? He’s home on business for a few days; and he’s heard your plans from Mya. He wants to talk to you, but if you’re in the bath he can’t. What about it?”

“I’ll come,” Margery said promptly. “I don’t mind speaking to him now.” And she ran to the telephone.

“Hullo, Gilbert! Polly Paine speaking. I’m so awfully glad to hear from Mya that you’ve found a really nice girl at last.”

She could imagine his rueful grin; it was obvious in his embarrassed voice. “You do mean that, Polly Paine? You were too right: I didn’t know what I was talking about.”

“I knew that,” Margery assured him. “You were much too cool and calculating. If you’ve plunged head over heels, and are thrilled to the bones, it’s much more what I should expect.”

“I’m all that. Don’t worry; I’m in earnest this time. You’re quite sure——?”

“I’m delighted, and overjoyed, and terribly thrilled. I want to hear all about her,” Margery said calmly. “When are you going to tell me? I’m sure I’ve a right to know. I feel like your mother. I hope she’s worthy of you.”

“I’m not good enough for her, by a long way! She’s a wonderful girl. But I didn’t ring up for that. Are you really moving to-morrow? Can’t I do anything to help?”

“I don’t see what you can do, thanks very much. All my goods are packed in a big van, and it’s on its way to Sussex. The men have promised to deliver the stuff at midday to-morrow. Only Pouffy and I are left, and we shall make an early start.”

“How do you go?”

“The usual way. Car to Priorsbury—train to Bristol—train to Reading—another to Dorking, and then a bus. With a suitcase and a handbag and a screaming cat in a huge basket, it won’t be exactly a picnic, but we shall worry through. I shall find help at the stations; I’ll need it.”

“You can’t do all that alone. I’m coming along to help.”

“You’re not. Terribly kind of you, but I’d rather be alone with my Pouffe. His cries will break my heart, and they’d be harassing to anyone else. No, thank you, Gilbert! I shall be all right. Nancybell would come, but an aunt of Robin’s is arriving to-morrow night and Nance must be here.”

“I didn’t mean to escort you in all those trains and changes. I shall bring the car, with Martin to drive so that we can talk, and I shall take you and the creature all the way by road. Much simpler, when it’s so cross-country.”

“Gilbert!” Margery cried. “Oh, *would* you? *Could* you? You don’t know how I was dreading that journey!”

“Good! How early shall I come?”

“As soon as you like. I’ll be ready by eight.”

“I shan’t,” Gilbert laughed. “But I’ll leave here by eight. Right! I’ll go and talk to Martin. See you to-morrow, then,” and he rang off.

“Nance! Nance!” Margery shouted.

“What were you screaming at Gilbert like that for?” Nancybell asked severely.

“He’s going to take me in the car, all the way by road. Isn’t that marvellous?”

“Good for Gilbert!” said Gilbert’s cousin. “He really has shown sense this time. Now I shan’t be worried about you.”

“It’s the most immense relief,” Margery sighed happily. “I shall have to tell Pouffy he isn’t going in a train, after all!”

“Pouffe will give up the train journey with pleasure,” Nancybell said, with conviction.

“Are you sure you can bear this?” Margery asked, as she staggered out to the car and handed the big basket to Gilbert. Wails of distress from the imprisoned Pouffe rent the air, and he tore at the wicker in an attempt to break out. “Pouffy, don’t be silly! If you don’t go with me now, you’ll never see me again.”

“Martin and I have braced ourselves to endure it,” Gilbert grinned. “Isn’t he an old idiot?”

“It must be rather terrifying,” Margery pleaded. “I hope he’ll give up in despair soon and go to sleep. But even if he yells all the way it will be much better than having him in the train and bus. I’m sorry to inflict this on you and Martin, but it would be worse with strangers.”

“Well, I say!” Gilbert began, when the farewells were over and Nancybell and Robin were left waving at the gate of the farm. “If we closed the windows, couldn’t you take him on your lap? Wouldn’t he feel better? I expect it’s the basket he doesn’t like.”

Margery’s face lit up. “Would you? I know you like the windows open, and so do I, of course, but just for once, till he gets used to the car—oh, Gilbert, would you be so angelic? He’ll go to sleep in my lap, and then we can open them again.”

Gilbert laughed, grateful to the Pouffe because an awkward meeting had passed off easily. He closed the windows, except for an inch at the top. “Now let’s see. That crack is no use to your monster.”

Margery opened the basket, which lay on the floor at her feet, and the angry Pouffe leapt out, sprang on her knee, and stood with his great tail lashing furiously and his yellow eyes glaring. She put her arms round him, coaxing and soothing him, and presently to everybody’s relief he crouched in her lap, and at last tucked his feet under him, draped his plume over his nose and settled down, only grunting in disgust at the strange sounds around him and starting violently at any sudden noise.

“There, darlint! Oh, good boy!” Margery murmured, and sat with her arms round him, ready to tighten them at a moment’s notice if he showed signs of waking. “Now, Gilbert! Are you going to own up? Tell me all about—oh! Oh, sorry! Of course, you can’t. What a blow!”

Gilbert had poked her in the ribs, frowning and shaking his head. Margery looked at Martin’s impassive back and realized the impossibility of discussing the future mistress of Summerton at such close quarters. Deeply disappointed, she changed the subject and began to talk of her hopes and plans.

“We’ll pull up somewhere about eleven and have coffee and buns,” said Gilbert cheerfully.

Margery nodded. “I’ll be glad, and I’m sure you will. You must have had a terribly early start. If you knew how grateful I am!”

“Good! I want to see your new house.”

“There’s not much to see yet,” Margery protested. “Come back in a month and bring Nancybell and Mya, and I’ll sell you sweets and let you sit in the children’s club-room. It’s only a cottage, but it’s very pretty.”

“Must you really be there by twelve?” Gilbert asked, a couple of hours later. “We’re not going to have time for that coffee. Would it matter if you were half an hour late?”

“Oh, I mustn’t be late!” Margery cried. “What if the van had arrived and they’d unpacked and put everything in the wrong places, or dumped the stuff in the garden?”

“Could they get in?”

“I gave one key to Atalanta; she offered to have the place clean and ready. She felt so important at being trusted with a key! Please, Gilbert! I mustn’t be late. I’m sorry, but we’ll have coffee together another time. I’m sorry for other reasons too.”

“I can’t persuade Martin to put on any more speed,” Gilbert grumbled. “He’s adamant; we’re doing as much as he’ll allow. If I were driving, now——!”

They saw Martin’s mouth twitch. Margery said grimly, “Martin knows what would happen. You might run over somebody.”

“Oh, all right!” Gilbert growled, uneasy at a gruesome memory. “But I bet you that van won’t have arrived.”

“Nanta’s expecting me by the twelve o’clock bus,” Margery explained. “Even if the van hasn’t turned up, she’d be terribly worried if the bus passed and I wasn’t there.”

“O.K.,” Gilbert said grumpily. “Then I can’t tell you things, that’s all.”

Margery leaned close to him. “You could whisper her name,” she said in his ear.

Gilbert’s colour rose, and he murmured a name: “Virginia.”

Margery started back with a smothered shout, and stared at him. “Gilbert! You don’t mean ——?”

He caught her wrist. “What do *you* mean? You can’t know her!” He checked himself and glared at Martin’s back.

“But I do,” Margery said firmly. “There couldn’t be two.”

“Martin, what’s up?” Gilbert exclaimed, as the car slowed and came to a halt.

“Something I don’t quite like, Sir Gilbert. I’ll have a look. There may be something wrong.” The man swung down from the car and slammed the door, and went to peer into the engine.

Gilbert and Margery looked at one another. “Did he guess?” Margery whispered.

Gilbert was scarlet. “I’ll bet he did! Martin doesn’t miss much. Tell me quickly, Polly Paine. How can you know her?”

“Bless Martin! What a decent chap. Is your Virginia tall, as tall as you, and fair, with rather nice blue eyes?”

“Marvellous blue eyes!” Gilbert corrected her. “I saw her in a garden. She was dancing in the crowd; she was the most wonderful thing you ever saw—like a bird.”

“I haven’t seen her dance, but I can believe it. She moves beautifully, even when she walks. Didn’t you speak to her?”

“I didn’t get a chance. I found out her name, and then she’d gone. I was so bowled over that I came away to think about it.” He flushed awkwardly. “I’d thought that—that you——”

“That I was the right girl,” Margery helped him out. “I told you I wasn’t, but you wouldn’t believe it. I’m glad Virginia taught you sense. Then you’re the dark man who was so distinguished and looked like a prince!” She eyed him critically. “I shouldn’t quite have said that myself, but perhaps I know you too well. I can see her point——”

Gilbert gripped her wrist again. “Did she say that? She saw me? Do you mean she remembered me?”

“You never went on like this about me,” Margery murmured. “Yes, of course, she went home and told her sisters about the tall handsome dark man at the dance. I don’t mean”—hurriedly—“that she fell in love with you, or any stuff like that, but she saw you all right. You know her full name—Virginia Rose? Isn’t it pretty?”

“Virginia Seymour would be better.”

“Lady Seymour! It would suit Virginia,” Margery said reflectively.

“Where did you see her, Polly Paine?” Gilbert pleaded. “Oh—dash! Martin’s coming back.”

“He thinks we’ve had long enough, and he wants to get me home on time. Good chap, Martin! She lives in Rainbows New Village,” Margery said rapidly. “My assistant, Atalanta, is her little sister. Her house is called Periwinkle Place; it’s quite near my cottage. You can go and call on her. I shall be too busy to go with you, I’m afraid.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

GETTING MARGERY SETTLED

It seemed to Martin that his passengers were slightly self-conscious as he took his place and the car sped on. Of one thing he was sure, there had been no love-making, and that was a relief. Margery Paine was a nice girl, but she would be quite out of place as Lady Seymour. If there was somebody else—and the words which had made him decide that his engine needed examination had seemed to suggest it—that was all to the good; she might be more suitable than the girl from the little shop in Road Street. The household at Summerton was well aware of its young head's taste for pretty girls; they would be glad to see him safely married. But not to Margery Paine.

"We're nearly there," Margery said, after a silence. "Martin's found the way wonderfully. That hill with the big white palace on the top—do you see? We go round the foot, past the aerodrome; yes, there it is. And here's the old village, with the church. Rainbows New Village is a mile further on."

"Gosh, what a mess!" Gilbert was roused from longing thoughts of Virginia Rose by the sight of the destruction which faced them as they turned the corner. "Couldn't she manage without cutting the trees? The people I know call it 'That ghastly spot', and I don't blame them."

"It is rather raw," Margery admitted. "But every tree that could be left was spared. In a year or two it will look better. The houses aren't all up yet. Here's my cottage, up this red-brick path; but there isn't any van," and she hustled the protesting Pouffe into his basket again.

"I told you it wouldn't turn up. We could have had coffee, after all," Gilbert grumbled, looking round with loathing at the tree-stumps and the bare patches where undergrowth had been cleared.

"It was a choice between trees and houses, and houses mean homes." Margery read his expression correctly. "A home for me, and a home for your Virginia."

They were standing on the path, looking at the grey cottage, while the Pouffe rent the air with heart-broken wails.

"You might never have met Virginia, if she hadn't come to live here," Margery reminded him. "You can't grumble! Here is her young sister."

Gilbert's eyes fastened on Atalanta as she ran from the cottage, her yellow plaits hanging beside her face. "By Jove—yes! Virginia before she put her hair up!" he murmured.

"Oh, Polly Paine! Nothing's come, except Mr. Woodburn! He's going to help the men carry the things up the path," Nanta cried.

David Woodburn came from the doorway. His eyes rested on Gilbert in surprise and acute dislike. "I thought I might be useful," he said. "But you won't need my help. I'll push along."

Gilbert looked at him with interest and then turned a reproachful gaze on Margery. "You didn't tell me you had a new pal!"

"I haven't. I've only met him once. It's frightfully decent of him to come to help," Margery said quickly. She turned to the Bird Watcher. "That's terribly kind of you! I'd forgotten the things would have to be carried so far. Please stay and help us! I'm sure the men will be glad. Oh, here comes the van; how clever of them! Please, Mr. Woodburn! Will you

break it gently to the men that there's quite a long way to carry the stuff? The van can't possibly get to the door."

"I'll talk to them." Woodburn strode down the brick path to the road.

"Can't you stifle that cat?" Gilbert demanded. "And who is the fellow, anyway?"

"The Wild Man of the Woods. But he's very kind and gentle. You should see him handle a hurt bird. Pouffy, how silly you are! Nanta, *could* you take him and shut him up for an hour or two? I'm sure Virginia wouldn't mind. We could bring him back when his bedroom's ready. He's terrified of men; if he sees them he'll dash away and I shall never find him again."

"I'll lock him up in Mandy's room; she won't be in till teatime. I'll leave a note for Virginia; she's practising with the orchestra." Nanta seized the basket.

"Don't try to carry it. He's too heavy for you. Gilbert will take him," Margery cried.

Gilbert picked up the basket. "Let's get rid of the beast. Which is the house, Miss Rose?"

"Virginia is Miss Rose. I'm Atalanta." Nanta led him along another red path. "It isn't far."

Margery stifled a laugh at sight of Gilbert's face as he stalked away with the wailing cat. "Poor Gilbert! But he'll see Virginia's house, even if she isn't there. I hope she'll be kind to him. They'd make a nice couple, and she needs a mansion as a background!"

When Gilbert and Nanta returned, good friends already, he stared in surprise for a moment, and then an amused grin spread over his face; for Martin, the immaculate, had left his coat in the car and was helping David Woodburn to carry in a heavy sideboard, while Margery directed them to the front room.

"Gosh, look at the perfect chauffeur!" Gilbert said to himself. And then—"Oh well, here goes! I can't stand and look on! We'll lend a hand too, shall we?"

"Oh, rather! Everybody's helping," Nanta cried gleefully, quite shaken out of her remote manner. "Come on! What shall we carry?"

"Not those books, they're too heavy for you. Leave them for me. You take the little chair."

"You do think I'm feeble!" Atalanta jeered.

"You mustn't hurt yourself," Gilbert said, with the authority of a would-be brother-in-law. "Your sister would be upset."

Margery's eyes widened when she saw what was happening. "In here, please. Oh, Gilbert, you are good! I never meant to let you in for this!"

"It's a pleasure. Great sport, honestly," he said gallantly. "Can't leave it all to the Wild Man. When I saw Martin I could have died! But I had to join up. Can't let Martin have all the fun!" he said loudly.

Martin grinned. He was delighted to help to settle Margery Paine so far from Summerton. He had not yet realized that she was no great distance, in a car, from Oxford, where Gilbert would spend the next few months.

"Thank you all more than I can say!" Margery said fervently, when the empty van had rattled away. "Thanks to you three, everything is not only in the house but in the right rooms. Atalanta and I have only to move them round a little and then I shall be straight and ready for the Pouffe."

"Is that the unhappy cat?" David looked down at her and smiled. "Tell him to keep away from my birds!"

"I'll explain to him. Perhaps I could put a bell on him. He has such a thick coat that he'd never feel it. What do we do now? It's after one; everybody must be starving. I brought sandwiches, but I'm afraid I can't feed you all. I'd like to do it, but——"

“I’m going back to my billet,” said David. “But I shall come round again later and I’ll move anything you wish. Promise you won’t try to do it yourselves!”

He looked so determined that Margery said hurriedly, “We won’t do anything silly. We’ll plan out the rooms and then we’ll wait for you, if you really will help again. It’s more than kind of you. Gilbert, I’d love to feed you and Martin, but——”

“I’ll say you can’t. Where can I get a meal?” He looked at Woodburn.

“There’s a good inn in the old village, opposite the church. They’ll do you well there.”

“That will be O.K.; thanks very much. See you later, Polly Paine.”

“Oh, you mustn’t come back! You’ve all that way to go home!” Margery protested.

“I’ve one more thing to do.” Gilbert’s eyes met hers, full of meaning.

“Oh! Well, if you must!” Margery sounded doubtful.

“I can’t go away without doing it.” Gilbert took his coat and went to the car.

“What did he mean?” Nanta asked curiously.

“He wants to see somebody. Will you share my sandwiches? Or does Virginia expect you? I’ve plenty for two girls, but not nearly enough for three hungry men.”

“I must go home. Virginia will be back now. But I’ll come and help you again. Shall I bring the cat? I’m dying to see him, but I didn’t dare to look, for fear he’d jump out and get away.”

“I’ll come and fetch him. We’ll carry him between us; he’s a fearful weight. But I must get things ready for him. He loves the big chair; if I put his cushions in it perhaps he’ll settle down. Leave him in the basket for a little longer, Nanta. He’s probably gone to sleep again.”

And Margery turned to her kitchen, to put her kettle on the gas stove for the first time and to make her first cup of tea in Cherry-Tree Cottage.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE POUFFE COMES HOME

The sun was pouring into the front rooms. Margery's eyes shone with eager happiness as she set her teapot and cup, and a plate for sandwiches, on the wide window-sill of the future club-room and hoisted herself up beside them. She looked over the little garden and down the brick path to the road; the windows of the kitchen and her bedroom looked out on the tiny lawn, the cherry-tree, and then on more trees and gardens.

"I'm going to love it all. It's so quiet; we were right on the street at home and it was noisy. It was dark, too, compared with this light, jolly place; the street was narrow and the houses opposite shut out the sun. I do like it here! And how kind everybody is. Fancy the Wild Man of the Woods carrying my furniture! And Gilbert! *And* Martin!"

Blissfully happy, now that the wrench of leaving home was over, she leaned against the window-frame and rested, drinking in the sunshine and the bird-songs from the trees.

"I must make Mr. Woodburn tell me what the birds are called. We had no trees near us in Priorsbury, and I never went on the marshes with Robin, as Nancybell did. I wonder if any of them are dunnocks? I'm glad that little one wasn't killed. Nanta says it flew away quite happily before Mr. Woodburn came back. Things seem much greener than they were; I suppose there are more leaves on the trees. My cherry-blossom has gone; I must look forward to next year, and Mrs. Dering said the tree would be red in the autumn. I've a lot to learn about country things, but there are plenty of people to teach me, and they all seem kind and friendly."

Her meal and rest-time over, she hurried to the bedroom, put the furniture in order, and made up the bed. "I may change things later, but that will do for Pouffy. Here's his big chair; the cushions are in his basket. Now a dish of milk and those bits of liver I brought for his dinner; he'll be famished. Now I'll go—oh, here's somebody! Gilbert!" severely. "Have you had any lunch? You've been very quick!"

"We ought to get home. Sure you don't need me any more, Polly Paine? Then I'll fetch the cat, shall I?"

"I'll come too. No, I'll get on here. Mr. Woodburn might come back," Margery said, and saw a look of relief on his face. "Thanks, Gilbert. If you would bring Pouffy, I'd be terribly grateful."

"He hopes Virginia will be at home. He didn't want me," she said to herself, as she set to work in the kitchen, dusting china and stacking it in the cupboard, for the men had unpacked the cases and taken them away, and the room was littered with plates and glasses, pans and pots. "He must manage things his own way. I should have thought he'd like me to introduce him! Nanta doesn't know who he is; she only saw that I came in his car. I shall have to do all this again; it isn't how I want it. But I haven't had time to think things out, and I must have the table cleared."

She was working hard when the door was flung open and Gilbert stood there, without Atalanta, without the basket, his face white.

"Gilbert! What's the matter?" Margery gasped.

"I found her," he said hoarsely. "She knew me. She called out something—I think she said, 'It's you!'—and then she ran away."

“Ran away? But what was wrong?”

“I’ve no idea. She dashed out the back way, through the garden, into the park. I—didn’t go after her. How could I?”

Margery leant back against the laden table and stared at him. “It was much better not. You wouldn’t have found her; she knows the way and you don’t. But what’s the matter with the girl?”

“I can’t imagine,” Gilbert said drearily. “I found her, but she ran away. She wouldn’t speak to me. I can’t do any more. Good-bye, Polly Paine! I hope you’ll like it here.” He turned and went towards the car.

Margery darted after him. “One minute, Gilbert! If you go, I’ll follow you and say it before Martin.”

Gilbert paused. “What is there to say?”

“I haven’t had time to think. But this seems obvious. Virginia must care, or she wouldn’t have run away. She remembers you, and she likes you. For some reason she’s frightened. Why should she be afraid, if she doesn’t care two hoots about you? She isn’t shy, or nervy; she can face up to anybody. But if she’s afraid of liking you, for some extraordinary reason, or afraid that you’re going to like her, then of course she’d run away. Gilbert, do believe it! It’s the only possible reason for the way she behaved.”

Gilbert looked down at her, his dark eyes kindling with hope. “Do you mean that?”

“I do mean it, and I’m going to find out what’s wrong. Go home, Gilbert, and keep on thinking about her, and don’t be worried. I’m sure there’s some silly reason. Perhaps she feels she can’t marry till the younger girls are fixed up in good jobs; they certainly aren’t settled at present! Or there may be something else. I hope to goodness there isn’t anything horrible in the family, like insanity or tuberculosis! The girls all seem perfectly well. I’ll find out, Gilbert; really I will. I’ll make her tell me.”

“That’s jolly decent of you, Polly Paine. I was knocked all to bits when I found her and she ran away. Can you find out, do you think?”

“I shall find out,” Margery said firmly. “She can’t be allowed to treat my friends like this. Don’t be miserable, Gilbert! I’ll put things right for you!”

A little comforted, Gilbert went to the car, and drove away with Martin.

Margery stood at the gate till the car was out of sight. Then, looking sober, she found a strong stick, which Nancybell had used on the marshes, and went off to Periwinkle Place.

Atalanta met her at the door. “He came here, Polly Paine—the nice man from the car. But he went away without taking the basket. You said I mustn’t carry it alone.”

“Where’s Virginia, Nanta?”

“Out, in the park.” Nanta looked troubled. “Does she know him? She went out when he came.”

“She’s seen him once before. I want to know why she ran away. There’s nothing the matter with him.”

“Is he the dark man she saw at the dance?”

“Seems to be. Why did she run away?”

“I don’t know.” Nanta’s troubled look deepened. “She was upset. Perhaps she doesn’t like him.”

“Well, I want to know. But we’ll see about that later. Let’s take Pouffy home; we’ll carry him between us. We’ll put this stick through the handle and we’ll each take an end. His room and his dinner are waiting for him.”

The Pouffe's wails began again when he found himself once more on the move.

"Silly boy!" Margery said severely. "But your travels are nearly over. I should think the whole village knows you've arrived!"

They found David Woodburn waiting at the open door of the bungalow. He came to meet them and took the basket in his strong hands.

"Where do I put the unhappy fellow? I thought you had ran away and left all your goods."

"In here, thanks." Margery opened the door of the back room. "Nanta, you may come and see what happens; but it will be much better if you don't, Mr. Woodburn, if you don't mind. He doesn't like strange men, and he's feeling bad enough. I'll come and help in a minute."

David laughed and withdrew. "Don't be long. I may do all the wrong things, in my efforts to put your house straight."

Margery closed the door and windows, and then opened the basket, and a miserable object crawled out, fur, ears, and tail drooping. He gave a wild look round and dashed for the bed and hid himself beneath it.

"Silly lad!" Margery scolded, shaking out the red cushions and arranging them in the chair he loved. "Push that milk and liver under the bed, Nanta, and we'll leave him to get on with it. He'll have a week's washing to do before he'll feel happy. We'll go and see what kind of mess Mr. Woodburn is making."

They slipped out carefully and shut the Pouffe in alone.

"Is the gent all right?" David was lifting pans on to the kitchen shelves.

"Oh, very unhappy! We won't go into that room just now. At night I shall shut every door and window and let him out, and he'll sniff in all the corners and get used to things."

David gave valuable help, carrying books up to the big attic, hanging pictures, moving furniture, easing the large sideboard into the right position.

"That's a jolly piece," he said. "You've a lot of good stuff, if I may say so, Miss Paine."

Margery flushed. "That's nice of you. I'm glad you think so. Some of these belonged to my mother's and father's parents. I wondered if I'd sell them; they're clumsy, and I could get modern stuff. But I'm fond of the old things and it feels homelike to have them here."

"Oh, don't sell them, unless you must!" he said quickly.

Margery watched him in amusement and thought of the contrast between her helpers; Gilbert, neat and slim, not a black hair out of place, beautifully dressed—David Woodburn in old slacks and a patterned pullover, with ruffled fair hair. "It's terribly good of them both," she said to herself.

David refused to stay for tea, saying that school was over and he must be in his Sanctuary, in case of birds'-nesters. He went off, begging Margery to leave a note at Applegarth, where he lodged, if she found anything heavy must be shifted, and promising to look in next day to be sure the weeping cat had settled down.

Margery made tea for herself and Atalanta, and then locked all the doors and windows and set free the bewildered Pouffe.

"Come along, poor boy! Have a good look at your new house!"

The Pouffe, completely shaken out of his placid self by this horror that had come upon him, crept from his hiding-place under the bed, in response to her voice.

"He's eaten all the liver," Nanta said jubilantly. "He is huge! He's a beauty!"

"He looks terrible," Margery laughed. "Poor miserable object you are, Pouffy! I hope you'll soon feel better." She picked him up and loved and soothed him, and then put him down in the kitchen. "Go and explore! You'll need to get used to things."

The Pouffe crept about, almost on his stomach, his eyes wild with fear of this new world. They watched him, speaking encouragingly to him at times, and went quietly on with their work, to let him see there was nothing to be afraid of.

"It's hard on him," Margery said. "It's the second new home in a few weeks. He had to stay with my friend while we were clearing out the other house. He settled down there, and now he's been uprooted again. I'm sorry for him, but I couldn't bear to leave him behind. Look at him now!"

The Pouffe had leapt on to the window-sill, his ears flat against his head, his staring eyes still wild, his great tail lashing angrily as he gazed out at an unknown garden, new trees and grass, strange sights and sounds. A car shot past on the not-very-distant road, reminding him of the terrifying noises of the day. He jumped down with a resounding thud and scuttled back into the bedroom.

Nanta giggled. "Don't his little fur trousers look funny? Just like baggy plus-fours!"

"Oh, good!" Margery cried. "He's found his chair. That feels like home, doesn't it, boy?"

She knelt and put her arms round him. He reached out a pink tongue and kissed her forehead gently, then gave a long tired sigh and snuggled down on his red cushions, folding his plume over his face to shut out the queer new world.

Margery kissed him and slipped away, shutting him in again. "All's going to be well, Nanta. But I'll not let him out for a few days unless I go with him. He'll soon make friends with you. Now we'll—what's this?"

"It's the twins. They want to see your house."

"Nanta, what have you done to Virginia?" Minty cried, coming up the path with her arm linked in Mandy's. "She's as cross as a whole bundle of sticks, and I think she's been howling."

"The dark man from the dance appeared suddenly and she ran away," Atalanta said simply.

"Gosh!" The twins gazed at her. "You don't mean that?"

"But where did he come from?" Araminta demanded.

"Must have come with Polly Paine," Amanda said. "She's the only stranger to arrive to-day."

"Don't be an ass, dear child," Minty began.

"Oh, but she isn't! He brought me in his car. And was I grateful? I can't think how I'd have managed alone," Margery said.

Mandy and Minty stared blankly. "He brought you? Her dark man from the dance? You know him? But you didn't tell us!" They spoke in a breathless duet.

"I didn't know. He told me this morning that the girl he'd found and hadn't spoken to, the 'somebody else' instead of me, was called Virginia Rose."

Mandy sat down hurriedly. "He's—you are—oh, I'm going round and round!"

Minty pulled the red scarf off her head and flapped it in her twin's face. "Pull yourself together, girl! Margery's baronet, whom she doesn't want for a boy-friend, is Virginia's prince from the dance. That right, Polly Paine?"

"Quite," Margery said grimly. "What I want to know is—why did Virginia run away when she saw him? He was frightfully hurt."

"He's awfully nice, Minty," Nanta put in. "And terribly good-looking."

"Run away? Did she?" Minty exclaimed.

"She wouldn't even speak to him. She rushed out into the park. He was dreadfully cut up."

The twins looked at one another. “It’s that old——” Minty bit off the next words.

“She said she wouldn’t be able to marry,” Mandy added.

“Not without telling.” Minty finished the sentence.

“Telling what?” Margery pleaded. “That’s what I want to know.”

Another look passed between the twins. Mandy shook her head. “We can’t tell you.”

“It’s a family matter,” Minty said firmly. “We can’t talk about it.”

“But we can talk to Virginia,” Mandy suggested.

“Yes, rather! Come on!”

And before Margery could speak they were gone, racing down the path towards Periwinkle Place.

Bewildered, Margery looked at Nanta. “What do they mean?”

“I must go too. There’s something Virginia won’t tell anybody. But she said she couldn’t get married without telling.” And the smallest Rose rushed after the other two.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MARGERY ON THE WARPATH

Margery shrugged her shoulders and turned back to her work. "Poor Virginia! I wouldn't like to be hustled by the twins. I'll go later; it isn't fair. So there is a secret! I do hope it's nothing serious."

Thinking of tragic possibilities, she was very grave as she stacked her glass jars and boxes of sweets on the new shelves. Presently she glanced into the bedroom and was satisfied to see the Pouffe in a sleep of exhaustion.

"He won't move for hours. I'll lock him in," and she tested the casement windows, opening the top lights to their widest, and left the Pouffe to take care of the house.

Too much burdened, for Gilbert's sake, to rejoice completely in the evening sun and the bird-songs, she went along under the trees to Periwinkle Place.

Atalanta met her at the door, looking anxious. "I ought to have stayed to help you. Did you mind? Minty says I'm as bad as they are, for running away."

"Don't listen to Minty. You had to be with Virginia, if they were going to scold her."

"I knew you'd understand. I had to stand by her."

"Can I speak to her?"

"I don't think so. The twins talked a lot, and she locked herself into our room."

"I'm not surprised. Then can I speak to the twins? We won't tease Virginia."

"They're digging, out at the back."

"Which way?" Margery's tone was firm.

Atalanta led her to the back door and followed to hear what was said.

Mandy and Minty were working off their indignation on the vegetable patch. Mandy looked up. "Here comes the revolting female, Minty. Will you deal with her?"

"Needn't be rude, child," Minty reproved her. "She must be bursting with questions."

"I'm only going to ask one question, but I want it answered." Margery stood determinedly before them. "It's obvious Virginia has a secret. It's something to do with marrying. Is there anything terrible in your family to make marriage impossible for all of you—disease, or something that might be inherited?"

The twins stared at her in such blank surprise that the question was answered before they spoke.

"She means insanity. It's because of us," Minty chuckled. "I don't blame her. She's seen Mandy, and she thinks——"

"She's seen and heard you," Mandy said sadly. "No, Margery, truth and honour, it's nothing like that. We can't give Ginny away; not yet. But there's nothing to be upset about."

"You needn't be frightened," Minty grinned. "How Ginny will shriek!"

"I was frightened," Margery confessed. "I had to know."

"It's rather silly, really," Mandy admitted. "But in spite of Araminta we aren't insane as a family, Polly Paine. It's just something Virginia doesn't want to tell; she feels quite strongly about it."

"But she wouldn't let it spoil two lives, if it isn't serious, would she?" Margery asked anxiously.

“Oh, they aren’t in love yet!” Minty attacked her border again. “They like the look of one another, but that’s all. It wouldn’t ruin the baronet’s life if he never saw her again.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” Margery said soberly. “He’s very much in earnest. He was quite white when he told me she had run away from him.”

“Poor boy!” Minty mocked. “Virginia cried quarts.”

“We want to see him,” Mandy urged. “Can’t you bring him back?”

“Not if Virginia’s going to run away again.”

“We’ve given her a fortnight,” Minty said unexpectedly.

“How do you mean?”

“Before we tell you what it’s all about,” Amanda explained. “A week for each of us.”

“Oh! But ought you to tell, unless she agrees?”

“Don’t know. But we shall do it. We’ll let her be an idiot for a certain length of time, but not for ever,” Araminta explained.

“Then it’s only Virginia’s secret?” Margery asked curiously.

“Oh no! It’s the same for all of us. But it was Ginny who decided not to tell.”

“There’s more in it than that, Minty,” Amanda observed.

“I know. It’s Ginny’s responsibility; she’s head of the family. We did what she wanted.”

“You know how she feels. Oh, Polly Paine, don’t look like that, or I shall have to tell you right now!”

“You promised, Amanda!” Minty cried.

“Yes, but if the revolting female looks so pathetic and bewildered I shall have to ease her mind.”

“Have you found jobs for us, Polly Paine?” Araminta demanded.

“I’ve done something about it, but nothing’s going to happen at present. If you can keep secrets so can I.” Margery turned to go.

The twins looked at one another. “We can’t let Ginny blight our lives, whatever she does with her own,” Margery heard Araminta say.

She went back to Cherry-Tree Cottage, and, suddenly very tired, prepared supper for herself and the Pouffe and went to bed. She was no sooner lying down than she felt a large soft hand laid tentatively on her; the rest of the Pouffe followed, as he leapt on the bed and crept close to her, singing with joy.

“Oh, Pouffy, dear, you are too big!” she protested. “But you’ve had a dreadful day; do you want to be comforted? Well, just for to-night, then, to make us both feel at home!” and her arms closed round him.

“We’ll see about that,” the Pouffe sang joyfully, and snuggled down close to her and forgot his troubles.

Margery sighed, and between his happy snores and her own thoughts about the puzzling Roses she had a restless night.

But next morning the sun was shining again, the birds were singing, and there was work to be done. She was in her own little house, and the moving and all the partings were in the past. “Polly’s” would soon open its doors to the children, and she was fast making friends. Even the Pouffe seemed a little more reconciled to his lot. Margery felt better and sang softly as she prepared two breakfasts.

The butcher called and promised to bring liver or lights or heart regularly for the cat.

“My, he’s a whopper, ain’t he?” the boy said, as the Pouffe sat on the window-sill and gazed out at him severely.

“He needs a lot to eat, to keep up that fine coat, so don’t let him down.”

“I won’t forget the gent,” the boy grinned.

The Pouffe still shrank from the strange world outside and refused to go near the little garden. He retired occasionally into the small garage, where the unwanted boxes were stored, but that was the limit to which he would go, and Margery confided to Atalanta that she was afraid he would never go out.

“I did want him to enjoy the garden,” she said. “He hadn’t one at home, only a yard, but he loved the garden at the farm, and I hoped he’d like this one too.”

“But he might run away into the park and be lost. You’d never find him there,” Nanta said, stroking the big soft head gently. “He is a beauty!”

The Pouffe gave her a look of silent scorn. If he wanted to go out he would go, and he would always find his way back to the one-and-only lady and her inviting bed and all that liver and milk. But he did not want to go; the garden was a strange world and he did not think it was safe.

“Here’s Mrs. Dering,” Atalanta said presently, as they tidied the front room. “Doesn’t she look nice? I’d love to ride.”

Margery glanced out, and saw Doranne, in brown breeches and a green jersey and a soft hat, mounted on a brown horse who was picking his way daintily up the red brick path to the gate. A groom followed, keeping a close eye on his mistress.

“Good morning, Polly Paine! How did you sleep? Are you going to like our village? Are you getting straight?” was Mrs. Dering’s cheery greeting.

Margery went to meet her. “How kind of you to care! I love your village, and my house is almost tidy. I’d have slept well, if I hadn’t had a monstrous cat on my bed, but he had to be comforted.”

“What a shame!” Doranne said laughing. “My Geoffrey’s a monster too, and he sleeps on my bed when he can. Did you have to coil yourself round him, while he slept in the very middle of the bed? May I see him?”

“Do come in, if you’ve time,” Margery said eagerly.

Doranne followed her in. “I want so much to see what you’re making of it. Oh, Margery, what a lovely boy! Will he let me speak to him?”

“I expect he’ll know you have a cat of your own. But he may not be quite sure you aren’t a man. You’d better explain.”

Doranne laughed. “My breeches may deceive him. Pouffy, old boy, it’s a lady. May she stroke you under the chin? That’s what Geoffrey likes.”

The Pouffe was not cheated by the breeches. This was a lady, and the sort of lady he liked. He stretched his great head towards her, and she laughed and rumped his coat, while she looked round the room and exclaimed in delight at the effect of the cherry-coloured curtains against the pale green walls and dark brown wood.

“Curtains already! You have been quick. I love the colour!”

“My friend at home was very noble and put away her own work to sew my curtains,” Margery explained.

“I’ve your little chairs for the children ready, and a low steady table. Tell me when you want them; you can ’phone me from the post-office. How did you get tidy so quickly?”

“Mr. Woodburn was more than kind. He helped to bring the things in and then he came back and put them in the right places for me.”

“Oh, David’s found you out! He’s a good sort; he likes helping people.”

"I thought perhaps you'd asked him to come."

"No, it must have been his own idea. I've seen him help people to settle in before. Did you have a dreadful journey with your Pouffe?"

"I should have done, if someone hadn't come to the rescue." And Margery told how Gilbert's help had eased her way.

"Oh, good! That was much better than trains and buses!" Doranne said heartily. "And Nanta is helping you? We're practising this afternoon, Nanta. Could you come along?"

Atalanta's face shone. "Thank you. I'll love to come."

"I brought a moving-in present." Doranne went out and took a flat parcel from the groom. "There's a little lady here who isn't too well off. She does charming water-colours, and I give her orders when I can. I've a lot of small pictures in my doll's-house near the sea, and I love them. I asked her to do a sketch for you."

Margery cried out in delight, for the sketch, framed in dark brown, was a picture of her cottage, with the cherry-tree in full bloom hanging caressingly over it. "Oh, Mrs. Dering! I was so sorry the blossom was over! Now I shall have it all through the year."

"That's what I thought," Doranne agreed, obviously enjoying her pleasure.

"That tree seems to protect the cottage. I love the way it hangs over us," Margery said happily. "How kind you are!"

"I wanted to help Miss Anson, and she enjoyed doing it. Now I must get along. I've several calls to make."

"I shall hang the picture in the children's club-room," and Margery called Nanta to help her to choose the best place.

She had not referred to Virginia, and Atalanta kept off the subject also. If the twins were really going to insist on explanations in a fortnight—and for their own sake it seemed likely they would do so—Margery could wait. In any case she could not try to draw the secret from Nanta.

She wrote a note to Gilbert and took it to the post-office.

Dear Gilbert,

Don't feel too bad! It's fearfully hard on you, but I'm sure it will come all right. There is a secret, but it isn't insanity or any kind of illness. I asked her sisters and they were quite definite about that. I don't think it's anything bad or even very serious, but it is something Virginia isn't willing to talk about. You'll need to wait; but I think she'll tell me soon. Do, please, feel happy about her! You know now where she lives; you've seen her; you've met one of her sisters, who likes you very much. You've done a lot since you told me her name. It will be all right; I'm sure of it.

Thank you so very, *very* much for your help yesterday. I couldn't have done it without you; I realize now how awful it would have been to cope with that journey alone, and how tired I should have been. Thousands of thanks!

Pouffy has stopped screaming and is beginning to settle down. He hasn't been out yet, but he's happier than he was.

I'll write again when I've anything to tell. I'm on the warpath, but I can't rush things too much.

Yours ever,
Polly Paine.

“My blessings on Polly Paine!” Gilbert said fervently, when he read the letter. “But what can the secret be? Poor Virginia! Perhaps she needs help. I wish she’d tell us; I might be able to do something about it.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DAVID BRINGS GIFTS

Atalanta had gone off happily to practise with the orchestra, and Margery was putting the kitchen to rights, when a voice hailed her from the path outside. "May I come in?"

She went to the door. "Oh, Mr. Woodburn! Yes, please do come in!"

"I had to run into town," he explained. "So I brought this. I wonder if he'll wear it?"

He handed her a cat-collar of elastic, with a small bell and an identity disc hanging from it. "He may as well carry his name and address, if he'll put up with the thing at all."

Margery cried out in delight as she read the inscription engraved on the pendant: "'Pouffe. 'Polly's'. Rainbows New Village.' Oh, how very kind! You've had it specially made!"

"It didn't take long. No need to put Cherry-Tree Cottage. Everybody will know you as 'Polly's'," he smiled. "When does the name go up?"

"Mrs. Dering knows a man who will paint it for me, and he's coming to-morrow. I'll try this ornament on Pouffy. I'm afraid you'd better not come."

"I'm coming," David said firmly. "I'm going to make friends. I don't like to feel there's a creature who is afraid of me. Don't be worried! It will be all right."

"Pouffe's terribly nervous of men," Margery said doubtfully. "Don't let him out of that room."

David closed the door of the children's club-room on herself and him. At sight of him the Pouffe spat and shot off the window-sill and under a big chair, with the same display of baggy little fur trousers that had amused Atalanta. He crouched in a dark corner and swore.

Margery held her breath, marvelling. David, on his hands and knees, crept to the chair and began to make chirruping reassuring noises. The startled Pouffe, thinking he was to be followed into his refuge, leapt to the back of the chair and stood there, with lashing tail, prepared for flight.

David continued to talk softly, and the yellow eyes stared at him in fascinated amazement. He sat in the chair and reached up a big brown hand, still murmuring in that odd voice. The Pouffe smelt his fingers doubtfully, swung his great tail, and gazed down at him.

Then, to Margery's everlasting astonishment, he stepped on to David's shoulder, licked his ear, jumped down into his lap, and looked into his face. "Go on talking!" said his eyes.

"He likes you," Margery whispered. "I never saw him do that to a man before."

David's hand caressed the shy Pouffe. "He's a beauty. Oh, they all like me, once they've recognized me."

"Recognized you as what? A friend of cats?"

"Not only cats; all creatures. Birds are just the same; they always come to me. Shall we try that collar?"

Margery handed it to him, and he gently slipped the elastic over the big soft head. "It's better than leather; safer, if he gets caught in a tree or bush. But they don't like their ears touched, so put it on him carefully. There, Pouffe, old boy! How's that?"

The Pouffe shook his head violently and the collar slipped into place. He looked startled as the bell rang and the disc tinkled against it, shook his head again twice, and stared inquiringly at Margery.

“Yes, you made that funny little noise, my dear. Oh, you do look pretty, with your ornaments under your chin!” she cried.

The Pouffe shook his head again and looked at David.

“Good boy!” David clapped his fat sides and ruffled up his fur and made a few remarks in the mysterious cat-language.

The Pouffe’s heart was won completely; he rubbed on this fascinating friend’s sleeve, and told him how very, very nice it was to be talked to like that.

“Could you teach me how to do it?” Margery marvelled.

“No need. He knows you.” David smiled.

“You must come twice a day to talk to him. And you must stay to tea. If you’ll go on talking in his own language, I’ll put on the kettle.”

“No, please! I must go, and you’re busy.”

“Nonsense!” Margery said firmly, “if we have tea at once you can be home before the boys come out of school. I’m not busy now. Pouffe would love to have you for half an hour.”

He laughed and sat tickling the Pouffe behind the ears and talking to him, and the yellow eyes regarded him steadily, in rapt adoration.

“He loves you. It’s wonderful,” Margery said, as she spread a cherry-coloured tablecloth and brought a tray of dishes, of pale green china decorated with cherries, to match the walls.

“This is very pretty!” David exclaimed. “Haven’t you been extravagant?”

“The cups are a present from my friend who takes the lovely photographs. She said I must have one room where things matched. Look at those!” She took a wallet from the drawer of a bureau.

David examined Nancybell’s photographs, printed in the well-known soft brown of the Knight’s-Head series of postcards; the priory ruins, geese and willows on the marshes, rocks and breaking waves, and some beautiful studies of the Pouffe.

“Here’s our little friend. Miss Paine, these are delightful! She has a real gift for picture-making.”

“She’s been learning to paint; her father was a painter.” Margery had been cutting bread-and-butter while he examined them. “I’ve still more than half the big cake she gave me; here you are! And jam. I’ll make scones another time, if you’ll come to see Pouffy again.”

“If Pouffy always has a tea like this I shall be tempted,” he said solemnly. “And I shall come along to-morrow and dig your garden. It’s too heavy work for you.”

“Oh, you mustn’t! I can’t let you work for me! Is that cat going to sit on you while you have your tea?”

“He’s not ‘that cat’. He’s the gentleman Pouffe. I’m afraid he is,” David admitted. “He doesn’t seem to mind the collar. He’ll soon learn to ring the bell when he wants you to open a door. I’ll look in and say a word to him when I’m passing.”

“How do you do it? I never heard anybody speak to a cat as you do.”

“I’ve always talked to cats,” he laughed. “I suppose it’s a gift. Are you going to be friends with Miss Rose and her sisters?”

“I’d like to be friends,” Margery said guardedly. “I suppose you know them? Everybody seems to know everybody here.”

“That’s about right. But I knew them in Edinburgh. I was studying there, and they were at school. Their aunt used to ask students to her house.”

“Oh!” Margery gazed at him thoughtfully. Did he know the secret? Would it be fair to ask?

"It would be better if they'd tell me themselves. I shan't say anything at present," she said to herself. "But I believe he knows. He looks grave about something."

"The twins are great fun," she said aloud. "And Atalanta is a dear."

"Yes, I like Nanta," he agreed. "The twins are brats."

Margery laughed. "Amanda still calls me 'that revolting female', but Araminta keeps assuring me she doesn't mean anything by it."

"It's cheek, all the same, but just like Mandy." He rose. "I ought to be on my job. Thanks very much; it was delightful. Good-bye, old chap! I'll see you again soon."

Margery was washing up her green cups when she heard voices. "More visitors?" She raised her eyebrows. "I am being thoroughly adopted! Oh, it's the twins! Have they come to clear things up?"

Mandy, her head tied in an emerald kerchief, carried a trowel and a trug; Minty, wearing her honey-coloured scarf over her hair, had a spade and a big fork on her shoulder.

"We've come to weed and dig your revolting garden. Will you have us?" Mandy cried.

"Too hard work for a child like you. We're tough," Minty added. "I dig and Mandy weeds. She's not too bad as a weeder."

"How terribly kind of you! But I don't think you ought to do it," Margery exclaimed. "Mr. Woodburn offered to dig it for me to-morrow."

The twins looked at one another. "Oh, David's been here, has he?" Mandy murmured.

"What did he say about us?" Minty demanded.

"What did you expect him to say?" Margery retorted. "He said you were brats."

"He did, did he?" Minty grinned. "Now why, I wonder?"

"Aw, Araminta! Of course we're brats," Mandy drawled. "That's harmless. He might have said worse. Let us see your house, Polly Paine! And then we'll go out and dig. You can't do it all yourself."

"Gosh, look at that thing!" cried Minty. "D'you call it a cat? It's a sheep!"

The Pouffe had been sitting looking sentimental in David Woodburn's chair. At sound of the excited voices he cocked his ears, and then, as the speakers appeared in the doorway, he vanished under the chair in one wild leap.

"Look at his furry knickers!" Mandy chuckled. "His back view's comic!"

"Nanta talked about him a lot. You've shaken that child up and she's quite different. Virginia's frightfully grateful," Minty said, and she went round the room commenting and approving.

The twins dug and weeded cheerfully all evening, while Margery, told to "run away and play and not to interfere", wrote to Nancybell and then to Elsa, telling of the warm welcome and the helpful friends on every side.

"Virginia may be grateful," she said to herself, "but I fancy she means to avoid me. I'll keep away from Periwinkle Place until she wants me; I couldn't bear her to feel I was prying, or haunting her in the hope of finding out something."

So she merely thanked the twins warmly and fed them with big slabs of cake, which were accepted with shrieks of gratitude.

"Angel! Oh, beautiful angel!" Mandy cried. "If you knew how hungry weeding makes your little Amanda!"

"Nothing revolting about your cake, Polly Paine," Araminta grinned.

David's eyes widened when he saw the garden next day. "You didn't dig all this, Miss Paine?" he asked severely, as he tickled the Pouffe under the chin.

“The twins came along last night and insisted on doing it. It was very kind.”

“Oh! Well, it won’t hurt them. I’ve brought you a present.”

“Something more for Pouffy?”

“No, for you this time.” He handed her a whistle. “You’re lonely here. If anything frightens you, blow that, and I or somebody else will be along in a second. Try it! It makes a fearful row.”

Margery’s eyes danced. “How very nice of you! But I’m not a scrap lonely or nervous. I’m busy all day, and at night I go to sleep.” She blew a shrill blast.

The Pouffe disappeared under his chair in one frantic leap of terror.

“I forgot him,” David exclaimed. “I’m sorry, old chap! It’s all over now.”

“He’s like that with sudden noises. You should see him if the wireless is on too loudly at nine o’clock! He hates Big Ben.”

David laughed. “My apologies, Sir Pouffe!”

“He jumps, and then sits and stares at the door. He thinks Big Ben’s coming in to find him. I have to leap to the set and turn it down. Thank you very much for the whistle! But I hope I’ll never need to use it.”

“You must have either a whistle or a dog,” David said. “Of the two, I think Sir Pouffe would prefer the whistle.”

“I can put the whistle out of sight; the dog would be always there. I don’t think Pouffy would like a dog friend,” Margery admitted.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A PAL FOR THE POUFFE

The next few days saw Margery fully adopted into the life of Rainbows New Village. The name, "Polly's", went up over the door, and "Cherry-Tree Cottage" appeared on the gate. The children's furniture arrived and was arranged in one front room; sweets and goodies were spread out in the other, where there was a big counter, brought from Priorsbury, a table, with glasses and bottles of lemonade on the shelves behind, and a good display in the window, not only of chocolates, but the small toys and books, pencils and baby games, which Margery had added to her stock.

"I am branching out!" she laughed, as she proudly showed her domain to Mrs. Dering, before the shop was opened to the children.

"We'll put your notice in the post-office window to-morrow," Doranne said. "It looks most attractive. And we'll announce the children's club; you'll charge a penny a week for membership. Yes, please; you really must. They'll value it far more if they pay, and there's no one here who can't afford a penny a week. Make it a halfpenny for more than one in a family, if you like. Atalanta must keep the register and see that they pay up regularly; and any child who doesn't behave properly or who comes with dirty hands must be suspended for a week. They're old enough to understand, and they'll be immensely impressed. Tell Nanta to be stern! She'll love her job. You're doing her all the good in the world; she's bright and jolly—a different girl. And you'll shut the shop and come to Virginia's class on Tuesdays, won't you? I want you to dance with me—I'm quite a beginner."

"I've been meaning to ask you; why did you say, that first day, that I'd be an addition to Virginia's problem? You didn't seem to think I was quite hopeless?" Margery asked.

"Hopeless! I saw at once that with practice you'd be very good. That's Virginia's problem. She loves the dances and she wants to see them done properly, but there are people who will never be good, and yet they love it. The artist side, the musical side, of Virginia is very strong; she'd like to neglect the hopeless people and concentrate on the few, and train them till she had a really good team, who could tackle difficult but beautiful dances and work at them till they did them perfectly. She'd like to produce something quite beautiful. You could be trained; she said so to me afterwards. But that would leave out all the rest, who enjoy themselves enormously but will never be good enough to satisfy her. And we keep on taking in beginners, who pull down the level of the class, so that she can only take easy dances. You see the difficulty? There isn't time to do both. We all have our other jobs to do."

"I see what you mean. But it would be a terrible pity to shut out the crowd and concentrate on a few."

"It can't be done. And she knows I wouldn't be satisfied, no matter how well her team turned out. The dancing is for everybody, and the dud people must be helped. But all the same the problem is there. She wants results, in the way of beautiful dancing."

"She gets results in the way of a lot of people being happy," Margery ventured.

"That doesn't quite console her. It's the old problem; the artist side and the social side tugging against one another. In a way, it's the same difficulty that I had to face about my trees."

"The trees?" Margery looked puzzled.

“Beauty or usefulness. Should I keep my park lovely and lonely and unused, a picture place to look at? Or must I spoil part of it to build homes? I know what the people living near call me; that awful woman who has ruined Rainbows. I loved the park. But the little homes, Margery! And the happy people living in them!”

“Oh, you were right!” Margery exclaimed. “People must come before beauty. It sounds dreadful, but if one can’t have both, people ought to come first.”

“The artist, or the social duty; people or beauty. I believe we often have to choose,” Doranne said. “I thought about it carefully before I decided, for I was told it must be just here, if I did build; no other corner was so convenient. And it was a particularly beautiful part of the park. I nearly gave up the idea. But now I’m glad I went ahead.”

“I’m glad! And I’m sure Virginia and the other Roses are glad. It doesn’t look so bad,” Margery urged. “You’ve managed to leave quite a lot of the park. I feel I’m under trees every time I go out.”

“We did our best. And it will soon look pretty in other ways,” Doranne said hopefully. “But my dear old trees! I still feel terribly sad about them. Polly Paine, one thing I want to ask you! You’ve helped Atalanta; what about the other Roses? What about Virginia’s secret?—Margery!” she cried sharply. “You look guilty! *Is* there a secret?”

Margery flushed. “Virginia has a secret and it’s worrying her, but I don’t know what it is,” she said sturdily. “I’m not hiding anything from you, Mrs. Dering. I want to know very badly, but I can’t tease her. I know there’s something she doesn’t want to tell.”

Doranne gazed at her, fascinated. “You’ve only been here a few days, but you know, where I merely guessed. What sort of secret, do you think?”

“Something she won’t talk about; a family matter. We can’t pry into her affairs.”

“No, but I wish she wouldn’t look so unhappy. She’s seemed worse lately.”

“She’s feeling worse. That’s because of me.”

“She thinks you’re going to find out?”

“She knows I want to know.”

“I see. What about the others?”

“They know what it is, but they won’t tell—yet. The twins are going to do something about it in a fortnight, if she won’t be sensible by then.”

“Oh, good! Then we won’t worry her. If only she didn’t look so unhappy! She has the right to keep her affairs to herself, but when she looks so gloomy I can’t help being bothered about her.”

“If she tells me anything I’ll ask if I may tell you,” Margery promised.

“Yes, please do. May I stroke your beauty once more? I want to see his collar; Atalanta told me of it.”

“He’s in the kitchen. He likes to watch the birds on the lawn. He still won’t go out; I’m terribly sorry about it. He’d enjoy the garden, once he was used to it.”

“I expect he’ll risk it one day.” Doranne followed her to the kitchen. “Look at him!” she exclaimed, pausing in the doorway.

“He’s seen something. A blackbird, perhaps; there are some very large and very cheeky ones.” Margery went to look. “No, it’s another cat, a stranger,” and she stroked the Pouffe’s large back. “It’s all right, Pouffy. It’s a nice little cat.”

The Pouffe, rigid, was stretching his neck as he watched the little grey cat pick her way neatly over the lawn. She jumped on a fallen leaf, then skipped backwards; she sprang on it

again, and danced daintily round it, throwing it into the air. Then she darted through the hedge and disappeared.

The Pouffe tore at the casement window. He had not felt sure that the outside world was safe for cats, but where that girl could go he could go, and she seemed to think it was all right. The sun was streaming over the house and pouring down on the lawn; he badly needed airing, after all these days indoors and in baskets. If only he could get out——!

“Shall I let him go?” Margery asked doubtfully.

“I should risk it. He’ll come back. He has his collar on.”

Margery pushed open the window, and the Pouffe was gone like a shaggy streak. For a moment he hesitated and sniffed the grass; then he stalked to the hedge, sniffed again, and before Margery could reach the door he had poked his way through in search of the intruder.

“He’s gone!” Margery wailed. “What if he doesn’t come back?”

“It had to happen. Cats must wander,” Doranne said stoutly. “My Geoffrey thinks he owns all the gardens near us. Oh, here he comes! Look, Polly Paine! He’s found the grey one. Perhaps they’re going to be pals.”

The Pouffe sprang back into his own garden again, followed by the small grey cat. She rushed after him and leapt on his back. He turned and rolled her over, then galloped madly about, his long fleeces waving, his bell tinkling.

“He’s renewing his youth. I never saw him like that before,” Margery exclaimed.

“I think he’s drunk,” Doranne laughed. “The sun’s gone to his head, and he’s found somebody to play with. Has he ever had a friend?”

“Never. He had no garden at home. Oh, do you think he’s going to have this person for a pal?”

“It looks extremely like it. Watch this game! That grey creature is saying rude things, and he’s going to teach her manners. I think her name must be Jane; she looks like Jane.”

The Pouffe and Jane were rolling on the lawn, locked in each other’s arms. She was so much smaller that even the nervous Pouffe felt no fear; but she was definitely rude, saying his hair needed cutting and he ought to be shaved. He was used to admiration and he resented criticism, but she only laughed and, being much lighter on her feet, danced round him and made more rude remarks. Time after time he chased her in vain; when he caught her he rolled her over and shook her, but gently, because she was a lady, if an impudent one, and he knew better than to hurt a girl. She wriggled out of his embrace and skipped away, and the game began again.

At last the Pouffe rushed back to the house, sprang up to the window-sill, slipped through, and lay panting on the floor.

“I should give him a drink,” Doranne said laughing. “He’s out of breath. I’m glad to have seen that. Don’t worry, Margery! He knows his way home, and he’s found a friend. He’ll be all right now.”

“Jane’s had enough; she’s gone,” Margery said, placing a saucer beside the exhausted Pouffe.

“She’ll come again—she loved him. She’ll take him away and show him her house. But he’ll come back,” Doranne said. “I know her; I’ve seen her playing in a garden, but I don’t know her real name.”

“Jane will do,” Margery said, as she went with her to the door. “Atalanta will be thrilled to hear the story! She loves Pouffy.”

“I hear Pouffy loves David Woodburn?”

“Oh, he does! Mr. Woodburn talks to him in his own language. It’s marvellous to hear him! Pouffy sits gazing at him entranced and looking terribly sentimental.”

“He once came to see my Geoffrey, and they had a long conversation. Geoffrey was terrifically pleased. David’s wonderful with any animals, and with birds.”

“Pouffe accepted his collar without a murmur, because Mr. Woodburn wanted him to wear it. I never thought he’d put up with anything on his neck. The bell puzzled him, but he’s used to it now.”

“He looks very pretty, and I don’t suppose he feels it, with all that ruff,” Doranne said. “You must tell David about Jane.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“POLLY’S”

“Polly’s” opened its doors next day, and Margery found herself too busy to watch the antics of Jane and the Pouffe.

The little shop was very attractive, with its glass bottles of gaily coloured sweets, its ribbioned chocolate-boxes, and all the bright toys and picture-books on the shelves against the pale green walls. Margery, with her fair hair in its neat page-boy bob, wore an overall of brilliant cretonne adorned with long spikes of blue and pink and yellow lupins; Atalanta came to her new job in a big pinafore of periwinkle blue.

At sight of it Margery laughed. “Did Virginia make your pinny, and her own, out of the curtains, Nanta?”

Nanta assented. “There was some left over. Mandy wouldn’t have blue for her window; her room’s at the back, so it didn’t matter. She said she must have yellow, since she doesn’t get much sun. So Virginia used the rest of the curtain stuff for overalls, as it’s good strong material.”

“It suits you—and her, of course. The twins are quite good about doing what she tells them, aren’t they? I’ve been rather surprised; they’re only a year younger—they might have been difficult.”

“They talked it over, when we came here,” Nanta explained, “and they decided Virginia must be boss. There had to be somebody, Minty said, or life wouldn’t be worth living; they couldn’t be always scrapping and scolding. And Mandy said that if Virginia had the worry of running the house she ought to have the fun of bossing the people in it; it was only fair. So they said she could give the orders and be captain and they’d be the crew; that was how Minty put it.”

“It sounds like Minty. But they call her Ginny; hasn’t she tried to stop them?”

“They only do it in the house,” Nanta protested. “It’s not for outside people. You couldn’t use names like ours all the time, in a family!”

“No, I suppose not,” Margery admitted. “Not Atalanta and Araminta; so you could hardly insist on Virginia and Amanda. How did you get on with your names at school?”

For some reason Atalanta coloured. “We managed. Shall I open the door now?”

“Yes, we’re all ready. I mustn’t ask any more questions!” Margery said to herself.

There were not many children yet in the New Village, but there were plenty in the old one, and the tale of the new shop had spread by way of the school. A footpath through the park shortened the mile between the hamlets, and the children thought nothing of the walk. After school hours they flocked in, to buy and to ask questions about the club-room. The terms of membership were explained; they approved of the little chairs, the picture-books and puzzles; and Atalanta quickly had a flourishing register and account-book, in which she took great pride.

But it was not only children who came. “Polly’s” proved the best possible introduction, and Margery began to feel she knew everybody in the village. Miss Stewart, the kind-faced retired nurse who mothered the babies and whom everybody called Aunt Jean, asked for chocolate drops, as a reward for particularly good infants. Little Miss Anson came for fruit jellies, and was brought in to admire her picture and be thanked warmly for it. Harriet Parry,

assistant secretary at the big house, and Freda and the other orchestra girls, came to make friends and gossip, and went away with chocolate creams. The Scottish Mrs. Garth, with whom David Woodburn lodged, came to chat and to ask for “a wee poke o’ peppermints”, and David himself talked to the Pouffe and bought bulls’-eyes, to keep him warm in his shack at night. Angela Baker, the gardener, wanted bars of chocolate to keep her going while she worked; the ladies from Jasmine Corner begged for Turkish Delight, as a treat for their old aunt, and Margery promised to order some and to keep a supply. Mary Garth, from the library, insisted on caramels; the Rose twins came for toffees and fudge. Only Virginia did not come.

Margery met her at the Tuesday class, when she danced with Doranne Dering and others, and learned “The First of April” and “Mutual Love”. Virginia’s teaching was as good as ever, and her demonstrations of steps and movements were beautiful. Atalanta’s music was excellent, and she was as full of shy importance as when she kept guard over the children’s room. But Virginia had no time for talking, and she steadily avoided Margery.

It was so obvious that Doranne, clapping right and left hands with Margery in “Christchurch Bells”, said, “You were right, Polly Paine. Virginia’s afraid of you.”

“I’m sorry. I never meant it to happen.”

“You can’t help it. How’s ‘Polly’s’?”

“Splendid! We’re really busy.”

“Good! Has Jane been round lately?”

“She comes most days,” Margery laughed. “Pouffy’s happier than he’s ever been in his life. And he’s *much* younger!”

Doranne took the fiddle from Nanta before the next dance. “Yes, really. You’ll forget how to dance, and then you won’t play half so well. I’m tired; you must take a turn. Go and guide Polly Paine through ‘Indian Queen’. She’ll know the hey; she’s just learnt it in ‘Mutual Love’.”

“How beautifully the twins dance, Nanta!” Margery exclaimed. “I wonder they could bear to miss it that day I came here first.”

“They hadn’t leave to come,” Nanta explained. “They didn’t want to work, so they had to go somewhere out of sight, like Dorking. Mrs. Dering would have sent Mandy back to Aunt Jean and Minty to the library. But everybody’s here to-day.”

“Doesn’t Virginia ever have any dancing herself?”

“Oh, yes, she joins in sometimes. And we have evening parties, when she’s M.C. She starts us off and then she comes in.”

“Do you ever get the boys from the aerodrome? I’ve seen them in the village.”

“They’re shy,” Atalanta smiled. “But sometimes they come in a crowd, especially in the evening. They won’t turn up one at a time; it’s only when a lot come together.”

“I can understand that. I wonder if they’ll begin coming to ‘Polly’s’ for lemonade? All those bottles not being opened!”

“I expect they will. They’re sometimes very shy, much worse than the children.” Nanta smiled again.

Margery was carried off by Doranne for tea on the terrace when the dancing was over. “Are you coming to the concert to-morrow night? Virginia’s playing a lovely solo.”

“I’m looking forward to it. I’m dreadfully ignorant; I’ve never had much music,” Margery confessed.

“We’ll soon make you love it. You love melody already; I can see that when Nanta plays a new tune. Have you had any luck with Mandy and Minty? They’re behaving better and being

more regular in their jobs, but I think they're a bit restive."

"They want to do other things," Margery agreed. "Mandy wants horses and Minty wants boats."

Doranne stared at her. "Oh, my dear! I never dreamt it was as bad as that!"

"Bad? How do you mean?"

"I can't give them boats and horses!"

"You've given them a lot, and they know it. I'm glad they are really trying to be good."

"Yes, but they'll never settle down if those are the things they want! What can we do about it?"

"Perhaps I can do something," Margery said cautiously. "A friend of mine keeps a ferry, and she's needing an assistant for the boat. If Minty went to her for a few months she might get so sick of it that she'd be cured and be only too glad to do something more interesting. It must be a most monotonous job."

Doranne laughed. "Oh, Polly Paine, you are wise! That would be splendid! And Amanda?"

"Another friend is married to a farmer; she might give Mandy some training. Her case sounds more hopeful than Minty's. I can understand being a kennel-maid or helping in a riding-school; I don't see how Araminta can make a living out of boats."

"I'm thankful to have you at Rainbows!" Doranne said fervently.

"If I thought you really meant that——!"

"Oh, but I do! You've helped Atalanta; you have plans for the twins; Virginia is obviously thinking that she'll have to confide in you. You've done a lot for us already."

"You don't think I'm prying into Virginia's secrets, do you?" Margery asked in alarm. "She has a right to keep her affairs to herself. But if she's worried——"

"We only want to help her. We can't allow her to be unhappy."

"Mrs. Dering doesn't know the whole reason for Virginia's being so much upset," Margery said to herself, as she went down the hill. "She hasn't heard about Gilbert. Virginia must explain, or she'll spoil both their lives."

That Virginia was thinking over the matter, as her fortnight ran out, became evident two days later.

Atalanta, poring over her register, looked up when the shop was empty. "If you really mean to suspend people for having dirty hands, John had better be the first. He was very grubby to-day. I took the Bird Book Mr. Woodburn gave us away from him. Susan—she's his sister—said their mother had told him to wash before he came, but he said he wasn't going to."

Margery laughed. "If it was only dirty hands I'd just warn him, as it's the first time. But if he said he wasn't going to, and didn't—yes, I'm afraid we must be firm. Send him to me, and I'll explain and scold him. Thank you, Nanta."

Atalanta closed the book. "How did it happen that you are friends with a baronet? The dark handsome man is one, isn't he? Is it rude to ask?" she apologized hastily, at the look on Margery's face.

"No, it's a very natural question. I'll tell you." Margery's quick thought had been—"So Virginia's thinking about Gilbert! Oh, good!"

She told how she and Nancybell, brought up together, had kept the "Nance and Polly" sweet-shop; how Nance's grandfather's will had introduced her to unknown cousins, who had proved to be the young baronet and his sister; how they had become friends and had gone to

see his big house at Summerton; how Nancybell had worn her ancestress's gown and looked the image of her.

"Sir Gilbert would have liked to marry her, but it was only to keep her in the family. She had already met Robin, and she chose to be Mrs. Farnham, not Lady Seymour. Then he was graciously pleased to think I would do instead." Margery grinned at Atalanta. "But he wasn't in love with either of us for a single second, and we both knew it. What's the matter?"

Nanta was looking startled. "I suppose whoever he marries will be Lady Seymour. I hadn't thought of that."

"It didn't appeal to me, but your Virginia would make a lovely 'my lady', and he likes her tremendously," Margery said daringly. "How beautifully she played yesterday! Whoever marries her will have a fine musician as a wife."

Atalanta grew scarlet. "She can't marry anybody without telling—things. It wouldn't be legal."

Margery put down the box of sweets she was sorting and stared at her. "Not legal?"

"Oughtn't I to have said that?" Nanta faltered.

"I don't know. What does Virginia mean?"

But Atalanta had taken fright. "It's time I went home. I have to practise. May I go, please?"

"Yes, run along." Margery turned away to hide the questions in her eyes. "See you tomorrow, Nanta!"

"Now what does this mean?" she said to herself, as Nanta disappeared, looking frightened. "What secret could make a marriage illegal? Some guardian to be consulted, perhaps; Virginia's under age. Have they run away from their family? Some old uncle or grandfather they're afraid of? But he'd have found them; they aren't living secretly, in hiding, and people can't disappear. Or—or could it be something to do with their name? A wrong name would make a marriage illegal. I can't think of anything else."

Looking thoughtful, she went on dusting and tidying the shop and putting things away for the night.

"Could they be living under an assumed name? That would explain everything. Virginia could only be married in her legal name. But why should they do it? And why call themselves Rose? It's an odd name to choose for a surname; I wonder it ever occurred to them. Perhaps one of them really has Rose in her name—Virginia Rose Something—and they decided to use it for them all. Gosh! I believe I know!"

A box of sweets dropped on the counter with a crash as Margery stood staring unseeing at her shelves. A memory of something heard rushed upon her; something Elsa Dale had said; the twin babies Daphne had seen, Lady Rosabel and Lady Rosalin; the family whose tradition it was that its girls must have Rose in their names.

"It can be used with another name, like Rose Margery or Elsa Rose," Elsa had said.

Virginia Rose—Amanda Rose—Araminta Rose—Atalanta Rose. Or Rose Virginia; Rose Atalanta.

She remembered the meeting in the bus; Amanda's rash remark, "Dad called us Rose, of course"—Minty's sharp, "Ass!" and Mandy's humble, "Sorry, I am an ass."

"They've dropped their surname and used Rose instead. They belong to that family," she exclaimed. "But why? I'm going to ask them! I know too much and yet not enough. I believe I've guessed their secret."

She threw off her overall and ran hatless down the brick path and along to Periwinkle Place.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE SECRET OF THE ROSES

“May I come in?” Margery stood in the doorway and looked into the little lounge hall.

All the Roses were there. They seemed to be waiting for her. The twins were in the corners of the window-seat, knitting; Virginia, wearing a big cooking-apron, stood at the kitchen door; Atalanta, looking frightened, had obviously just made her confession.

“I said you couldn’t get married without telling, because it wouldn’t be legal. She couldn’t guess anything from that,” she faltered.

“Oh yes, she could, you booby,” said Araminta.

“Aw, Virginia, you’ll have the revolting female here in two ticks,” Amanda drawled. “Better tell her and be done with it.”

Margery heard the words as she opened the door.

“Here she is,” Mandy added. “Didn’t I say so? Come in, revolting person.”

Margery ignored her. “I don’t mean to pry, but I must know now. Are you related to Lord Kentisbury’s family?”

“Losh, woman! What put that into your head?” asked Minty, really startled.

“Nanta, what did you say?” Amanda scolded.

“It wasn’t anything Nanta said. I’ve heard about that family. The girls are all called Rose. I don’t know their surname, but I believe you do.”

Amanda laughed. Araminta grinned. Atalanta sat down on the last step of the stair and gazed at everybody, her troubled face framed in its yellow plaits, her chin resting on her clenched fists. “I never said anything about him,” she said.

Virginia dropped on the couch and flung her arms over the end and buried her head in them.

Margery ran to her. “Virginia, what does it matter? I won’t tell anybody but Mrs. Dering. You can go on being Miss Rose and not Miss Anything-Else, if you’d rather. We’ll keep quiet about it.”

Araminta chuckled. “Oh, Margery Paine!”

“Not ‘Miss’ Anything,” Amanda drawled. “She’s the Lady Virginia Rosemary Kane.”

Margery sat up and stared at Mandy. “How? Why? Then you——?”

“Lady Amanda Rose Kane,” Mandy said blandly, and pointed at her grinning twin. “Lady Araminta Rose Kane. They thought Rose was good enough for us, as we weren’t in the least like the family. The babe is Lady Rosalind Atalanta; anyone could see she was going to be a real Kane; she’s the image of Father. It was getting monotonous when her turn came, so they put her Rose-name first. Our father was Lord Kentisbury.”

“But he never had any good of it; he never knew, poor dear,” Minty added.

“We’re saddled with those wretched titles for ever and a day,” Mandy went on. “We didn’t know about his family. We didn’t feel like ‘my ladies’. Do you wonder that we went on strike?”

“And refused to use the titles. I don’t blame you.” Margery was recovering from the shock. She looked at them with dancing eyes. “So I’ve had Lady Amanda to weed my scrap of garden, and Lady Araminta to dig for me? You don’t look it, you know. Virginia is the only one who lives up to her family. I’m not in the least surprised to hear she’s really Lady

Virginia; it fits her exactly. But it doesn't suit the rest of you; you aren't dignified enough. Lady Rosalind Atalanta—how pretty it is!—will you help me in my shop to-morrow?"

"I don't like it, and I don't feel like it. None of us do," Nanta said, ungrammatically but firmly.

"But we can't get out of it. We're the daughters of an Earl," Araminta said, "and there's nothing to be done about it."

"Except what we have done," Mandy added.

"Tell me how it happened!" Margery begged, sitting with her arm round Virginia, who refused to look up.

"Our dad was the second son," Mandy explained. "He had a row with his father and cleared out to the States and let them think he was dead. When the old Earl died—he was almost ninety—the new one was a kid of sixteen—"

"The eldest son had died before his father," Minty helped her out.

"The silly kid went and killed himself on a motorbike," Amanda went on. "Our dad never heard of that, but he knew his father had gone and he thought he'd better do something about it. He was the next Earl, if anything happened to young Geoff, you see. He was taken ill on his way home, and he died without knowing the young ass had been killed a week before."

"Then for one week he actually was the Earl, though he never knew it," Margery commented.

"That's the idea. Unlucky for us; it gave us the worry of being 'my lady' for life. So we cut it all and ran away."

"Aunty died and we were coming to London. We turned ourselves into Roses and dropped the Kane bit," Minty added.

Margery thought over the story. "Who is the Earl now? I know he has twin girls. Do twins run in the family?"

"Sure. Dad said he wasn't a mite surprised to have two; said every Kane had two, usually girls."

"What a pity one of you wasn't a boy! He would have been the Earl, I suppose. Your father must have been disappointed."

"You can forgive him if he was a little bit depressed at having four lovely daughters," Araminta grinned.

"Does the new Earl know about you?"

There was a pause. The three younger Roses looked at Virginia. Her shoulders shook, and she shrank into the cushions.

"Virginia, what *is* the matter?" Margery cried. "It's not so very dreadful! You've a title, but you don't care to use it. It's not deadly; I'm sure other people have felt the same. What is there to howl about? Has Lord Kentisbury been horrid to you?"

"You'd better own up, Lady Virginia," said Araminta.

"Aw, Ginny, it's not so very bad," Mandy drawled. "Own up and get it over. The revolting woman will understand."

"He was very kind." Virginia spoke rapidly, her voice muffled. In spite of her distress she still kept her touch of dignity, which contrasted so oddly with the conversation of the twins. "He's our Uncle Geoffrey, the youngest son; the third son died unmarried. Uncle Geoffrey heard of us; a letter was found among father's papers and it was sent to him. He said he'd like to meet us, and he asked us to go to Kentisbury and see his wife and their son, Lord Verriton. It was a kind letter. I—I didn't behave well; I was rude. I said we didn't want to—to get in

touch with the family. I said we'd prefer to be left alone to go our own way. We didn't want to be patronized, as poor relations—four helpless girls!" she said passionately. "Would you have liked it?"

"Was the letter patronizing?" Margery asked gravely.

"N—no," Virginia admitted. "It was just kind and welcoming; I see that now. But we were feeling sore about being saddled with useless titles when we couldn't live up to them, and—and it did seem as if we'd be looked down on if we went to the Castle."

"I shouldn't think you would have been. Did Lord Kentisbury answer your letter?"

Virginia did not speak. It seemed as if she could not; as if to reply would cost her a real struggle.

"He did everything that was right and proper," Araminta observed.

"Shall I tell her the rest, Ginny?" Amanda came to the rescue. "He wrote again, Polly Paine, and said he would respect our wishes, but he was sorry not to meet us at present. He said that, as head of the house, he must ask our permission to keep a friendly eye on us, and that if he could help us at any time it would be a pleasure. And he sent the letter to Miss Rose; Virginia had told him we didn't want to be called 'Lady' or 'Kane.' Ginny didn't answer the letter, and that was that."

"But Ginny's felt bad ever since, poor brute," said Araminta.

"That explains everything," Margery said soberly. "I've wondered what was the matter with her. It was easy to see what was wrong with you two and with Rosalind Atalanta—" Nanta grew scarlet and the twins grinned. "You wanted to change your jobs, that was all. But Virginia seemed to have everything, and she was loving her music and the orchestra and the dancing; and yet she looked as if she was carrying an Old Man of the Sea on her back. If she's been feeling guilty and a little bit ashamed—"

"A little bit! More than that," Araminta remarked.

"She's been downright unhappy, poor lass," Mandy said. "We didn't mind; we said she'd done quite right. But she feels she was—well—"

"Unkind to Uncle Geoffrey," said Nanta unexpectedly.

"Poor Uncle Earl!" Minty mocked. "Was his little niece unkind to him?"

"Ungracious and childish," Virginia jerked. "My letter seemed all right at the time; it was what we all felt. But afterwards I thought it had been—well, you said I was dignified. That letter wasn't."

"And it's hurt you ever since," Margery agreed. "Hard lines, Virginia dear! You'll have to put that right before you'll feel good again. You'll need to say you're sorry."

"I know. But I can't. How can I?" Virginia demanded.

"Apologize to his lordship?" Araminta raised her brows. "Would that be dignified, Polly Paine?"

"Better than feeling you'd been rude, I should think," Margery said stoutly.

"I—I feel I acted like a naughty child. I know I shall have to say so, but I don't want to do it."

"Oh, good for you, Virginia! That's brave!" Margery exclaimed. "If you know you were wrong and say so, that's the first step. You'll go on and do the rest; put things right and make friends."

"I don't know why you feel so bad," Minty observed. "It's done. He hasn't bothered us, whether he's keeping an eye on us or not. Why worry?"

“We wouldn’t, but Ginny’s different,” Amanda said. “She cares about things that we think don’t matter.”

“I think it matters.” Atalanta coloured but spoke up bravely. “It’s horrid for her to feel she was nasty to him.”

“Cheap and nasty.” Virginia still would not look up. “That’s what I was; childish and bad-tempered. Nanta understands better than you two.”

“Oh well! Nanta and you are English Kanés of Kentisbury. Minty and I are just Virginians,” Mandy said tolerantly. “Look at your English hair and eyes! We’ve never seen Lord Kentisbury, but I bet you’re like him. You’re the image of Father.”

Araminta sat up and sniffed. “In the meantime, Lady Virginia, you’ve burnt that cake.”

With a shriek Virginia rushed to the kitchen. “You might have reminded me!”

“No cake for tea to-morrow,” Mandy said sadly.

Atalanta ran after her sister. “Oh, Virginia, is it spoiled? It smelt so good!”

“Now you know why we call her Countess Virginia, Polly Paine,” Araminta remarked. “She would be, if she had her rights. But girls can’t have anything.”

“Oh, no, child!” Mandy corrected her, “If any girl could be the Countess in her own right it would be our Cousin Rhoda. She’s the sister of the boy on the bike; she’d come before any cousins.”

“I forgot her,” Minty admitted. “Not having seen her, I hadn’t realized she existed. Virginia would make a marvellous Countess, wouldn’t she?”

“Wonderful!” Margery’s agreement was heartfelt. “She ought to use her title. I don’t feel it matters for the rest of you.”

The twins grinned at her cheerfully. “Can’t have one ‘my lady’ without the others!”

Virginia stood in the doorway, a blackened mass in her hands. “Look!” she said tragically.

The twins shouted. “Oh, Lady Ginny, what a mess!”

“Perhaps the inside will be all right, if we scrape off the top,” Atalanta said hopefully from behind.

“Let’s try! Let’s try now! Will you risk it, Polly Paine?” cried Minty.

“We’ll try to-morrow,” Virginia said firmly. “Margery, you won’t tell anybody?”

“About the cake? But I won’t tease; I know what you mean. Not without your leave, Virginia. But you’ll tell Mrs. Dering, won’t you? You couldn’t keep a secret from her!”

“I don’t know. We have kept a secret from her, for months. Let me think about it,” Virginia pleaded.

CHAPTER NINETEEN DISASTER

The twins came to “Polly’s” early next morning, for supplies to fortify them for their day’s work.

Margery had been thinking during the night. She leaned on the counter and addressed them severely.

“I can’t think why you two mess about in jobs you don’t like, when you’ve an uncle who could give you the training you want.”

“Oh, but we couldn’t!” Amanda was shocked. “Ask him to train four girls? How could we, Polly Paine?”

“We can’t ask him for anything,” Minty remarked.

“You can, and you should,” Margery said firmly. “He’s taken all that ought to have been your father’s; he’s in your father’s place. He couldn’t help it; perhaps he didn’t want it. But he had to do it, and everything that should have been your father’s is his. He wants to do the right thing and take your father’s place to you as well. You won’t let him do it. You’ve been very unkind. He’s given you your own way, but I expect he felt hurt.”

“Gosh!” The twins stared at her.

“D’you really mean that?” Minty demanded.

“Have we been revolting pigs?” Amanda asked anxiously.

“Absolutely, I should say.” Margery’s tone was ruthless.

“Must tell Ginny,” Mandy drawled. “She won’t like it.”

“But do you think he’d do it?” Minty began to show some eagerness. “Give me boats and her horses and dogs?”

“He must have heaps of dogs and horses. He may have a yacht. I can’t tell you what he’d do, but I’m sure he’d help. He seems to be very kind.”

“He’s got his own family to look after; twins and all,” Mandy reminded her.

“He’d manage to take you on as well.”

“We shall have to think about this, Amanda,” Araminta proclaimed. “Perhaps I could make him buy a yacht and put me in charge—after I’d learnt a little about her, of course!”

“You’d sink her, and I wouldn’t have any twin. But hadn’t you a plan for us, Polly Paine? You know our secret now. Won’t you tell us?”

“I’ve a friend who runs a ferry between an island and a seaside town. She’s needing an assistant, to row the boat across; a terribly dull job! She might take Minty; I asked her, but she said she’d need to be sure Minty would stick to it. She’s running a public service and she can’t let the public down.”

Araminta pulled a face at her. “I’d stick to a job if I liked it. I’m crazy for boats and oars.”

“And I know somebody who has married a farmer, and he must have horses and dogs. But neither would be half as good as the things your uncle could do for you.”

“We’ll think about it,” Amanda conceded. “Polly Paine, why do you keep the cat on a shelf?”

Margery accepted the change of subject and laughed, reaching up to pat the Pouffe, who sat on a high shelf with his feet tucked under him, gazing down with half-closed eyes. “He likes to see all that goes on and he wants to be near me. But he doesn’t care to be mauled; he

puts up with children, at a distance, but he isn't really fond of them. In their room he sits on the top of a big bookcase and watches them. The other day he decided to go out, so he jumped down—with a thud like a young elephant, of course—and walked to the door, and Nanta says one small boy went and opened it for him, as politely as if Pouffy had been a lady. The children love to see him there, but they can't reach him; he knows he's safe. Aren't you going to be late?"

The twins laughed and admitted it. They took their fudge and withdrew reluctantly.

"We're being frightfully good and well-behaved, revolting woman," Mandy sighed.

"It can't last much longer," Araminta warned her, as she went out.

Margery smiled at the Pouffe, who closed one eye sleepily.

"That looked like a wink, darlint, but I don't suppose it really was one," she said, reaching up to rub his soft ears.

About half-an-hour later the door was flung open roughly. She turned to reprove the noisy customer.

Then she gave a cry. "Oh, what is it? What's the matter?" For David Woodburn stood there, white and shaking, looking as if he might faint at her feet.

Margery sprang to him and drew him to a chair. "What has happened? Is it Virginia?"

"Mrs. Dering," he stumbled over the words. "On the road near the aerodrome. She was riding. A 'plane rose suddenly, making that awful row—you know?"

"Like the one that frightened the dunnock," Margery whispered. "It startled her horse? Was she thrown?"

"By the worst possible luck, I came round the corner at the same moment, on my bike. The horse was rearing, but she was getting control and the man had almost reached her. She might have been all right. But—the noise of the bike—" he broke off.

"—was the last straw," Margery said unsteadily. "It wasn't your fault. How bad is it? Is she dead?"

"The horse dashed off up the road. She fell and was dragged along." He covered his face, as if to shut out the sight.

"Couldn't you do anything?" Margery almost sobbed.

"I got ahead of the brute on the bike and then ran back and stopped him; he sobered down fast enough."

"It was terribly risky; you might have been killed, too. Did you save her?"

"She wasn't dead. They carried her into the aerodrome and 'phoned for the doctor and an ambulance. They're taking her up to the house. I don't know—"

"Oh, she must live! Everything depends on her, and she's so—so—such a lovely person!" Margery's voice broke. "What about her husband? He'll need to know."

"The aerodrome will cable. They're in touch with him, on business matters. He'll come by air."

Then he sat up. "Sorry I went to pieces, but it was a shock. I'll go to the house; there might be something I could do or somebody I could fetch. I won't take the bike too near, because it makes such a row. I'm sorry I went on like that, but I feel it was partly my fault. I don't know why I unloaded it all on you, but somehow I had to come."

"I'm glad you did." Margery's eyes met his bravely. "If you feel too bad, or too lonely, I hope you'll come again."

"Thanks, Polly Paine, I will," he said gratefully. "I'm afraid we're all going to feel terrible for the next few days. I'd rather talk to you than anybody."

“But you mustn’t feel it was your fault. I’m sure it wasn’t,” Margery said earnestly. “You probably saved her life and risked your own.”

“Everything will go to pieces without her.”

“Oh, no, that mustn’t happen!” Margery cried. “We must carry on as if she were here. If—*when* she gets over it, she’d feel horrible if we’d let her down.”

“I don’t see who can take her place—unless you’ll do it,” David added. “You’re the sort that people like to tell their troubles to. Look at me, rushing straight to you, to tell you the worst! You could do it; they only want somebody to be interested and to give them motherly advice.”

“I don’t know people well, and I’m not nearly old enough. Miss Stewart might do it; she’s very kind.”

“Aunt Jean won’t leave Mrs. Dering. She’s a nurse; she’ll want to help, and they’re old friends. Someone will have to take on the nursery; young Amanda could do it.”

Margery remembered Mandy’s attitude to the babies and looked doubtful. “I don’t believe she would.”

“I’ll talk to Mandy. If Mrs. Dering is likely to recover, we’ll all have to do things we never expected to do,” he said vigorously. “You were right, as usual; we can’t let her down. We can’t let the place and the people go to pieces. A lot of them will be helpless; they’ve depended on her, and some are old and delicate. Those of us who can will have to tackle the problem. You’ll be needed; you’re just the kind who could help. But it depends how she goes on. If we lose her, I don’t know that any of us would have the heart even to stay here.”

“She wouldn’t like her work to fall to bits,” Margery ventured.

“Marcus would have to decide. It’s to belong to him, if anything happens to her, I know. I’ll get along and see what I can do.”

“You’ll tell me—?” Margery asked wistfully.

“As soon as I know,” he promised.

The news spread through the village, and groups of white-faced women and frightened children gathered at their gates or went anxiously to the little shops to ask for news. “Polly’s” and the post-office became centres of questioning, and Margery was kept busy telling all she could.

Amanda rushed in, looking terrified. “Is it true? Aunt Jean has gone racing up to the house and left me with the infants. I sent them home. What do singing-games and marching matter?”

“Oh, Mandy! Couldn’t you have kept them out of people’s way?”

“I didn’t think of that. Is it true, Polly Paine?”

“Mr. Woodburn says so, and he was there and saw it happen.”

“Is she dead?” Virginia appeared in the doorway, her face white.

“I don’t think so—yet.” Margery’s voice broke. “We must wait and try to bear it. Mr. Woodburn will tell us presently.”

“I’m going to camp right here till he comes,” Amanda proclaimed.

“You might do something more useful,” Margery retorted, strung up to a high pitch by all the questions. Then she spoke more gently, as Amanda stared at her in hostile dismay. “Why not go to meet Minty? They can’t keep the library open. Minty will want somebody to speak to, and she’d rather have you than anybody.”

“You and Minty could round up the babies and take them off their mothers’ hands, Mandy,” Virginia suggested. “Everyone will be upset and won’t have time for the infants.”

Amanda made a grimace. “I’ll ask Minty,” she said, and raced away.

"I'm glad you said that, Virginia," Margery exclaimed. "I hope the twins will play up. We must keep things going; if the babies are in the roads they'll get hurt. Mandy and Minty could be the most enormous help by keeping them out of the way."

"I'll talk to them," Virginia promised. "I'm going to 'phone the orchestra girls; we were practising this afternoon, but we can't now."

"Not in the house. Couldn't they come to Periwinkle Place to practise?"

Virginia looked startled. "Without her?"

"Couldn't you look after them? Aren't you the leader?"

"Yes, but—but if she goes, what's the use?"

"But if she doesn't go?" Margery asked quickly. "Suppose she gets better? She'd want you to go on giving concerts. I think you should practise until you know. It would be something to do; keep you from thinking."

"What we all want is to do something for her," Virginia broke out.

"It would be for her. It would please her, if she knew."

"Margery, if she's dying I can't," Virginia said passionately. "When we hear she's going to recover, I'll do it."

"We must all carry on as well as we can," Margery said soberly. "I haven't known her as long as the rest of you, but I feel quite bad enough . . . Oh, Mr. Woodburn! Tell us!"

He dropped into a chair. "She's unconscious, and she has serious injuries. They've sent for specialists and nurses. They may have to operate; there's probably pressure on the brain. She's very low; I don't think they've much hope, but they'll do everything possible. They've cabled to Marcus."

The girls looked at him silently. He seemed near to breaking-point.

Then they looked at one another, each with the same thought, for they were still very new friends. Will she be any use? Is she going to cry or faint?

Virginia was white, but her lips were steady and her voice was firm. "We must help other people. How can we do it? What would be most use? David, what can we do?"

"Oh, cheers!" Margery thought. "She's risen to it. She's splendid!"

David looked up. "Will you? What people will want most will be somebody to speak to, to cheer them up. They'll crowd in here to ask Margery what she knows. Can you bear it, Polly Paine? Just talk to them and be as cheering as you can, and hide what you really feel."

"I'll try." Margery gave him a shaky smile.

"Remind them that she's young and strong, and tell them Mr. Dering's on his way home. They'll want some place to meet and buck one another up. But some of them won't come, and they'll sit at home and weep. Virginia, couldn't you look them up—you'll know the ones who'd like it—and go in and say something hopeful? Old Mrs. Black and her girls, and Mrs. Freelove, who's ill, and Miss Anson—she's shy; she'll be in a dreadful state. I can't do that sort of thing, it must be a woman. Couldn't you be a kind of universal comforter?"

"It's a new job for me, but I'll see how it goes," Virginia agreed. "I'll go along to Miss Anson, and if she seems pleased I'll go to some of the others. And I'll talk to the twins about the children."

"I'll lend them Nanta," Margery suggested. "She's wonderfully good with children. I'll manage alone."

"It's tremendously fine of you both," David said gratefully. "It will help everybody no end. I'll go up and wait for news, and I'll come back as soon as I hear anything. May I use 'Polly's' as headquarters? It's central."

“Please do! Then I shall know the latest,” Margery said fervently.

CHAPTER TWENTY

TWO LETTERS

The silence of fear settled on Rainbows New Village. People went quietly to ask for news; Virginia's visits were received gratefully. The children were taken by the twins and Nanta to have a picnic in a distant bit of the park.

Mandy and Minty, shaken out of their casual rut by the disaster, made no objection to Virginia's proposal, and Minty cut bread-and-jam sandwiches and collected buns from the mothers and packed a large basket, while Amanda and Nanta played hide-and-seek among the bushes and "When I was a Schoolgirl" and "I saw Three Dukes" in a clearing. Araminta appeared with her basket and rugs, and the babies laughed in delight and sat in a ring to be fed, unconscious that their guardians were white and tired and had nothing to say to one another but plenty of rather feverish chatter for them.

David Woodburn called at "Polly's" continually, but had no news. "Condition just the same. She's holding on. There are two good nurses, as well as Miss Stewart." Then, later, "No change. The specialist won't operate till to-morrow, but he thinks it will have to be done."

"Aunt Jean found her engagement book and asked me to deal with it," he said, on one visit. "The architect was coming this week, about the new houses; and she had an appointment with her lawyers. I've been 'phoning them, and I put off the lecturer for to-morrow night. Little Miss Dering was coming to tea to-day, so I had to break the news to her; she was terribly cut up."

"You've found real things to do for Mrs. Dering," Margery said wistfully. "The rest of us feel so useless."

"Useless be bothered! You're helping enormously, Margery," he said warmly.

Margery had noted his use of her name—Margery, not Polly Paine—and she quietly fell into line with the rest of the village and addressed him, simply and naturally, as David. He made no comment; it was no time for thinking of personal matters. But she saw the gleam in his eyes and knew he had noticed. She realized, and believed he did also, that the stress of tragedy had drawn them together and that they had leapt ahead in their friendship by weeks.

"Go to bed, all of you, and try to sleep," was his last command, as he looked in at Periwinkle Place and found Margery there with the silent Roses. "We can't do any more. I'll go up during the night, and if there's any change I'll let you know; that's a promise. If you hear nothing, it means she's just the same."

He went to his billet for supper, and Margery turned to go home. "Come to the gate with me, Virginia?"

Virginia came readily. "Go to bed, Nanta. I'll come presently. Twins, you'll go too, if you're sensible. If you can sleep, you'll forget. Margery, you really have helped. People like you, and they like dropping in to 'Polly's' for news."

"I don't feel ready for sleep," Margery said, pausing by the gate. "I shall write letters for an hour. Virginia, I want your leave to write to Gilbert Seymour."

Virginia gave her a startled look. "Why?"

"Because he's unhappy. It isn't fair to him. May I tell him your story?"

Virginia flushed and stood staring down at the periwinkles by the gate. "I can't think about him just now."

“Of course not; that’s what I want to tell him. He must keep away while we’re in such trouble. I’m afraid he’ll turn up and be a bother to us. I’ll explain that; but I want to tell him why you ran away. Once he understands, he’ll be willing to wait till you’re ready to see him.”

Virginia’s colour rose again. “I don’t know if I want him to come. I don’t know what he’s like.”

“I can tell you a lot about him. But there’s heaps more that he must tell you himself.”

“I don’t know that I want him coming here.”

“Virginia, let’s be sensible,” Margery said bluntly. “You and Gilbert have never spoken to one another, but you each think the other looks interesting. You have to meet, and talk, and see what comes of it. If you don’t care about him, it needn’t go on; you’ll tell him to go away. But you can’t send him away before he’s arrived! It would be terribly unfair, And you might be sorry all your life.”

Virginia’s eyes were still on the bank of periwinkles. “You’ll tell him it doesn’t mean anything?”

“Nothing definite. Shall I say you want to know if he’s as nice as he looks, and if you find he isn’t you’ll send him off?”

“If it means no more than that he may come,” Virginia said at last. “But I won’t go on with it unless I like him. And I don’t want him just now.”

“I may tell him who you are?”

“I suppose so. Tell him not to talk about it.”

“Virginia!” Margery pleaded. “Won’t you write to Lord Kentisbury and put things right? To-night, when you don’t feel like going to sleep?”

Only Virginia knew how the thought of that letter burdened her, though the twins had guessed, and she believed that Margery had guessed too.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said unsteadily.

“Just the plain truth,” Margery exclaimed. “Say you’ve never felt happy about your last letter and you’re sorry you wrote as you did. Then say you’d be glad to be left alone for a little while longer, and you thank him for his kindness, and you hope he’ll forgive you. That would be quite enough.”

“My letter was ungracious,” Virginia whispered. “It’s a horrible thing to be. And my silence, after his kind answer, was worse still.”

“Then write a grateful letter now! You’ll feel much happier if you’re on good terms with the family. He won’t say you must use your real name—it doesn’t matter to him. You can still sign yourself Virginia Rose.”

“I’ll think about it. You’re kind, Margery. Why do you care?”

“I hate to see you look unhappy, and so does Mrs. Dering. If she knew your story she’d want you to write as much as I do. I can’t think of anything that would please her more.”

Virginia looked down into her eyes. “Would it be something to do for her?”

“Oh, Virginia! The best thing you could possibly do; the best gift you could give her, when she’s well enough to understand,” Margery pleaded.

Virginia turned away. “Good night, Polly Paine. And thank you.”

“I believe she’ll do it,” Margery thought exultantly, as she ran along the brick path to Cherry-Tree Cottage.

The Pouffe leapt from his perch with a thump, and came to meet her, looking reproachful; there had been too many people about all day for his taste, and he felt neglected.

Margery gave him liver and milk, made some cocoa for herself, and sat down to supper. Then she wrote to Gilbert, telling him the story of the Roses and their secret.

"They're terribly shy about it," she explained, and went on to beg him not to come to Periwinkle Place at the moment, and to tell of the shadow which had fallen on Rainbows. "I'll let you know how things go, and presently I believe Virginia will be glad to see you. She can't think of anything but Mrs. Dering just now, so don't come and upset her. But later on you must come. And I hope you'll like one another. She's being rather fine in this crisis, and I really think she's going to write to her uncle and make friends. Some day you'll have to interview Lord Kentisbury, if you want to marry her, so be making up your mind to it! He's the head of the family, and I'm sure he'd have to give his consent! But I should think he'd approve of you, and he sounds very nice and kind."

David Woodburn arrived while she was having breakfast and accepted a cup of tea gratefully.

"No news. Did you sleep, Polly Paine?"

"A little, thanks to you. I'd have lain awake if it hadn't been for your promise. I knew there was nothing more to tell."

"I'm glad you trusted me. The only news is a frantic cable from Marcus. The weather's bad over the Atlantic, and nobody will bring him home or lend him a 'plane. I'm glad they're being firm; we don't want her to recover just to hear that he has crashed."

"Oh, no! I hope he'll be careful! It's hard on him, but he'll need to wait."

"He didn't bargain for this when they married," David said. "She knew she might have anxiety about him, but she wouldn't ask him to give up flying. She had one very bad time, when he was missing, before they were engaged; and she knew it might happen again. But he didn't expect to be frightened about her."

"He'll know what it feels like and what she's agreed to, in marrying a flying man. Do speak to Pouffy! He's waiting so patiently."

The Pouffe's adoring gaze was fixed unwinkingly on the one human who talked to him in that fascinating language. David made some enticing noises, and the great creature leapt on to his knee and arched his back and rubbed his head on the coat sleeve. David grinned and tickled him under the chin, and went on talking to Margery.

"I've been thinking and planning, on the lines that Mrs. Dering will get better, but that she'll have a long illness."

Margery nodded. "I'm afraid it will take a long while, but if she's improving we can bear it."

"Yes, but this place mustn't go to pieces, and it has depended on her. When she's well enough, she must be told everything's going on as usual. But I'm afraid it won't just happen."

"What can we do to keep things going? I'm sure you've a plan."

"I want Virginia to take over. There must be somebody, and she could do it."

"You mean, take Mrs. Dering's place?"

"As far as anybody can. Organize things—keep people up to the mark—run the concerts and the lectures and the dancing, and see that things don't go to pieces, and go round and be friendly to everybody. People used to tell their troubles to Mrs. Dering, and they felt better for having got them off their chests. When somebody's cat scratched up somebody else's seeds—this is a warning for you, Sir Pouffe!—they told her and she sympathized, but talked them round and made them see that cats don't know anything about boundaries of gardens. Virginia has a way with her, when she likes to use it; she could do the job."

"Is she old enough? If only she'd use her title!" Margery exclaimed. "It would give her just the standing she needs. As 'Lady Virginia' she could do so much more."

"Oh, you know about that?" David raised his brows.

"I know, and I know that you know."

"My uncle in Edinburgh is their lawyer," David explained. "Virginia isn't of age; somebody has to handle their affairs. Their father's money is invested, and Uncle John sends their income every quarter. He knows the game they've been playing; they wanted him to write to Miss Rose, so they had to explain. He didn't approve, but as Kentisbury had allowed it to go on he couldn't put a stopper on their masquerade."

"I've wondered how they managed things. Could we persuade Virginia to use her title now, for the sake of Rainbows?"

"I doubt it. She isn't a bit keen."

"But wouldn't it help?"

"Oh yes!" He made a grimace. "It's silly, but it would help a lot. People are like that. If they knew Virginia was 'my lady' they'd treat her most respectfully; she could do what she liked with them."

"Then she must own up," Margery said decidedly. "It's exactly what we need. Virginia looks like a leader; if her real name would impress people she must use it."

"But I don't believe she'll do it. I know her rather well."

"Do you want to marry her?" Margery shot the question at him.

"No, I do not," he said curtly. "I've other ideas, as it happens."

His look was so straight and full of meaning that Margery's eyes fell. "I'm sorry. I thought perhaps, since you've known her so long—"

"Not for me, thank you. She's a very fine girl, but she's not my girl."

"I'm glad to hear it, for my friend, Gilbert Seymour, wants her very much."

"The bloke who helped you to unpack? But how does he know her?"

Margery explained. "They must make friends, of course. They may not like one another. But they're attracted to one another, and that's a good beginning."

"Kentisbury would probably approve. He's a jolly good sort; I think very highly of him."

Margery looked up quickly. "Do you know him?"

"I've seen him once. He made inquiries about the girls and got in touch with Uncle John. He found that I had known them in Edinburgh and that I was living near them here, so he asked me to keep an eye on them, and to write to him if he could do anything for them at any time. I went to see him, by his wish; he'd been an invalid and he couldn't do too much. I liked him, and I promised to do as he asked. But there has never seemed any need to call on him; the girls are all right and they only want to be left alone."

"They don't know that you keep watch on them?"

"They do not, Polly Paine. Don't give me away! It's all for their good."

"I won't say anything, of course. I'm glad to know—I feel better about them now."

"Their uncle has done all he can to *be* an uncle to them. They don't want an uncle, and he won't force himself on them."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE TROUBLE AT RAINBOWS

The shadow deepened over Rainbows when it became known that the doctors had decided to operate. Doranne still lay unconscious, and they hoped they could help her. In her present condition it was doubtful if she would live through the operation, but it was certain she could not live without it. So they cabled to Marcus for his consent and received his heart-broken reply: "Do everything you can. You must save her." He was still raging over the delay, but the storm over the Atlantic continued and flying was impossible.

Margery, Virginia, and David did what they could to hearten their neighbours on that black day. Life at Rainbows seemed to stand still; the people no longer talked in the roads. Everyone waited; nothing mattered but the message from the big house. The twins, more silent than they had ever been in their lives, took charge of the children and kept Nanta busy at the same time.

A joyful letter of thanks came from Gilbert. Margery glanced at it and saw that he was feeling happier; then she put it away, to be read to Virginia later on.

David's motor-cycle rushed hooting down the hill and through the village. The people, startled by the sudden breaking of the hush, ran to their gates, and called after him, "Is there news?"

He waved his hand and pulled up at the post-office to give his message. "It's over. She's doing well. They're more hopeful." He raced on to tell the good news to Margery and Virginia.

"Polly's" became once more a centre for eager crowds. David had little to tell; Doranne had lived through the operation and she had now a chance of recovery, but her condition was still critical. He told all he could, and went off to the aerodrome to cable to Marcus.

For a day or two the tension continued, though now the balance lay on the hopeful side. Then at last the word went round; Mrs. Dering was stronger, and if nothing went amiss she would recover.

The village relaxed, with a great sigh of relief, and everyone felt limp and tired, and, it must be confessed, a little irritable.

Margery, going along to Periwinkle Place during the evening with Gilbert's letter, heard one housewife say to another, over her hedge, something about "—that awful woman." "And I said to her . . . and she wasn't half upset, I can tell you—"

"Oh, horrors!" Margery muttered. "If they start squabbling it will be the last straw!"

"I can't stop them. They wouldn't listen to me. Why should they?" Virginia argued, when she heard the story.

"It's happening all round," Amanda remarked, as she picked up her trowel. "That revolting female at The Rookery is making trouble. The poor little Anson was in tears this morning over something she'd said. Mrs. Dering would be down on them like tons of bricks."

"Tell David," Minty drawled. "Margery, you tell David. He'll knock their silly heads together. He'll do anything to please you."

Margery flushed and turned from her. "Virginia, I think you should read this. Gilbert wouldn't mind."

"Oh!" Virginia grew scarlet and hesitated. Then she took the letter and went into her own room.

“Is it from our boy friend?” Minty asked with interest. “We’ll pull her leg over this, Amanda.”

“You’d better not!” Margery said sharply. “Don’t be an ass! If you tease her now you’ll spoil everything. For goodness’ sake be careful, you two! Don’t be more—more revolting than you can help.”

Araminta raised her black brows. “Somebody else being touchy. Mind your step, Amanda!”

“I was going to weed your dastardly garden, but I guess I’m too weary to-night.” Mandy put down the trowel. “Serves you right, Polly Paine.”

Margery bit her lip to keep back a retort, as Amanda flung herself on the couch with a book. Her garden was full of weeds, and help would have been welcome.

“I made a big fruit cake yesterday,” she remarked, to the world in general.

Mandy, with dancing brown eyes, looked at her over the book. “Are we revolting?” she drawled.

“Sometimes; quite often. But you needn’t be. I’m sorry for Virginia, if you’re going to make things hard for her.”

“She’s had a nice letter from *him*.” Amanda put down the book and spoke confidentially.

“From his lordship, bless his heart,” Araminta added. “He sounds quite human. Says he’s glad to be on friendly terms and we must ask him if we want anything.”

“I thought of rushing to the castle and howling, ‘Give me horses! Give her boats!’ at the gate,” Amanda grinned. “But Lady Ginny said it wouldn’t be dignified.”

“And he says there’s no need for us to be ladies unless we wish,” Araminta went on.

“You might practise, in case you want to use your titles in a hurry some time. You’d find it difficult to begin being ladies suddenly,” Margery said cruelly.

The twins grinned at her, then turned to look at Virginia, as she came from her room.

“Let’s go and dig that revolting garden, Araminta!” cried the elder twin, and dashed from the room.

“Why did you skip off like that, child?” Minty grumbled, as they went down the path. “I haven’t the least wish to dig to-night.”

“The thought of weeding positively revolts me,” Amanda assured her. “But didn’t you see Ginny’s face? She wants to talk about *him* to Polly Paine.”

“We don’t want to lose her Gilbert,” Minty conceded. “He’d make a nice brother-in-law, I think. We’ll weed her—what did you call it? Not revolting—a new word.”

Amanda giggled. “Her dastardly garden. Come on! She’ll give us chunks of cake, if we do a lot.”

“It’s a nice letter.” Virginia handed it back to Margery and stood looking down, her cheeks flushed. “I like him. But tell him not to come too soon. We aren’t through this trouble yet.”

“It’s entering on a new phase,” Margery said solemnly. “I hope things don’t get too bad. It will be a long while before Mrs. Dering can come and knock their silly heads together. But—oh, Virginia! I do hope you’ll be very happy! And what lovely country-dance parties you’ll give on the lawns at Summerton! You’ll be a beautiful hostess!”

Virginia changed the subject hurriedly. “Do you think we should start things again? Would it please her?” There was no need to explain who was meant by “her” in Rainbows New Village just now.

"I'm sure it would, and it would be good for people to have something new to think about. You mean your class to-morrow?"

Virginia agreed. "If we kept away from the house the music wouldn't bother anybody. If she's still going on well—"

"I should carry on. I'm sure she'd want it."

"I don't feel like dancing, myself, yet."

"I don't suppose anyone does. But it would be good for us all."

But when, next day, Nanta tuned her fiddle and the class began, only six girls were present, and three were Margery and the twins. Virginia knit her brows. "People are late to-day. We'll do 'The Old Mole'; Margery must learn it. She's going to be good: she has such lovely natural balance."

But only two more dancers came, and everyone went home greatly disappointed.

"Longways dances aren't any fun unless you have ten," Amanda grumbled. "People do revolt me! Letting Ginny down like that!"

"Wait till to-morrow night," Araminta said grimly.

"What's on? Oh, the lecture! There'll be nobody there. Why are they having it?"

"David and Ginny and Margery want everything to go on as usual. I shall go; David's last lecture wasn't too revolting."

"I'll come, just to see his slides," Amanda agreed. "That man keeps quiet about it, but he's a jolly fine artist."

"He's jolly keen on Margery."

"I know, dear child. But don't say a word—you might put them off. I'd like to see old David married and settled down. It's quite time."

"Says the elderly twin!" Minty mocked.

Margery had been thrilled and surprised by the news that not all the lectures at Rainbows were by outsiders, and that David Woodburn had already spoken on "Local Bird Life", illustrating his talk with slides made from his own drawings. She was looking forward eagerly to his second lecture, and was as angry and disgusted as the twins when only a handful of people turned up to hear him. The slides were beautiful and took her completely by surprise by their delicacy and beauty, but the audience was not there to appreciate them or to listen to his stories of his birds.

"It's a beastly shame! They're rotten!" Margery raged, as they went down the hill afterwards.

"Revolting, my love. I always said so," Amanda drawled.

David laughed. "I'm just thankful I wasn't an outsider. If I'd come from London I'd have felt annoyed."

"Mrs. Dering wouldn't like it," Virginia said. "She'd be worried by this slackness about everything."

"A blight on the dastardly village," Araminta grinned. "Can't you people buck them up? You three are a sort of unofficial committee. Everybody else is too old or very young."

The committee looked at one another. "I'm no good. It needs a woman's firm but gentle hand," said David. "And Margery hasn't been here long enough. It's up to you, Virginia."

"I can't do anything. Nobody would pay any attention to me. But I'd like to tell them what I think of them," Virginia said vigorously.

Margery looked at David. "They'd listen to her, if—" she began.

"They'd pay attention to the Lady Virginia," said David. "There's nothing else for it, my dear. You'll have to use that title and come to the front as the leader of Rainbows."

"Oh, Virginia, do!" Margery pleaded. "They'd follow you!"

Virginia stood at the gate of Periwinkle Place and stared at them. "Are you both mad?"

"No, frightfully sensible. You could do far more as 'my lady'. People would be so thrilled! For Mrs. Dering's sake, Virginia!"

"I'd do a lot—almost anything—for her sake," Virginia said with energy. "But this isn't possible. You're crazy, both of you. Who would believe me if I suddenly claimed a title?"

David and Margery looked at one another again. They had not foreseen this difficulty.

"Nobody," drawled Mandy. "Don't be mad! How could the girl do it? They'd ask for proof."

"And they'd laugh like anything at her cheek," Minty added.

"Better fetch our uncle and ask him to introduce her—and us, of course—as his nieces. That would fix them," Mandy suggested.

"If I do it, will you take on the job?" David looked at Virginia.

"What job? If you do what?"

"The job of rounding up people and running this place for Mrs. Dering till she can do it herself, or till Marcus comes home and asks you to go on with it. His one idea will be to keep things as she wanted them. If I fetch your uncle?"

"If you do! But you won't." Virginia gazed at him incredulously. "You'd never dare!"

"That's a challenge. If I do my bit I'll expect you to do yours. I'll take you home, Polly Paine."

"David! Margery, stop him!" Virginia cried in panic. "What are you going to do, idiot?"

"You're going to save Rainbows, and I'm going to make it easy for you," David told her over his shoulder.

"You won't do it. And I won't!" Virginia hurled the words after him.

"Oh yes, you will. And I will. We both of us will," he called back cheerfully.

Virginia sank down on the low wall. "What is he going to do? Oh, twins, stop him!"

"Not I. It's a jolly good plan," Minty said unexpectedly. "This—er—sorry, Amanda love!—this revolting place and these dastardly people are going to rack and ruin, with nobody to keep them in the right path. You can do it, Lady Virginia. I'm all for it."

"It will be a loathly bore for us, of course," Amanda drawled. "Lady Amanda! Lady Araminta! Gosh, shan't we get sick of it? But I don't want Mrs. Dering to have a broken heart, when all her other broken parts have mended. You'll need to do her job for her, Ginny."

"You'll love it," Araminta pointed out. "You like bossing people. If Dad, poor dear, had been the Earl in earnest, you'd have looked after the castle for him beautifully. You're wasted in Periwinkle Place."

"Idiot!" Virginia said irritably.

"I shall need you, Margery." David paused outside "Polly's". "Will you come with me? You've been in my side-car before."

"When you go to see Lord Kentisbury?" Margery looked startled. "I want to back you up, but what can I do?"

"Take on the explanations, if I have to see his wife. He might be away, or engaged, or even having a day in bed; he's not strong, and he has to take things quietly. If I were faced with

Lady Kentisbury I'd be all at sea. You'd have to take over. Come on, Polly Paine! Help me out!"

"I don't know how to talk to a Countess," Margery said in alarm.

"You'd ask if you might see the children; I believe there are several. That would win her heart. I want your company."

"I'll come with you, but I hope the uncle will be at home. Where is Kentisbury Castle? Is it very terrifying?"

"Appalling," he assured her. "There's too much of it. You have to shut your eyes to it. It's not far, about twenty miles; it's near Mrs. Dering's little place by the sea. Lord Kentisbury could easily run over to Rainbows; if he hadn't been so considerate he could have come and annoyed the Periwinkles long ago."

"I'll come," Margery promised. "But I hope you'll do the talking. I'd like to see Virginia's proper background!"

He grinned. "True for you, Polly Paine! Kentisbury, complete with battlements and walls a yard thick, drawbridge and portcullis, and a central keep with a banner to show the family is in residence, is just the background for Virginia."

"Oh, well! Summerton can't compete with all that! But it's an ancient historic mansion, and it's large and beautiful. It will do very well," Margery said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO MARGERY MEETS THE COUNTESS

The Countess of Kentisbury lay in a long chair in the sunshine in a pretty morning-room. She put down her book and yawned. Then she glanced at the big cradle at her side and smiled. "Impossible to be quite bored when one looks at that! I can hardly believe it yet. I'm getting my wish fulfilled with a vengeance. How Maid and Mary laughed! And how jealous Jen is! She shrieked with indignation. Yes?" to a manservant who was approaching.

"A gentleman and a young lady to see his lordship, my lady. I said he was in town and that you were not receiving, but they asked me to bring you this."

"My blessings on them, whoever they are, if they've come to keep me company for a few minutes!" The Countess read the card. "'David Woodburn. Rainbows. Business—Nieces.' Oh, bring them to me here! That will be all right."

The man went off, looking doubtful. Her ladyship was supposed to keep very quiet for a few days.

"'Business—Nieces.' How brief and to the point!" Rosamund, the Countess, laughed. "It must be the Recalcitrants, as Geoffrey calls them, as Rhoda is the only other niece; and Rainbows is where they live. I liked Virginia Rosemary's honest apology in her letter. David Woodburn—I remember," as David and Margery entered, he looking shy, she quite plainly terrified by her surroundings, but both valiantly determined to carry out their mission. "He has quite a pretty girl with him, but she's not one of them. She's fair, but there's no Kane of Kentisbury about her. She's shy; I must put that right at once."

"Please forgive me!" she said. "I'm under strict orders to keep quiet. If you've come to tell us about the runaway nieces, I'm delighted to see you. You aren't one of them, are you?" to Margery.

"Oh, no! I'm Margery Paine. But I'm very fond of them." Margery looked down at her with startled eyes. "You're exactly like Nanta and Virginia!"

"Find seats for yourselves. Tea and cakes will come presently; I want mine badly. So the cousins are like the family! I'm a Kane too, you know; it was my name before I married; we were second cousins. Virginia I've heard of, but who is Nanta?"

"Atalanta, the little one. She and Virginia are like their father; the twins are dark."

"I'm fascinated by their names," the Countess laughed. "Virginia Rosemary and Rosalind Atalanta are delightful."

"We oughtn't to have come," Margery said shyly. "We didn't know you had been ill. I'm sorry."

"I'm afraid we're intruding." David placed a chair for Margery.

"I'm glad to see you. I was bored almost to tears. I have friends coming to tea this afternoon, so I was ordered to spend a quiet morning. Do I look ill?"

"No, not a bit. But you said—"

"Come round here!" said the Countess.

Margery came to the other side of her chair and gazed into the big cradle. "Oh, Lady Kentisbury, what tiny darlings! How old are they?"

"Nearly three weeks. Don't be shy, Mr. Woodburn! Don't you want to see my daughters?"

“But I thought your twins were nearly a year old?” David looked at her with startled eyes. “I’m sure I heard—”

“Oh, Rosabel and Rosalin! They’re big girls now. These are the new ones, Rosanna and Rosilda,” the Countess said calmly.

David gasped. Margery broke into a peal of laughter. “You don’t mean—oh, have I wakened them?” as one twin and then the other stirred and murmured in her sleep.

“Which woke first?” the Countess asked with interest. “I’m still studying them. That one? That’s Rosilda, a restless little person; she’s the younger. Yes, I do mean it; two sets of twins—all girls. Why not? Kanes are given to having twins, and my husband and I are both Kanes. One set for each of our families. I wanted a lot of girls, and I’m getting them. Presently they’ll go for walks in the park two by two, like a school crocodile.”

Margery was on her knees by the cradle, worshipping the new twins. “Exactly like you! And like Virginia! I wish Nanta could see them!”

“Nanta and anybody else can see them, if they’ll come here. But they avoid us as if we were infectious,” the Countess retorted.

“They’re lovely babies!”

“We like them!” the Countess said solemnly. “And we’re getting used to them, and everybody is terribly much amused. We’re being teased about our boarding-school. I wanted girls; I’m delighted. I want to have them out in the garden, but Nurse won’t allow it yet. They’re still rather new and tender! Mr. Woodburn, aren’t you glad she came with you? You don’t know what to say about babies, do you?”

“I’d have more to say if they were newly hatched baby blackbirds,” David admitted.

“Chickens, fluffy yellow ones.” Margery amended his idea. “Blackbirds is the wrong word. Look at their soft little yellow heads! What did you call them, Lady Kentisbury?”

“Rosanna Maidlin and Rosilda Mary. Maidlin and Mary are for very old friends. The others are family names; Rosanna lived in Queen Anne’s reign, and Rosilda was an early ancestress, whose father went to the Crusades with Cœur-de-Lion. Her name was probably Rosehilda originally; Hild is Saxon for maid. But it has come down to us as Rosilda.”

“It’s very pretty! Their names are as pretty as they are.”

“I wanted one of these to be simply Rose Mary, but my husband, and everyone else, said it wouldn’t be fair to her. With the others called Rosabel and Rosalin and Rosanna, she’d feel hurt if she was merely Rose. One has to think of the newspapers!—‘The Countess, with her two sets of beautiful twin daughters, Lady Rosabel, Lady Rosalin, Lady Rosanna and Lady Rose’—it wouldn’t do, would it?”

“It’s better she should have a family name,” Margery assented, laughing. “But you could call her Rosemary, like Virginia?”

“A very great friend has a little Rosemary, so I’m avoiding it as long as I can. Of course, if I have two more, I may be forced to use Rosemary!”

“And Rosalind, like Nanta?”

“No, it’s too much like Rosalin, who is Number Two. But I’d like another boy now.”

“You’ve found lovely names so far. Rosilda is very pretty!”

“Her godmother, for whom she’s called Mary, is thrilled about it. Here comes tea! Will you pour it, Miss Paine? May I say Margery?”

“Oh, please do! I should feel so much less frightened!”

“You aren’t frightened now, since seeing my babies. You must go to the children’s garden and meet the boys, and Rosabel and Rosalin, presently.”

Margery carried a cup of tea to her. "You must wonder why I came," she said shyly. "It's Mr. Woodburn who wants to tell you about your nieces. I'm only a friend; I keep a little sweet-shop in Rainbows New Village."

"I kept a tuck-shop myself, before I married." The Countess smiled at her. "Isn't it fun? I can guess why you came; Mr. Woodburn was a little alarmed and he wanted you to hold his hand."

"He said he'd be shy if your husband wasn't here and he had to see you." Margery smiled back at her.

"Polly Paine, I shall borrow Lady Amanda's word and say you're a revolting person," David exclaimed.

"You want to tell my husband something about the girls?" The Countess looked up at him, as she took a cake from the plate he offered. "Can you tell me instead? I'll give him a true and faithful account."

David plunged into the story of Rainbows; of how the village depended on Doranne Dering; of her accident and his own share in it; and of how she was being missed, and all her cherished hopes were being overthrown.

The Countess listened with keen interest. "And you really think our niece Virginia could help to get the place back on right lines?"

"She'd do it all right, but it would be easier for her if she'd use her title." David explained the difficulty and his own solution.

"You'd like Geoffrey to call at the village and tell people who the girls really are? He'll do it; he'll be glad to see the nieces, and still more glad to be able to help. Virginia couldn't merely assume her title; she's right about that. How can Geoffrey introduce her to people?"

Margery looked up. "At the post-office. If he'd go there with her and tell Mrs. Simpson he's just found out—but it wouldn't be true."

"Mrs. Simpson would pass it round the village. Yes, that's the way to manage it. I'll tell him. He has to be in town again in a day or two; he can easily drive through Rainbows. Tell the girls I shall come to see them as soon as I can, and I hope they'll come to have tea with us and the family presently."

"We mustn't tire you," Margery began.

Rosamund smiled at her. "Kind of you! But I'm not tired. You've cheered me up; I was bored stiff. If you'll go through that door to the garden and through the gap in the box hedge, you'll find the rest of the family—my boys and my little girls, who were my babies till these two came. You must tell Virginia about them. Are the other girls reconciled to using their titles?"

"The twins say it will be a loathly bore," Margery said. "It will be difficult to get used to it. We call them Mandy and Minty and Nanta."

"Oh, but you won't bother about titles; not among friends! Still, Lady Mandy and Lady Minty sound quite fascinating."

"I'm afraid they'll insist on being Lady Amanda and Lady Araminta," Margery said ruefully.

While David told the Countess more about the Periwinkle girls, Margery went through the gap in the hedge to see the four children at play with their nurses in their own little garden. She came back full of delight in the elder pair of twins and in the fair-haired small boys, who were the heirs to Kentisbury.

"You must be terribly proud!" she said earnestly.

The Countess smiled. "I am," she admitted. "You'll tell Virginia and the others about their little cousins, won't you? Can you stay and have lunch with me?"

"Oh, but I must open my shop this afternoon," and Margery thanked her warmly but declined. "I put a notice on the door—'Closed till two o'clock'. We ought to hurry home."

Rosamund laughed. "You're right. You must stick to business. I shall call at your shop when I come to Rainbows."

"It's called 'Polly's', at Cherry-Tree Cottage. Polly is my nickname," Margery explained. "It's easy for children to say."

As David drove her home he was silent at first. Suddenly he said, "She asked me something about you and me, Polly Paine. I told her—not yet, but I hoped some day."

Margery's hands clenched under the rug. She had never felt like this about Gilbert Seymour.

At last she relaxed, with a laugh. "Perhaps—some day. It's too soon, David. And I'd have to ask my Pouffe. But he adores you; I think he'd consent. He'd like to have you always there. It would be good for him to have a father."

David's laugh rang out. "I'll ask Sir Pouffe's consent. I won't tease you, Margery, but I've made up my mind and I shan't change. It was good of you to help to-day; I'd have felt scared if I'd been alone. Will you come to my shack and see my birds and my drawings to-night?"

"Thank you, David. I'd love to," Margery said sedately.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE MAN OF THE WOODS

"I'm very grateful for your help, girls. You've been a real boon to our mothers," Miss Stewart said. "The nurses can do everything now, so I'll take over my job again. You'd better have a few days' holiday, as the library won't open until people can be allowed into the house. I'll manage without you, Mandy."

The twins, warming to their new task, had been playing bears with the children, and were wildly dishevelled. They sat on the floor and looked up at her, as they combed their black locks. "Sure, Aunt Jean? We don't want to let you down."

"Mrs. Dering getting on all right?" Amanda added.

"Splendidly, but she's still very weak, of course. What have you been doing with my babies?"

"Just a rough and tumble." Minty wound a red scarf round her hair, and threw a yellow one to her twin. "Tie up your head in a bag, girl. You may look a little more decent. I'm afraid poor Aunt Jean's in for a bad time," she chuckled, as they raced for home, where Nanta was helping Virginia in some extra cleaning. "Those babes will expect her to be a big brown bear, or a little black pig. Far more thrilling than 'Mulberry Bush' or 'Looby Looby'. We've demoralized her infants!"

"There's David's bike. I believe the dastardly man and the still more revolting Margery have been to see our uncle," and Mandy dashed to the gate. "Hi, David! What have you two been up to?"

David waved his hand towards Margery. "Ask the lady," he called and rushed away up the road.

"Polly Paine, where have you been?" Minty asked severely.

Margery went to the door, as they followed her up the brick path. "Talking to your aunt and cousins. There are two new ones, did you know?"

"What's that?" Virginia came from her bedroom, wearing a dusting-cap of periwinkle blue, which brought out the deeper blue of her eyes. "Two new what?"

"You're the image of Lady Kentisbury, Virginia Rosemary; you too, Nanta, of course. You four are silly objects!" Margery said vehemently. "You couldn't have a kinder aunt than she is, and you make her feel as if she was infectious. You won't go near her."

"Did she say that?" Amanda drawled. "Does the good creature know there are four of us? A bit crushing—what?"

"She has four girls of her own; she loves girls." Margery delivered her bombshell.

"Four? It was two when we heard last!" Minty protested.

"It's four now. There are new twins, three weeks old. David and I saw them."

"Margery, what do you mean?" Virginia cried.

"The family does seem rather weighed down with girls," Margery owned, her eyes full of teasing laughter. "We had morning tea with your delightful Countess, and Lady Rosanna and Lady Rosilda were there too."

"Gosh!" Amanda sat down heavily on the window-seat. "'Our delightful Countess', and we haven't even met the woman."

"Not *more* twins?" Minty cried.

“Amanda, don’t let me ever hear you refer to Aunt Rosamund in that hideous way again,” Virginia said sharply. “Margery, is it true?”

“My goodness—Aunt Rosamund!” Mandy murmured.

“Better mind your step, revolting lass,” Minty warned her.

“True as true, Virginia. They’re lovely babies; three weeks old. She hopes you’ll go to tea with them soon.”

“Her family’s worse than ours,” Minty grinned.

“She’s pleased about them. I saw the older ones too—Rosabel and Rosalin; beautiful kiddies, very fair, with eyes just like Virginia’s.”

“And Nanta’s,” Mandy added. “What does she call the new ones?”

“Rosanna and Rosilda. They have other names as well.”

“Gosh!” Mandy said again. “We shall have to get used to this. We’ve had practice with babies lately; we’d better go and look after her crèche, Araminta.”

“Margery, what did you tell her?” Virginia demanded.

“Everything; at least, David did. All about you and Rainbows. If he said anything else, it was when I was seeing the children. There’s Lord Verriton, who is two, and another boy of five, who is his uncle—Lady Kentisbury’s stepbrother. Isn’t it an odd family?”

Virginia stood looking down. “And what happens next?”

“Your uncle’s coming to see you. Then you’ll all need to be real Ladies. The twins will find it a terrific strain.”

“Revolting female,” Amanda said promptly.

“You don’t know what we can do when we try.” Araminta’s tone was gentle.

“Then you’d better try your hardest. You’ll get used to it.”

“Stay to lunch with us, Polly Paine, and tell us about the castle! Did you see any horses?” Mandy begged. “Ginny will feed you; you don’t want to start cooking now.”

“She’ll boil an egg,” Minty said. “Don’t let her do it, Virginia!”

Virginia seconded the invitation, and Margery yielded, and repaid their hospitality by giving a full account of the morning’s visit. When she set out to open her shop, Virginia went with her to the gate.

“You don’t think David told Aunt Rosamund anything about—Sir Gilbert, do you?”

“I don’t know, Virginia. But he told me he was glad we had gone, because it cleared your way. Once there isn’t any secret, Gilbert can come to see you and you can start making friends,” Margery said gently. “It can only be that for some time, you know; he won’t try to hurry you into anything more. He still has a month or two at Oxford, and then he wants a year at a farming college. He’s very keen to do his best for Summerton; he’s really in earnest about that.”

“He’s sensible. I like all you tell me about him,” and Virginia turned and ran back to Periwinkle Place.

“Polly’s” had a busy afternoon, having been closed all morning. But when Margery’s last customer had gone, David appeared to claim her promise to visit his Bird Corner.

“Shop’s shut,” she told him. “No more toffee till to-morrow.”

“Toffee not wanted. Come and hear my woodpecker! He’s making a fearful row, laughing at everything.”

“Laughing? Are you pulling my leg?”

“No, he really laughs. Did you give a full report at Periwinkle Place?”

“I tried to. They’re amused and rather horrified about the new twins, and they’re all a bit frightened of their uncle.”

“They won’t be, once they’ve seen him. He’s as nice as she is. Where’s Sir Pouffe?”

“Out with Jane,” Margery smiled. “We won’t disturb them.”

David tucked her into the side-car and raced off to the corner of the park sacred to wild birds, and led her by narrow paths to the hut where he sometimes slept.

“Look!” He touched her arm as they reached a clearing. “That’s our friend the woodpecker.”

A beautiful bird with crimson crest and greenish wings and a long strange beak was jabbing at the ground viciously in search of supper.

“Works hard, doesn’t he?” David said, as Margery watched in delight.

“He’s a beauty. What a fierce little dig he makes!”

“You’ll hear his chatter from the trees. It really is a sort of laugh. This is my shack. I don’t sleep here regularly; I’ve good quarters at Applegarth. But occasionally I have a night out, and I’m very cosy in there. Sit here and I’ll bring you the drawings for the book.”

Margery had been prepared for good work by the slides she had seen. But she cried out in delight at the beauty and delicacy of the pictures, some in colour, many in line, of every kind of wild bird which had been seen in the Sanctuary.

“Even the rabbits and other small creatures! They’re beautiful! How did you learn to do such lovely fine work?”

“I’ve always been keen on drawing. My dad left me a small income, so I went for training, and then I had the luck to fall in with this chap who wanted plates for his book and small sketches to be set in the text. We talked it over and I did some specimens; we saw the publisher and fixed things up. They seem pleased; I think it will lead to more work. Only this morning I had a letter suggesting drawings for a book of woodland life, for children. It will be fun to do.”

“You can put in your hut, and the mice and rabbits,” Margery said eagerly.

Her delight pleased him; he showed her more sketches, and she made suggestions for others. But the woodpecker would not laugh, and David was annoyed and disappointed.

“I shall have to come back another time to hear him,” Margery said tactfully.

Then David promptly hoped the raucous cackle would not sound and kept listening anxiously lest the bird should relent.

But the woodpecker had had his supper and was sleepy. He did not laugh, and Margery promised to return.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR RECALCITRANT NIECES

The twins were digging in Margery's front garden next morning when Amanda, leaning on her spade, gazed at a large car drawing up in the road.

"Araminta, loathly child, come here," she said softly.

Minty came to her side. "Revolted female, what do you want? I was just winning a desperate tussle with a bad character—a buttercup, in fact."

"That ghastly car—spurting wealth from every side. Could it possibly be——?"

"The uncle," Minty murmured. "I believe the girl's right. Now we're for it!"

"He's coming here; he's heard about 'Polly's'. He doesn't look so bad, Minty. Like Ginny, isn't he?"

"Looks rather a lamb," Minty agreed. "We can get round him all right."

Amanda grinned. "He won't know we're us. How could he? Neither Nanta nor Virginia in sight. Shall we keep it dark and direct him to Periwinkles?"

"Polly Paine will give us away, dastardly woman that she is. We couldn't keep it up."

The Earl passed along the brick path, not heeding the tall girls in slacks and coloured turbans.

"Say, Uncle Geoffrey!" said a small voice.

"Revolted girl! It's Lord Kentisbury," the second twin reproved her.

He swung round and stared at them, a smile creeping into the deep blue eyes which were so like Virginia's; a tall fair man of nearly fifty, with a thin face lined by years of invalid life, though he looked well at the moment. "Uncle Geoffrey is right. Are you two of the recalcitrant nieces? I should never have guessed it."

The dark-eyed twins gazed back at him cheerfully.

"We're not like the family," said one.

"What did you call us? What does it mean?" asked the other.

"We have been educated," the first twin told him, "but it's not an everyday word, is it?"

"Recalcitrant? It means refusing to go in the way you ought to go. No, you aren't Kanes in appearance." His eyes were on them thoughtfully, in growing admiration for their dark beauty. Apparently they wished to live like hermits, but if they should desire it Rosamund would be proud to present such attractive nieces to the world.

"We didn't expect you till to-morrow," the brown-eyed girl said reproachfully.

"We meant to put on white frocks and do our hair," said the black-eyed damsel.

He laughed. "I'll guess the hair. It's black."

The twins whipped off their turbans and shook their curls free. "Right first time! How *did* you know?"

"It gets in the way when we're working, so we tie ourselves up in bags," Araminta explained.

"Which is the one who wants horses?"

"Oh! Did that revolted Polly Paine tell? I am! I'm Amanda."

"Amanda Rose, I understand. Come to stay with us and you shall learn to ride. But I must protest. Miss Paine has been most kind and helpful."

“‘Revolting’ doesn’t mean a thing when Mandy says it. You’ll soon get used to her,” Minty said encouragingly.

“We’ll try. And Araminta Rose craves for sailing-boats?”

“Terribly much! You haven’t those at Kentisbury, have you?”

“We don’t keep them in the castle, but we are only ten miles from the sea. I could easily find some man at Littleton who would take you out and teach you. Your craving for the sea comes from the family; Kanes have always gone into the Navy.”

The twins looked at one another. “Seems likely to be useful, doesn’t he?” Amanda drawled, her eyes aglow.

“Say, I think we’ll need to go,” Araminta exclaimed. “It will mean best clothes and doing our hair all day long, but it would be worth it.”

“But we’ll do something in return. We can’t let you do all that for us, just for ‘Thank you, Uncle,’” Amanda said earnestly. “Could we help to look after the family? We’re quite good at playing bears with babies. You’ve a whole herd of infants, haven’t you?”

The Earl laughed again. “‘Thank you, Uncle,’ will be quite enough. The quartette are being well looked after. We’re very proud of our little crowd. We shall be delighted to see you at Kentisbury; I wish you had come before. But I must see your sisters too. And I’m afraid we must turn you into Lady Amanda and Lady Araminta, for the sake of the village.”

The twins made a grimace.

“Loathly bore,” said Araminta.

“But it seems to be our fate,” Amanda groaned.

“Your inheritance. Where can I find your sisters?”

“There goes one of them.” Amanda pointed to a figure with flying yellow pigtails. “That’s Atalanta. She’s guessed who you are and she’s gone to fetch Virginia.”

“My wife produces two yellow plaits at bedtime,” the Earl smiled. “Rosalind Atalanta must be like her. Shall we follow her?”

“We call her Nanta. We’ll show you the way to Periwinkles. Polly Paine!” Minty shouted. “Come and speak to our uncle! He’s going to teach us about boats and horses.”

Margery came to the door, looking alarmed. “It’s good of you to come so soon, Lord Kentisbury. Virginia has been feeling very shy about meeting you.”

“It’s better to have it over and be friends,” he agreed, looking down at her. “We thank you greatly for your help, Miss Paine.”

“I’m only Margery.” She smiled up at him. “I didn’t do anything. It was David—Mr. Woodburn—who said we must go to you. I loved seeing all your babies, and your wife was so kind.”

“You must come to see her again. I’m hoping these children will come very soon; we’re going to put Amanda Rose into breeches and send her out riding in the park, and Araminta can keep her slacks and wear a blue jersey—no, a scarlet one!” with a laughing look at Minty’s black curls and eyes, “and she’ll go sailing in a cutter from Littleton—or I know a man who has a nice little yawl—”

Araminta beamed on him.

“I suggest, unless you are afraid of horses or Amanda is seasick, that you should both go sailing in the morning and ride together in the afternoon; it would be company, and riding, at least, is part of your education. My wife will ride with you presently, and in school holidays there may be Tansy Lillico and Littlejan Fraser as well; two jolly schoolgirls, who come to Kentisbury to ride when they can. Would you be afraid or seasick?”

“Sure, no! We’d love it!” The twins spoke together. “But we didn’t expect each to have both; we thought we’d have to choose.”

“Then Araminta shall have breeches and Amanda a red jersey, too.”

“Guess I’ll have a yellow one,” Amanda grinned.

“Say, Uncle Geoffrey! Call us Mandy and Minty!” Minty pleaded.

“Uncle Geoffrey! How kind of you to come! I am so sorry—”

“Ginny, he’s nice! He’s not a scrap revolting!” Amanda swung round.

“He’s quite a lovely person,” Minty added. “He’s going to—”

“Thank you, Minty.” The Earl’s hand on her shoulder checked her. She glanced at his face and was silent.

“Virginia, my dear, I am glad to meet you at last. I was coming to you, but I was delayed by these young people.”

Virginia, flushed with running, stood at the gate, with Nanta beside her. She had dropped her dustpan and brush when Atalanta rushed in, crying, “He’s come! He’s talking to the twins at ‘Polly’s!’” and had dashed up the brick path, forgetting everything, even her blue overall, only pulling off her cap as she ran.

The Earl’s eyes rested on her and then went to Atalanta, with the yellow plaits, so like Rosamund’s, framing her face. He smiled, as he took Virginia’s hand and gave his other hand to Nanta. “Now I really meet the family! My dears, you must come to Kentisbury and see my wife and my little girls and boys, and then you must see the family portraits, and you will know how much you are like the rest of us. I find it hard to believe your sisters are Kanés, but there is no doubt about you.”

“We are like Father,” Virginia said shyly. “I know I behaved badly, Uncle. I’m very sorry. I’ve been sorry ever since I wrote my first letter.”

“But you said so in your second letter,” he smiled. “That’s over and done with. Now we look forward, and I hope we are going to be friends. But I understand you have work to do here, before you come to Kentisbury. Are you going to accept the part your friends have arranged for you?”

Virginia reddened. “I can see somebody is needed, and David seems to think I can do it. I don’t see why I’m the only one, but Mrs. Dering has been wonderful to us and I wouldn’t like her to be disappointed.”

“That is as much a part of the family, in you, as the love of boats in Araminta; the sense of responsibility for other people,” Lord Kentisbury said. “You will rise to the call, I know. You’ll hold your village together and keep things going; and later you will come to us at Kentisbury and meet my large family of little people. What will you do, my dear?” and he turned to Atalanta. “Will you come to the castle with the twins and learn to ride? Or will you stay and help Virginia and come with her later on?”

“You don’t know Nanta yet.” The twins laughed at him.

“I’ll stay with Virginia, please.” Nanta coloured. “She says I’ll be able to help.”

“Good! Then we shall see you later. You’ll love our crowd of babies. Now, how can I help you on your way, Virginia? I understand we are to make some introductions?”

“In the post-office. Mrs. Simpson’s a great talker,” Margery said promptly. “Take off the pinafore, Lady Virginia!”

Virginia tore it off. “I didn’t think. I’m sorry, Uncle Geoffrey.”

He laughed. “I liked it. It brought out the deeper blue of your eyes. But so does your pretty frock, so we can do without the overall. Rosamund wears blue, too. Shall we get this business

over? Which is your post-office?"

"I'll show you!" Nanta darted ahead.

With resigned faces the twins followed Virginia and their uncle. "We don't want to be my ladies, you know," Amanda murmured.

"You'll be very nice ones," he said, over his shoulder.

"Beastly bore," Minty groaned. "Polly Paine, you're partly to blame for this. Come and back us up!"

"You'll want to report to David," Mandy added.

"I need some stamps!" and Margery caught up her purse and ran after them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

UNCLE GEOFFREY IS KIND

The big car had already intrigued the village; the coronet on its side had not escaped notice.

“Who is it, Mrs. Simpson?” Mrs. Garth and Miss Anson were asking, when Atalanta appeared in the doorway.

The temptation was too much for Nanta. “It’s our uncle. He’s Lord Kentisbury,” she announced, her cheeks flaming in excitement. “He’s coming to see you. He lives in a castle, and the twins are going to stay with him. He has four baby girls; two sets of twins.”

“You don’t say!” gasped Mrs. Simpson.

“Imagine!” murmured the Scottish Mrs. Garth.

“He’s here,” cried Nanta.

The Earl had drawn Virginia’s hand through his arm and led her after Atalanta. He stood in the doorway and said pleasantly, “Mrs. Simpson, I think? I am anxious to introduce my nieces to you in their correct names, Mrs. Simpson. For family reasons it has seemed wise until now to say nothing about the fact that for a short time before his death their father was the Earl of Kentisbury; he was my elder brother.”

Virginia looked at him, her face scarlet; this was, indeed, letting her down lightly.

He smiled at her. “My niece is the Lady Virginia Rosemary Kane, not Miss Rose, as we have allowed you to believe. It is time she used her title; I think none of you will find it hard to give it to her. I’m not so sure about these wild young people, but if you remember, they are Lady Amanda and Lady Araminta, and our littlest niece is Lady Rosalind Atalanta.”

“Don’t call us by those loathly names, if you can’t bear it,” Lady Amanda drawled.

“*We* don’t want you to worry,” Lady Araminta assured them. “We feel much more like Mandy and Minty.”

Their uncle laughed. “But your big sister feels, and looks, exactly like Lady Virginia! I’m sure we can trust Mrs. Simpson to pass round the word for us.”

“Indeed, yes, my lord—my lady,” said the flustered postmistress.

“I’m not a bit surprised,” Mrs. Garth chattered volubly. “The times I’ve said Miss Rose carried herself as if she was somebody!”

“I’d noticed it myself,” Amanda murmured. “Had you noticed it, Minty?”

“Just once or twice,” Minty grinned.

Virginia looked at them stonily. “Nobody could notice anything but lunacy in you two. If they suspected anything, it would be that you’d escaped and ought to be shut up.”

The Earl interposed. “My nieces have felt shy about using their full names, but I’m sure you will make it easy for them. I have decided it is time they should give up shirking their titles.”

“Yes, my lord. We’ll remember, my lady,” Mrs. Simpson promised eagerly.

“Good! Then we’ll have no more secrets. Now, my dears, I must go. Will you come with me to my car? Mandy and Minty, we will come and fetch you this day week, if that will be convenient. Rosamund will be ready for visitors, and she is looking forward to seeing you. She told me to say”—and his eyes smiled at them—“don’t bother about clothes. We live in the country, very quietly. We’ll see to your riding-kit. For everything else she restricts you to one

suitcase each, and if you want to do any shopping she'll enjoy going to town with you. Don't worry, till you've seen how little you're going to need."

The twins beamed on him. "That's frightfully kind! We haven't needed lots of frocks here," Amanda said.

"We mostly live in our slacks," Minty added.

"I guessed that," he laughed. "Rosamund will help you in your shopping, if you find you really must have a new frock or two. Don't deny her the pleasure! She'll love it. My dear!" He turned to Virginia. "You have a job to do here, and I'm sure you'll do it well. Those good creatures will back you up. It won't be hard."

"I feel a worm!" Virginia cried. "I'm ashamed! You've made them believe it was your doing that we kept quiet—"

"And without telling any lies about it!" Minty chuckled.

"I was dumb with admiration," Amanda drawled.

"You're being so kind to us all, and Aunt Rosamund is so thoughtful for these two—"

He laughed. "She said, 'They won't know what they want. Don't let them go and buy unnecessary stuff! Ask them to let me help.' It seemed to me very wise, and she really will enjoy it. Now good-bye for the moment, my dears. Rosalind Atalanta, may I have a private word with you?"

Nanta followed him to the car, looking alarmed and shy. "Need I be called that? I'd much rather be just Nanta."

"I'm sure the family would prefer you as Nanta. I was only teasing. What did they call you at school?"

Nanta coloured. "Rosalind, always. They said Atalanta was outlandish."

The Earl smiled, as he entered the car. "I thought as much! Rosalind is very pretty, but you shall be Nanta, if you like it better." He talked to her earnestly for a moment or two through the window.

The car drove off, and Nanta turned to Virginia, her face glowing. "He said—he knows I have to stand by you here, but what's to hinder you and me from going to tea at the castle, though we can't go to stay just now? He'll send the car for us on Sunday afternoon and we'll see Aunt Rosamund and the crowds of children. I'd like to go, if you'll be there too, Virginia."

"You'll see it all before we do!" wailed the twins.

"My opinion of Uncle Geoffrey has gone down," Mandy mourned. "He's a revolting individual. Why can't we all go to tea on Sunday?"

"He didn't say anything about you," Nanta said in triumph.

"Aunt Rosamund couldn't stand the shock of four of us all at once," Minty decided. "You'd be a shock to anybody, Manda."

"Polly Paine, I shall be cut to the heart if you don't address me by my title all the time." Mandy turned to Margery, who had bought her stamps from the excited Mrs. Simpson.

Margery bobbed a country-dance curtsy. "I'm sure, my lady, I'll be delighted, my lady. I expect it will soon seem quite natural, Lady Amanda. But it's a little strange at first, Lady Amanda."

Mandy made a dash for her. "Oh, most revolting female! Oh, dastardly woman! It's all your fault!"

Margery darted away and was safely behind her counter before the twins could reach her.

"Penn'orth of peppermints, please, Miss Paine," Amanda said haughtily.

"You won't do it, will you, Polly Paine? The ghastly child was only ragging," Minty said anxiously. "We honestly do hate it."

"And I honestly sympathize," Margery assured them. "But you'll get used to it. I'll have to refer to you that way to other people, whether you like it or not, but I won't insist on Ladying you privately, unless Lady Amanda really wishes it!"

"You've asked for it, you ass," Minty scolded.

"I was only ragging, please, Margery," Amanda said humbly. "I didn't really mean it. I'm not a good Lady yet."

"Oh, go away and don't be idiots!" Margery said laughing. "You'll get enough of it without having it from me."

The news reached David when he went to his billet for supper. Mrs. Garth was full of the story, and he soon knew all the details. He went to "Polly's" and found Margery planting out seedling pansies, while the Pouffe rolled in ecstasy on the lawn.

"Happier than he's ever been in his little life." She pointed at him. "He never did that at home. He loves his garden."

David made a chirrup, and the startled Pouffe sat up and gazed at him. Then he raced to his one man-friend and clawed joyfully at his knee.

David hoisted him to his shoulder and made a few cat-remarks, reducing the big creature to a state of sentimental bliss. Then he turned to Margery.

"So the secret is out. How did you like Lord Kentisbury?"

"Quite delightful, but he doesn't look strong. I hope all those children aren't delicate."

"Did they look weakly? I didn't see them."

"I never saw a healthier-looking lot," Margery admitted.

"They'll be well cared for; they'll have every chance. There's no hereditary illness in the family. How are the Roses feeling? Mammy Garth is bubbling over."

"The situation has redeeming points. They're growing reconciled," Margery laughed. "Virginia and Nanta are going to tea at the castle on Sunday. Mandy and Minty go to stay there next week, and they're to learn to ride and to sail boats. Uncles are useful."

"Then they'll be happy. Araminta must marry a yachtsman and Amanda a country squire, who breeds horses. And your Gilbert must come to see Virginia; she's cut out for that sort of life. Nanta will probably be trained thoroughly in music, and will be a famous violinist. Look what I found in Mother Simpson's window as I came past! A large notice; I copied it for you. Beautifully printed—by Mandy, I should say."

Margery read his copy, with widening eyes.

A lecture-talk will be given at Rainbows on Saturday at 6 p.m. Subject, Country-Dancing and its History. Speaker, Lady Virginia Rosemary Kane. Musical Illustrations by Lady Rosalind Atalanta Kane.

"David!" she cried. "Everyone in the village will go! What is she up to?"

"My guess is that she wants to get people together and talk to them about carrying on till Mrs. Dering's well again. Country-dancing is the bait; I didn't know it had any history! She's using her title to draw folks in; the whole crowd will be there."

"Oh, good for Virginia! Isn't she a sport?"

"She wants to do it before she goes to Kentisbury; hence the short notice," David chuckled. "Our Virginia has wakened up, and she'll wake us up too. It's just what we've been

needing.”

“I shall go, both for the lecture and to see what happens.”

“I shall be there,” David assured her. “I’m not a dancer, though she’s tried to rope me in, but I’m keen to hear her remarks. We might go together.”

“Sure! We will,” Margery agreed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

VIRGINIA'S LECTURE

Something new had, indeed, been roused in Virginia, something which would later be invaluable to her as the mistress of a big estate. David's assertion that she could help in the chaos at Rainbows had been reinforced by her uncle's reference to her sense of responsibility for other people, and his assumption that she would do the job and would do it well. If, as the Earl had said, this was her part of the family inheritance, a legacy from forebears who had always tried to look after people and help them, Virginia knew she must justify her heritage and take up the burden when circumstances asked it of her. No such feeling troubled the twins in the slightest degree, but Atalanta understood and was ready to back her up in any way she could.

For long Virginia had wished to tell her dancers what they were doing when they clapped their hands in "Gathering Peascods", or when they made a big ring for "Sellenger's Round". She felt sure she could make the story sufficiently interesting to appeal to non-dancers as well. If she could bring them together to hear her history, she would have a chance to say other things at the same time.

She had never lectured, but she was not shy and she knew her subject. Surely, she thought, the right words would come at the right moment, and her trust was justified. She spoke simply and easily, and she told her story well.

She described spring festivals and processions, and called on Atalanta to play the Helston and Tideswell dances, with her infectious rhythm which set feet tapping in every corner of the little hall. She told of maypole dances, and described the development of longways, rounds and squares as her class already knew them. She talked for a few moments of sword and morris dances, which she had seen in London, and took her hearers back to dim early days of sacrificial rites and ceremonial dancing.

Then, leaning on the reading-desk, she spoke earnestly, by this time thoroughly at home with her audience.

"I was sure you'd be interested; I was thrilled when I heard all this for the first time. It goes back a very long way. But we have to think of to-day, and to get on with our own jobs. And one big job we've to tackle is to keep Rainbows going as Mrs. Dering wanted it, until she's able to come back to us again. Don't you think she'd be disappointed if she found things had gone to pieces; classes stopped, lectures given up?"

She paused, and guilty dancers gazed back at her from every corner.

"We didn't feel like dancing, while Mrs. Dering was so ill, Lady Virginia," said Mary Garth.

"Neither did I," Virginia said promptly, "and I sympathized with those who didn't turn up at the last class. I knew just how they felt. I'd found it very difficult to come myself. I'd have liked to give it up for the week, but I felt Mrs. Dering wouldn't wish that. It would have been easier if more people had come, of course."

"I'm sorry," Mary said honestly. "I didn't think of it like that."

"We'll come next time, my lady," another promised.

Virginia gave her a radiant smile. "Thank you! I'm sure you will. We'll learn to do the Helston Furry round the lawn. But what about Mr. Woodburn's lecture? We let him down

badly, didn't we?"

"I'm sorry I didn't go to that," Mrs. Simpson admitted. "Mrs. Garth says he took a heap of trouble making the slides, and they were just wonderful, she told me."

"Marvellous!" said Minty loudly, from her seat in the front row. She and Mandy had been nudging one another in silent ecstasy as Virginia made her point and drove it home.

"I never saw anything like them in the whole of my long experience," Amanda drawled.

Virginia joined in the laugh. "I wonder if we could ask Mr. Woodburn to give us another chance? I know he understood how you felt, and he's very keen on his birds. Will you come, if we ask him to repeat the lecture? And, by the way, what if it had been a speaker from London? I'm afraid we took advantage of its being one of ourselves; it wasn't fair to Mr. Woodburn. Friends, I don't mean to scold; I've no right to do it. But we all feel anxious not to disappoint Mrs. Dering, and for a few days it did seem as if things were going to pieces. I don't want to push into the front line, but I'm not quite so busy as some of you; I don't have to stick to a shop or a definite job. I'm going on with the dance classes and the orchestra; we shall play on the regular evenings, and I hope one or two of you will turn up to listen and to have coffee, as you used to do. It's so blighting to play to an empty room, and we must play, or we shall have nothing to practise for, and that would be the end of us! We hope to give another concert presently; Mrs. Dering had planned some of the programme before her accident. I've been assured by Miss Stewart that none of this will disturb her in the least, or I wouldn't suggest it, of course. If I try to keep things going for her till she can take over again, will you all back me up?"

A round of applause answered her, and from every row of seats came warm assurance and thanks.

"We will that, my lady! We'll do our bit."

"Oh, Lady Virginia, if you only will! We've missed Mrs. Dering so terribly badly!"

"If anyone could take her place it would be you, Lady Virginia," Mary Garth ventured.

Virginia blushed. "I'd like to try. I should feel terrible if she came back and was heart-broken about us. You know that Mr. Dering is expected any day. Until he comes, I'll do what I can, if you'll let me. But I can only do it if you all help."

"Marcus is home," and a hand fell on her shoulder. "He arrived an hour ago."

Virginia turned in startled eagerness to face the tall fair man, who looked tired and worn, but yet relieved. A murmur of delight filled the hall, as he wrung her hand gratefully. "My blessings on you, Virginia. I heard your speech. I don't understand this 'Lady Virginia' business, but you'll tell me presently."

"It's silly, but it's true." Virginia grew scarlet.

"If it's true it isn't silly. It's extremely suitable," and he smiled at her. Then he turned to the crowded hall, and silence fell. "My friends, I have seen my wife, and she is going on well. She was able to say a few words to me, which was more than I had dared to hope for. The first thing she said was that she was sorry to have spoiled my trip and interfered with my job. Then, presently, she gave me a message for you. She said: 'Is everything all right? Tell them to carry on. I'll be better soon.' From what I heard as I came in, I know you are going to satisfy her, and I shall be able to set her mind at rest. I hope Lady Virginia"—with a questioning smile into Virginia's eyes—"will live up to her own suggestion and be a leader for us during this difficult period. But not merely 'till I come home'. Rainbows isn't my job. Till my wife comes back—will you, Lady Virginia?"—again that keen amused question in his eyes.

“I’ll try, if you want me to,” she promised.

“Then how soon can you come and tell me all about it? I’m eaten up with curiosity.”

“I said we’d finish with some dancing. I hoped some new people would join in, now that I’ve told them a little about it, and Nanta’s going to play some more tunes.”

“Then let’s stick to your programme. But when you’ve finished, I hope you and Lady Rosalind Atalanta will have supper with me and tell me the story.”

“You’ve seen Mandy’s poster. Didn’t she print it beautifully?”

“Lady Mandy and Lady Minty, I suppose? What fun! Does Doranne know?”

“Not yet. It happened after she was hurt. We’ve had no chance to tell her. Our father was the Earl of Kentisbury, but he died before he knew; we’ll tell you, and you must tell her.”

“She’ll want to see you, as soon as it’s allowed, to thank you,” he said earnestly, and slipped away to have another look at Doranne, while Virginia called for dancers in two lines, and taught “The Butterfly” and “We won’t go Home till Morning”.

“The only thing left to do now is to ask your Gilbert to tea,” David remarked, as he walked as far as “Polly’s” with Margery after the lecture.

Her eyes danced, as he loved to see them do. “Oh, do you think I should? Isn’t it too soon?”

“It would be only fair to him,” David said.

“I’d have to ask Virginia. I think we’ll get rid of the twins first.”

He laughed. “It might be as well. When are you coming to hear my woodpecker? He laughs all day long.”

“Truly? I must come soon. Will you give your lecture again?”

“I may, if I’m asked. But you needn’t come a second time.”

“Of course I shall come. I want to see your slides again. My cherry-tree is full of tits, since you hung up that fat for me; I know them quite well now and their odd little song. Pouffy sits and gibbers at them, but they just laugh at him.”

“Tell Pouffy I shall beat him, if he does more than gibber,” David said solemnly.

“I’ll tell him you’ll never speak to him again. That will be quite enough punishment,” Margery assured him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE WOODPECKER LAUGHS FOR MARGERY

The car that called for Virginia and Nanta on Sunday afternoon brought the Countess also.

"I thought you might feel less shy if I came to fetch you," she said gaily.

Called by Nanta, Virginia came running out. "How kind of you! Did you know we should be frightened?"

The Countess's eyes were on her in delight. "You *are* one of the family! And this is another. May I call you Nanta?"

"Oh, please! The other is so long." Nanta gazed at her in amazement.

So also did Virginia, and Rosamund understood. "You expected me to be older! I'm twenty years younger than my husband; not so much older than you. Is this Periwinkle Place? Where is Margery's little shop? Oh yes, I see the cherry-tree—and there she is in the garden. I like Margery," and she waved a greeting. "Now jump in and we'll take you to see your father's home, and the crowd of little cousins."

"Mandy and Minty will be mad," Nanta chuckled.

"They didn't know you would come, so they've gone into the woods," Virginia explained. "They wouldn't have gone if they'd thought there was a chance of seeing you."

"I'm longing to see Amanda and Araminta! But I thought we'd make friends more quickly if only two of you came at a time."

"Do you understand why we were shy?" Virginia pleaded, as the car drove off. "It seemed so dreadful to tell you there were four more girls in the family."

The Countess looked at her with laughing blue eyes. "I'm not the one to object to a family of four girls! We're very proud of ours. What's the matter, Nanta?"

"Mrs. Simpson and Mrs. Garth, out for a walk. They guessed who you were. They were so pleased."

"Some day I shall come to see your village, and you shall introduce your friends to me. Shall I bring both sets of twins? Would people be intrigued to see them?"

"They'd love it! But aren't they too little?"

"The new ones will soon be big enough to go visiting. They're growing fast."

Before the sight of the castle struck Virginia and Nanta dumb with shyness, they had made friends and were no longer nervous of their young aunt. Atalanta had told the story of Virginia's lecture, and Rosamund had listened with keen delight.

"Oh, my dear, how wise of you! And how brave! You must tell my husband; he'll be delighted. And you're a keen folk-dancer; so am I. We probably have mutual friends in London. Some day we'll have a party in the quadrangle; the old castle walls would be a marvellous setting, and the lawn's big enough for quite a crowd. You shall help me; I know heaps of dancers who would come. I'll tell you about our dancing and the May Queens at our old school. I was the Red Rose Queen; would you like to see my royal robe, Atalanta? You've gripped your village by that brilliant inspiration, Virginia; you'll do anything you like with them now. But here we are; don't be frightened of the castle! It isn't as bad as it looks. Come and see the babies! Nanta, leave your hat in the car; I'm sure you don't usually wear a hat?"

"No," Nanta smiled. "I don't like it, but Virginia said—"

"Virginia would, of course. It's a pretty hat, but I want to see your hair."

Nanta thankfully flung off the hat and went bareheaded to the children's corner of the garden.

The car carried them home at night, radiant in this dispelling of the cloud that had overhung their minds. The castle might be terrifying, but the people in it were kind; their uncle was pleased with Virginia's action at Rainbows, and had made helpful suggestions, praising her courage and initiative; the Countess had plans for the twins and for their own visit later. Full of content, Nanta rushed to tell the story to Mandy and Minty; and Virginia, too joyfully excited to rest, went to report to Margery.

"We've had such a lovely happy time, Polly Paine, and we partly owe it to you. You were the first to guess, and you told me to say I was sorry. We're so very glad there's no secret now."

"The whole of Rainbows is going to be glad," Margery assured her. "I met lots of people after church—we came home in a gang through the park—and they were all talking about last night. They say they're so glad we've got Lady Virginia while we can't have Mrs. Dering. They'll do anything you want."

Virginia flushed. "It's nice of them. I'll do my best."

Margery, stroking her Pouffe as they sat under the cherry-tree, took a chance. "Won't you let Gilbert come to see you, Virginia? It's the only thing you need now."

Virginia grew scarlet and stooped to speak to Jane, who was mincing across the grass, enticing her playmate to come for an evening walk. "Some day, Polly Paine. Please not yet! There's been so much lately. I'm sure he's nice, but I'd rather wait."

Margery did not tease her, understanding completely how she felt.

But Gilbert was not one to be patient. Margery had kept him up to date in events, but had advised him to wait till Virginia was ready to take another step. He waited, with difficulty, for almost a week after her lecture; then one afternoon the interested village saw another large car at the gate of Periwinkle Place and a dark handsome young man standing at the door.

Atalanta answered his knock. She gave one look at Gilbert and rushed to the back garden, where Virginia was weeding.

"Virginia! It's him—at the door—Sir Gilbert Seymour! Oh, aren't you glad the twins aren't here?"—with the same thought that had occurred to Margery.

"Not at the door. You couldn't ask me to wait outside. You won't run away again, will you?" Gilbert had followed Nanta, and they met on the small lawn.

Virginia's eyes went to the gate which led to the park. "I—oh, why did you come? Did Margery—"

"Margery doesn't know, unless she's seen the car. I couldn't wait any longer. Lady Virginia, won't you talk to me? There's no need for introductions, we know all about one another. Won't you take me round and show me this odd place, and the park?"

"I don't mind doing that," Virginia said, much relieved.

"Good! Shall we call on Polly Paine and buy chocolates?"

"No, not 'Polly's'," Virginia said firmly, conscious of what Margery's amused eyes would say. "But I'll show you the park and the house."

"Where you give lectures and teach dancing?"

"The lecture was only a silly talk. I must wash—look at me! Nanta, take care of him till I'm ready."

Nanta was shy, but eager to help, and his first question put her at her ease. "You're a fiddler, like your sister, aren't you? I heard music as I came up the path."

"I was practising. There's a concert next week. Virginia's going to conduct, instead of Mrs. Dering."

"Would she let me come, do you think?"

"You should come when she's to play a solo. Mary's going to recite, instead of a soloist, next time."

"Bother Mary! Couldn't we make away with her?"

Atalanta laughed. "She's very clever. You'd like to hear her."

"No, I shouldn't. I want to hear your sister."

Nanta laughed again, and Virginia, indoors, raised her brows. "The child likes him. That's a good beginning! He knows what he wants, and he means to get it, and nobody's going to keep him waiting. Oh, well! That's better than being soft. I wouldn't want him to be too humble."

Gilbert's only idea at the moment was to have her to himself and to listen while she talked. He dutifully admired Rainbows and asked questions, but his thoughts were on his guide and not on her answers. Presently he said,

"I'm sorry for Martin; the chap in the car, you know. I drive myself, of course, but I like to have him if I want to talk to anybody, and I've a plan for this afternoon. Won't you let us run you down to the sea? Darthington must be full of tea-shops. Come on, Lady Virginia, let's do it! Poor Martin's been sitting in the car all this time; frightfully stale for him."

Virginia looked startled, but the prospect was pleasing. "Could Nanta come too? She'd enjoy it."

"Sure," Gilbert said heartily, only too glad to get her on such easy terms. "Let's take Nanta to the sea. She's practised long enough, I bet." There would be plenty of private jaunts later, he hoped.

"Martin, we'll run Lady Virginia and Lady Atalanta down to the sea for an hour," he said, as he put the girls into the car.

Martin touched his cap. "Very good, Sir Gilbert. A pleasant day for the sea, your ladyships." He sprang back into his seat with the inward comment, "And very nice too; much better than Margery Paine! This will be something to talk about at Summerton!"

Gilbert, aware of what he was thinking, was intensely amused, but could not share the joke with Virginia at present.

David Woodburn looked in at "Polly's" that afternoon. "I hear Seymour's turned up. Did you send for him?"

"I did not. He acted for himself."

"Good for Sir G.! And Virginia's gone out in his car? Will they come back engaged?"

"Certainly not," Margery said promptly. "Nanta's gone, too; and it will take Virginia longer than that. But they'll come back good friends."

"Then, I say! Wouldn't you like to set them a good example?" David leaned on the counter and spoke earnestly.

"What do you mean? How can I?"

"*We* can; *you* can't do it. *We* can do heaps of things that you can't do alone. Come and hear my woodpecker; he'll laugh like a bird when he sees you. And show Lady Virginia what ought to happen. Get in first, in fact."

Margery's eyes gleamed, as she looked straight into his. "It would be rather fun."

"All the fun in the world. Come on, Margery! Take the plunge, and swim with me."

"I'll come to hear the woodpecker when I close the shop. We could go on to your lecture together."

"Can you really stick it twice all through?"

"As often as you care to give it. I wonder if Virginia will remember?"

"I bet she'll forget all about it." David grinned, his eyes alight with hope. "Won't we pull her leg, if she's not there?"

Margery laughed. "After what she said at *her* lecture, it would look rather bad, wouldn't it?"

Crouching with him in the bushes, she heard the raucous laughing chatter of the woodpecker in the trees. David put her through a series of questions on the points he had taught her during the last few weeks.

"Do you know the difference between a dusky dunnock and a house-sparrow? Between a sparrow and a shilfie—that's a chaffinch? Between a blackbird gent and his lady, and between them and starlings? When did the cuckoo begin to call? You're a good pupil; you know more about birds than you did when you came here."

With him Margery walked up the hill to hear his lecture again, and a grin of amusement and fellow-feeling passed between them, for Virginia was not there.

Marcus Dering came to Margery at the end of the talk. "Could David spare you for five minutes? My wife would like a word with you." His face was radiant.

Margery turned eagerly. "Can she see people? Oh, Mr. Dering, I am so glad!"

"One visitor at a time, for not more than five minutes. I was told to bring Lady Virginia, but I can't find her."

Margery's eyes sparkled. "She's out with a nice boy."

Marcus raised his brows. "Who is it? Would her uncle approve? He'll need to be consulted."

"Her uncle will be satisfied. He's a handsome young baronet."

"Sounds good. Come and tell Doranne. And something else, Margery Paine?" His eyes were on her and David quizzically.

"I'll tell Mrs. Dering," Margery said primly.

He laughed and led her to the other end of the house, where Doranne was slowly gaining strength.

"My dear!" Doranne whispered. "I've been told about your doings. Thank you for your help."

"It's Lady Virginia who has done everything, Mrs. Dering."

"I want to thank her too," Doranne smiled. "Lady Virginia! She gave up her secret to help Rainbows. It was good of her. How are Lady Mandy and Lady Minty and Lady Nanta? It's a lovely story!"

"Virginia will tell you to-morrow. Look, Mrs. Dering! David gave it to me."

Doranne's eyes fixed on the ring she wore. "Oh, Polly Paine! Is it true? You and David—oh, I am so glad! You'll stay at Rainbows? You won't let him take you away to Scotland?"

"Oh no, not to live! We want to stay at Rainbows; I'll keep 'Polly's', and David will go on with his drawings and look after the birds."

"Oh, good! That will be a very happy thing. We shall have to build you a bigger house! Tell David I say he's been very wise. To-morrow Virginia must come and tell me her story."

Margery sent David off to his billet at Applegarth when he had taken her home, and wrote a hurried note to Nancybell.

Dear Nance,

The Birdwatcher is engaged to the Sweet-Shop. David and I are going to marry. You must come to see him soon. Will you tell Mya and Elsa for me?

Thanks, and my best love!

Your very happy
Margery.

She was cutting up liver for the Pouffe's supper, while he smiled expectantly down at her from his shelf, when there was a tap on the door, and Virginia crept in.

"I forgot David's lecture, Polly Paine."

Margery turned. "How could you, Lady Virginia?" she asked in mock severity. "After the way you scolded other people?"

"I know. I feel awful. Did they know I wasn't there?"

"Oh, they knew! The hall was full. I heard people asking where you were. The lecture was even better than the other time. Mr. Dering says David is coming out as a first-rank lecturer."

"I feel frightful." Virginia stood with bent head and her voice was full of shame. "I never thought about the lecture till Nanta reminded me, and then it was too late."

"I expect you were enjoying yourselves." Margery tried to keep her tone severe.

Virginia shot a look at her. Suddenly she gave a cry. "Margery, that ring! It was David's mother's. Such a dear old lady; I've seen her wearing it. You don't mean—you and David? Did he give it to you?"

Margery looked down at the old-fashioned ring with its circle of small diamonds set round one tiny sapphire. "David and I thought we'd set you and Gilbert a good example."

"Polly Paine! Oh, I am so glad!" Virginia flung an arm round her. "I hope you'll be very happy."

"We are very happy! And the Pouffe is so pleased. Now how about you?"

"Oh, well—soon, perhaps!" Virginia admitted. "I am so glad you came to Rainbows, Margery."

"David says he's glad, but I don't see that you need be. Rainbows is glad to have you, I can tell you."

"You've helped us all. You've been behind everything," Virginia said firmly. "It's all your doing, Polly Paine."

[The end of *Margery Meets the Roses* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]