

The Abbey Girls in Town

Elsie J. Oxenham
1925

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Title: The Abbey Girls In Town

Date of first publication: 1925

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

Date first posted: March 25, 2014

Date last updated: March 25, 2014

Faded Page eBook #20140333

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

THE ABBEY GIRLS
IN TOWN

by

ELSIE J. OXENHAM

THE CHILDREN'S PRESS

First printed in this edition 1967
Originally printed 1925, by WM. Collins

To
MARGARET BAYNE TODD
CAMP FIRE GIRL AND FOLK-DANCER
WITH LOVE AND HAPPY THOUGHTS
OF VACATION SCHOOL DAYS

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CHAPTER ONE

RUTH ARRIVES

“Good-bye! Good luck to you! I hope they’ll be nice!”

“If they aren’t, come straight to us in Devonshire!” Kitty called shrilly after the outgoing train.

Ruth laughed and waved her hand again. “I’ll wire for you to meet me,” she called back.

Then as the train crept through the mazes of Southampton and gathered speed for its rush to town, she sank back in her corner and faced the new future.

Her dream lasted almost all the way to London. She had no wish to read and did not want anyone to talk to. She had come face to face with the unknown future that morning, when the first glimpse of England came in sight. Escaping from Mrs. Gordon and Kitty, who had been so good to her on the voyage, she had hung over the side and gazed enthralled at England, as England became real; England, that she had dreamed of all her life, out there on the African farm.

She was travelling alone, and looked absurdly childish to be doing so; slight and slim, with short fair hair which had a comforting tendency to be wavy, though no one could have called it curly. The rest of the family were coming in the spring, for circumstances had suddenly made it possible for everybody to have the longed-for trip “home”; but her father could not live in England in the winter; it was his poor health as a young man that had taken him out to the Cape, and it was not advisable for him to run risks now. So the rest were to follow in the spring, and have the summer in England. But Mrs. Gordon and Kitty, from the next farm, were coming in the autumn, and they had offered to bring Ruth to England with them, so that she might have a few months longer “at home”; and Ruth had accepted the offer joyfully. She was eighteen, though she did not look it; she was eager to see anything and everything she could, and was ready for every new experience.

The voyage had been intensely interesting, and Mrs. Gordon and Kitty had been very kind. Ruth had enjoyed every minute of the journey; she rather wished they had come a week later, so that she would have come in for the Christmas festivities on board the liner—she was sure there would have been plenty of fun going on. As it was, she felt a little doubtful about Christmas; in any case, it would probably be a very quiet one.

Everything depended on what her cousins were like; Ruth had felt that from the first, but she felt it with quite new force now that she was racing to meet them at the full speed of the express train. Her cousins were to meet her in London; she had wired to Mary from Southampton.

There were only two of them. Biddy was younger than herself, about sixteen, and went to college; and that was literally all Ruth knew about her.

She knew more about Mary than about Biddy; but what she knew was not all reassuring. Mary had been asked if Ruth might come to stay with them in London, and had written to welcome her. But she had added that they could not promise to do much to entertain her; their income was very small, and she had to go to work in an office every day, while Biddy went to college to prepare herself for a similar post. Their resources and their free time was limited, and Mary was afraid she would have to go about and do her shopping and sightseeing alone.

Ruth was quite equal to that. But she did wonder a trifle anxiously just how poor her cousins were, and whether her coming would really be awkward for them. Had they, for instance, anywhere to put her? What kind of place did they live in?

She would soon know; and it would all be interesting. But she hoped sincerely she was not being a real trouble to Mary and Biddy.

What exactly did she know about Mary? She was so old to begin with. Over thirty, Ruth understood; nearly twice Biddy's age. Ruth felt secretly a little afraid of her. And she feared very greatly that Mary was "stodgy,"—dull, quiet, uninteresting, middle-aged. Judging from her letters, Mary was staid and dull, and cared only about her office work, with no outside interests.

"I'm afraid she's going to get several shocks when she sees me!" Ruth thought grimly. "I guess I'll wake them up a bit! But what about Biddy? Doesn't she want to go out? Perhaps Mary sits on her and won't let her have any fun? Then I shall have to stand up for Biddy, that's all. She and I will go out together, and Mary can sit at home and darn stockings or type manuscripts!"

And then at this point, Ruth's thoughts were always shipwrecked on one fact, which threw them all into confusion and left her drowning in a sea of uncertainty again. There had been a long time without any letter from Mary; so long that her mother and aunts had begun to say Mary Devine had forgotten them at last. Then, last summer, had come a long letter, longer than any they had ever had, several closely typewritten sheets. It had been as interesting as a story, and had been read with great delight and handed round from farm to farm. It had been full of new interests, new friends; it had been alive, while all that had gone before it had been dull and lifeless.

The letter had been so full of vivid life, and all that it had spoken of had been so new to the dwellers out in the wilderness, and so surprising when taken in connection with the uninteresting Mary! For it had spoken of music, of tunes which “went on and on, haunting one for days together”; and of dancing—*dancing!*

“Not like ordinary modern dancing at all,” Mary had written. “That always looks so dull to me. This is so full of changes, and so beautiful, and it fits the music so wonderfully. But it looks difficult; one would have to go to classes.”

There had been no hint that she had any thought of trying to learn the dances herself. “She wouldn’t, of course. She’d be too old,” Ruth said to herself. But Mary had said she hoped Bidy would go to classes and learn the dances; it was good to think of poor Bidy getting some change from her shorthand and book-keeping! Ruth’s sympathy for the injured and downtrodden Bidy was very keen.

But the letter had told more, much more, than merely of the classes Mary had watched. It had described how new friends had come into her quiet life; a wealthy pretty girl, who was referred to at first as “Miss Robins,” but who later on in the letter became just “Jen”; and “Miss Shirley,” who, as Mary’s story grew, became “Joy.” Ruth wondered hopefully if she would ever see these two; if the friendships had continued. Quite a big part of Mary’s letter had been given up to the story of a party, and it was this which had given most delight to the distant readers. It had been a children’s party, in a big hall far away in the East End of London; the East End was a very poor district, Ruth understood, and the children had been very poor children; but they had come together to dance country-dances, and Mary had watched and had quite evidently found keen enjoyment in the sight. The party had been managed by someone she referred to as “the Pixie,” a little person in green; and in her descriptions of the Pixie, the dancing children, and the club-building in which the party had been held, Mary had forgotten all her natural restraint and had written freely and with warm enthusiasm.

There had been one more letter from Mary before she left home; but it had been very short, written hastily in answer to the letter asking if Ruth might come; and had been distinctly a return to the earlier style. There had been no time for description or even news. Mary had said briefly that she and Bidy had been away in the country for three weeks; that they were very busy going to “classes”; and that they had many plans which Ruth would hear when she arrived. That had been all, except for her welcome to the unknown cousin. That letter had not helped Ruth at all in her knowledge of Mary; it had rather added to her doubt and perplexity.

One other curious happening had completed her bewilderment. The very night before she left home, an English mail had come in; and among the newspapers had been one which was unfamiliar, a semi-religious weekly paper. Searching its pages to find why it had been sent, Ruth had come on a column marked with blue pencil; and had read it, first curiously, then eagerly. It was signed "M.D.D."; and it told simply, but powerfully, of a crippled slum child's day in the country; how a fairy godmother, with red-gold hair, and wearing soft, lovely clothes of a pretty green colour, had taken her and four other girls in a car, away out where there were woods and streams and fields and birds and flowers; had come home in the evening at dusk, laden with the trophies of the countryside; and how some of these—beautiful big brown dried leaves of autumn, and twigs with growing green buds—had been treasured for weeks in the poor home, reminders of one gloriously happy day.

Had Mary Devine really written the little story? Was she suddenly developing into a writer? Ruth had asked the question; her parents had asked it; her aunts had echoed it. There had been no hint of this in Mary's earlier letters; they had been dull and uninteresting in the extreme. The one letter, the extraordinary letter, had indeed been as interesting as a story; everybody had said so. But—Mary an author? It was too astonishing to be believed. To be sure, her father had been a journalist, and Ruth's mother remembered that as a child Mary had been reported to be "always trying to write stories"; but no one had heard anything of these for fifteen years. What happened to Mary to make her begin again now? Was the article perhaps not written by her, after all? "M.D.D." might be somebody else. But then, why had it been sent? No, it must have been Mary.

Ruth awoke to the fact that there were lights outside, that they seemed to be passing through an unbroken succession of towns and stations. And in ten minutes the journey should be over. Then these towns and stations were the beginning of London, and in ten minutes she would see Mary and some of her problems would be answered. How soon could she ask Mary if that article had really been hers?

As the train began to slow up, she leaned forward out of the carriage window, in eager excitement for the first sight of her perplexing, unknown cousin. Or cousins! Would Bidly perhaps come too?

CHAPTER TWO

BIDDY AT HOME

Ruth stood on the platform beside her suitcase, a little doubtful and forlorn. No Mary had appeared yet.

"I've got the address. I suppose if I take a taxi, I can drive all the way. I wonder how far it is? Everybody says London's very big!" she thought doubtfully, as she watched the hurrying crowds.

"Ruth! I know you're Ruth, by that snapshot you sent!" a merry voice hailed her.

Ruth whirled round, her face lighting up joyfully. "Oh! Is it Biddy?"

"Mary couldn't come; she'd made a promise for this evening before we knew when you'd arrive. It's her club night, you see. And I simply love stations, and meeting people, so I came instead. Which are your boxes? Come and find them! I've got a car waiting," Biddy remarked, with an obvious attempt to subdue the joyful importance of the announcement.

"That sounds fine!" Ruth said with relief, and pointed out her luggage while she scanned her cousin eagerly.

Most of Biddy was hidden in a big coat buttoned up to her chin. She was sturdily built, not very tall; with brown eyes, and brown hair drawn back in a bunch of curls at the back of her neck, a merry smile, and a cheery matter-of-fact air. She was bossing the porters with a calm, businesslike manner which amused and impressed Ruth, whose vision of a crushed, downtrodden Biddy needing cheering up and championing, had vanished into the fog that hung about the great station.

"I apologise for this!" Biddy laughed, as they followed the luggage up the platform. "It's not much of a fog, but it is a little attempt at one."

"I didn't notice it till we got here. Is that London fog?" Ruth asked, with eager interest. "I've heard of your fogs. How funny the lights look shining on it! But isn't it choky?" and she coughed.

"It isn't so bad up our way. We're down by the river here. I wonder how you'll like living right in town!"

"Biddy, what a super car!" Ruth was looking at the liveried chauffeur curiously. "It's a private car, not a taxi! Haven't you made a mistake?"

Biddy laughed. "Jump in. Frost will see to the luggage. He's a great friend of mine. Home, Frost! And thank you very much!"

"Have you stolen this motor?" Ruth asked severely.

“Yes, just for an hour. Well, it’s been lent to me, or to you, rather. It’s Jen Robins’s car,” Bidy condescended to explain. “She’s out with Mary this evening; at the club, you know. Jen called for Mary, and they drove to Islington together; then Jen sent Frost back to pick me up and take me to Waterloo to fetch you. When he’s taken us home, he’s going back to fetch Mary and Jen.”

“That’s the girl who took you to the big party?” Ruth asked wistfully. “Shall I see her?”

“Oh, I *think* you’ll see her soon!” Bidy promised. “She’s one of the very best. But I’m not being polite! I meant to do things so properly. Did you have a pleasant voyage? What do you think of London?”

“I’ll tell you in a few days! At present it seems chiefly yellow fog and smoke,” Ruth retorted.

“In a real fog you wouldn’t see many people, or many lights. But this is a very crowded part. I don’t know it at all,” and Bidy gazed out also.

“Don’t you know your way about London?” Ruth asked, in surprise. “But you’ve lived here for years, haven’t you?”

Bidy’s shout of laughter startled even Frost, who was used to her. “Not the *whole* of London! I know our own part. There are miles and miles of London I’ve never even seen. You haven’t the foggiest notion how big it is!”

“I’m getting a very foggy notion of this part of it, anyway!” Ruth retorted. “I say, Bidy! Tell me one thing; it’s the very first thing I want to ask! Did Mary write that article, signed ‘M.D.D.’? It came the night before I left home. There was no letter or explanation with it.”

“Which was it? What was it about?” Bidy assumed her casual tone of no importance again, but it was contradicted by the sudden gleam in her eyes and the pride in her flushed cheeks.

“Which? Have there been more? Has she written several?” Ruth asked eagerly.

“Lots! She’s had five printed and paid for; and they’ve taken two more. And she’s written others, some of them school stories that I helped her with.” Bidy fairly bubbled over with excitement. “And she’s begun a book! She’s only done about half of it so far, for the ‘shorts’ get paid for so much sooner, if they’re taken; but she’s doing it, and that’s something. Isn’t it simply smashing?”

“It’s gorgeous!” Ruth said soberly, taking it in slowly.

“Which was it you read? We’ve sent them all out to you,” asked Bidy.

“It was about some very poor children’s ride into the country in a car. Was it Jen who took them?”

“No. It was Joy Shirley. Mary thinks all the world of them both. So do I, of course. Joy takes out cripples one day in every week. Mary got five

guineas for that one, and she wanted Joy to take the whole of it to use for the children; she said it seemed only fair. But Joy and Jen simply wouldn't hear of it; they said it was the first money she'd made by writing, and she was to use it for herself."

"And what did she do with the money?"

"She said some of it must be used for the cripples. But Joy didn't need it; she's got tons. So Mary went to see the Pixie, who finds the children for Joy; and asked her to take some of it and use it for the cripples' play-hour at the big club in the East End."

"Oh, shall I see her? She came into that letter of Mary's. Is she still in London?" Ruth cried eagerly.

"She's going to be, after Christmas. Yes, you'll see her. We're nearly home; I know where I am now. Now here we are. You jump out and go straight up and wait for me at the top. Go on till you can't go any higher. You don't mind stairs, do you? For there are several hundred here. Frost and I will see to your boxes, if you take the suitcase and rugs."

"Let me help. You mustn't do it, Biddy," Ruth remonstrated, as Biddy and Frost took the handles of her steamer trunk.

"I'm a lot stronger than you. There's nothing of you!" Biddy retorted, and mounted the stairs sturdily.

"Thanks awfully, Frost!" she panted, at the top. "We'll lug it in ourselves. I think that's everything," and she produced her latchkey and threw open the door, and switched on the light. "Good night! And thank you very much!"

As Frost clattered down the long flights of bare stone steps, lit by the lamps outside, Ruth looked eagerly round at her new home. The fire was glowing red already. The table was laid for supper, the old crimson curtains were drawn across the windows. Ruth, looking round, felt at home at once. Allowing for the difference in climate, it was exactly the kind of room she had always been used to, and to which the luxury of the liner had seemed such a complete contrast. The room was quietly cosy and homelike; everything in it had a much-used look, though not necessarily ill-used. It was a room that had been lived in for years, and had originally been furnished from the relics of other homes; its atmosphere was restful and welcoming. But colour scheme—style—artistic effect—it had none; it was a jumble of treasures and comforts collected from other rooms in other homes, and brought here together with no attempt at arrangement or selection.

"It's not that we don't like having things all to match," Biddy said frankly, reading Ruth's look aright. "We'd love it. But we simply can't afford it yet. New wallpapers are a dream of the future, when Mary's book comes out. And carpets and cushions and curtains all toning in together

would be gorgeous; but they're not for us, at present. We have to make things do, so long as they aren't actually falling to pieces."

"That's what I'm used to. I like your room. It's just like home," Ruth said warmly.

Biddy chuckled. "Mary and I know just what we're going to have when the book comes out. We sit over the fire and plan the rooms. This is your room!" and she brought a jug of hot water from the kettle on the gas-stove in the kitchen, and led Ruth to a room opening off the sitting-room. "It's not very big; our bedrooms are both small."

Here again was the same mixture, the same air of comfort. The little room had a floral paper on the walls, of many colours; the carpet was green, the eiderdown pink. Then Ruth gasped and stared, at sight of the blue basin into which Biddy was pouring the hot water, for it seemed utterly out of place in the ordinary little room.

"Biddy! Where did you get such lovely things?"

"T'other kettle's boiling over!" and Biddy fled with a delighted laugh to the kitchen, overjoyed that her newest treasure had been admired at once.

Ruth bathed her face in the deep round basin, while she marvelled at its beauty; sheer beauty of simple generous lines and deep satisfying colour. There were round beautiful bowls for sponge and soap, with fascinating little grooves instead of handles; a tall, simply-curved jar for her toothbrush. On the mantelpiece were candlesticks and vases, all in the same rich wonderful blue, the same perfect lines and curves.

"Biddy! Where did you get that lovely china? Tell me at once! Is that your room, by the way? Have I turned you out?"

"Yes, of course, but I don't mind. There's room in Mary's bed, and it's warm to be two at this time of year. Come and have some supper! Will you have tea, coffee, or cocoa?"

"Oh, tea, please! I'm a real Colonial. Tea at any hour of the day or night."

"And do you like fish? If you'd rather have eggs, I'll scramble some for you; 'twon't take long."

"The fish looks delicious, and I'm starving!" Ruth assured her. "Now tell me about that lovely china!"

"It's pottery; hand-made village pottery. I'm so glad you like it. It's my very newest treasure, the joy of my life," Biddy said delightedly. "I'd have been awfully disappointed if you'd ignored it."

"Nobody could. It's so beautiful; but so different from everything else, Biddy!"

Biddy laughed. "Yes, the rest of the room doesn't live up to it—yet. The pottery's the beginning. Some day I shall have everything beautiful. The

curtains are going to match the dishes, deep blue; and the bed will be the same blue. The walls are to be soft grey, and the carpet grey and blue.”

“It sounds pretty! You have it all planned out! But how did you get the china?—well, pottery, then! Where does it come from? Is it really handmade?”

“Every bit of it, on a potter’s wheel. I’ve seen them doing it. It comes from a village in Surrey,” Biddy explained. “You must see Mary’s! But she’ll want to show you herself. Hers are a lovely deep rich brown, lined inside with old gold; and every here and there the brown runs over the edge into the gold in uneven splashes, like blobs of paint. Mary’s going to have dull gold walls, or a soft light brown, a deep brown carpet and golden curtains.—Do you think we’re awful idiots?” she asked abruptly.

“Not a scrap! I love to hear about it. I can see how pretty your rooms will be. I’ll sit over the fire with you and plan mine too! But I am dying to hear how you managed to afford those lovely bedroom sets! Did Mary’s articles pay for them?”

“No, she wouldn’t have allowed that. We needed winter coats,” Biddy explained simply. “Oh, we didn’t buy them! They were Christmas presents. I’ll tell you how it happened. They’re presents from Jen Robins. Yes, I know,” as Ruth exclaimed in astonishment. “She oughtn’t to have done it. We said so to her. But she can afford it, and she says she was dying to buy some of the ware and give it to someone who would appreciate it. She can’t have it herself at present, for she’s living in a furnished flat in town. Her home’s in Yorkshire, but her father has to live in town for a while; he’s an invalid and needs special treatment. Jen was motoring with Joy Shirley from Joy’s home in Oxfordshire down into Sussex, to see Joan; Joan is Joy’s cousin, and she’s married. She’s had to keep rather quiet all autumn, so the others have had to go down to see her. Joy’s car broke down, and they were held up in a little town in Surrey; and there they found the factory where these lovely things were being made by hand. They both fell in love with them. Jen heard Mary and me planning our rooms one night when she was here to supper; and she told us of the Surrey pottery, and gave us our choice, for Christmas presents, of new woolly jackets or bedroom sets! I simply fell on her neck; Mary was very shy about taking such good presents, but she came round. Jen’s so awfully bucked about the way Mary has come out of her shell in the last few months that she loves to do things for her. But then she’s like that; we couldn’t stop her. She enjoyed the choosing as much as we did; and she came next day to gloat over the things!—But I’m not looking after you properly! You’re making me talk too much. Are you getting enough to eat?”

“I’ve been eating while you’ve been talking,” Ruth said laughing. “But, Biddy, I want you to tell me——”

“But you haven’t had any toast! I’ll make it for you to-night, and to-morrow you shall make your own,” and Biddy squatted on the big footstool with a fork and a slice of bread.

“But I want to know something,” Ruth said earnestly, as she buttered the toast. “You spoke of the way Mary had come out of her shell and was beginning to do things and care for things. What did you mean?”

“Just that,” Biddy’s face grew sober. “Everything’s different; a thousand times better. You can’t understand, of course. This place used to be horribly dull, Mary didn’t care about anything; she used to sit alone here every evening and darn stockings or go to sleep over the fire.”

“And what happened?” Ruth had forgotten her toast, and Biddy’s slice was burning. “Things are different now, Biddy?”

Biddy gave a shriek of horror at sight of her toast. “Look what you’ve made me do!—Different? As different as they can be. Mary came alive suddenly. There’s Mary now! You’ll see for yourself. Or at least there’s Jenny-Wren outside; she’s brought Mary home. That’s Jen’s pipe. Do you hear it? ‘Laudnum Bunches’! She always plays that when she’s excited about something. I wonder if it’s you or——” and Biddy flung open the door.

High clear piping notes in a merry tune came from somewhere down the long staircase. Ruth rose, excited and eager. “What is it? How does she do it? Where are they?”

“The morris pipe. Are you coming up to see Ruth?” and Biddy hung over the balustrade. “She wants to see you!”

CHAPTER THREE

MARY EXPLAINS

“Not to-night. Oh, what a smell of burnt toast!” a laughing voice called out of the darkness below.

“I’ve begged her to come in, but she won’t,” Mary was still two flights down but coming slowly up.

“Good night! See you after Christmas!” and then the sound of the motor told Ruth that Jen had gone, much to her disappointment.

“Ruth, I apologise! I am so sorry I had to be out. Has Biddy explained?” Mary came in, dropping a pair of plimsolls into a corner. “Has she looked after you properly?”

“Biddy’s been splendid and has done everything for me. But I don’t think she happened to explain just where you were,” Ruth was eyeing her mysterious elder cousin curiously.

“Mary, have you passed?” burst out Biddy from the hearthrug, where she was making more toast.

Mary laughed, and threw her hat aside. “Passed with honours, I think. Jen’s really pleased. She meant it; she wasn’t putting it on. She says the children are dancing very nicely.”

“Cheers! Oh, good! You needn’t have been so nervy!”

“Of course, there were points to put right; little things I’d missed or misunderstood. I’ve done so little myself; I never realised how little till I began to teach. But Jen says their style is good, and they’re surprisingly free from faults and absolutely natural and unaffected. They were good to-night!”

“No wonder, after the lecture we gave them last week! It will be a huge load off your mind!”

Mary turned to Ruth. “Shall I go and change, or will you excuse me as I am? I’ve been teaching country-dancing, and I’m in my tunic. Do you mind?”

“Oh, she’ll excuse your legs!” Biddy laughed. “Don’t go and change at this time of night, Mary-Dorothy! Here’s a beautiful slice of toast just ready for you!”

“Please don’t change for my sake!” Ruth said hastily, her eyes beginning to twinkle, however. “Do you really wear gym things, Mary? Oh, but how nice you look! How *neat!*”

Mary threw aside her big coat, and stood in her blue tunic and slim black legs. "We all wear them for classes; you have to for sword-dancing, if you're to enjoy yourself at all. When I was asked to take on this children's club and teach them once a week, the leader said she'd prefer it if I came in gym things, as it looked more businesslike."

"Do you really teach dancing? But do you dance yourself?" Ruth was eyeing her in stunned astonishment.

"I try, just a little. Of course, I shall never be good," Mary said simply. "I'm too stiff; though not nearly so stiff as I was! But I'll never be a good dancer. Biddy's going to be very good."

"You should see my capers!" Biddy said gravely. "Mary's a lot better than she says, Ruth. Don't listen to her. And she's taught those kids awfully well. She's been going to them on Fridays for six months, and to-night Jen went to see how they were getting on, and to criticise. That's why it was so fearfully important, and Mary couldn't come to meet you. And Jen says they're really good; and she knows."

"Congratulations, Mary! I *am* glad!" Ruth said warmly.

Mary laughed. "I was really very nervous! You must come and see my children some night."

"I shall want to, of course. But I want to see you dance yourself. When can I? Will you do something for me now?"

Mary coloured and laughed again. "No, I won't! I'm nearly dead. But perhaps next week—have you told her about next week, Biddy?"

"No, I left you to break it to her."

"What is it about next week?" asked Ruth curiously.

"Are you sure you've had enough supper? Then come to the fire, and we'll tell you." Mary switched off the light, and they sat in the glow of the fire, Biddy curled up on the big stool, Ruth forced by the other two into the big chair, Mary stretched on the rug, leaning against Biddy and resting her tired limbs.

"We're very glad to see you!" Mary began, and Ruth wondered what was coming. "But you've come at a queer time. You find us a preoccupied family! Our minds are full of one thing, and even your coming won't interfere with it."

"Do tell me!" Ruth leaned forward and spoke in mock excitement to match their thrilled tones. "Is Biddy going to be married?"

"No, but we're going to Chelsea!" Biddy proclaimed exuberantly. "*Much* more exciting than getting married!"

"It's been the dream of our life,—for the last six months, anyway. Poor Ruth! It is a shame! I'll explain," Mary said kindly. "We've been going to classes in folk-dancing ever since last May, Ruth, and they've been the joy

of our lives. But we don't go to the official classes, which cost rather a lot for us. But Jen keeps saying we ought to go to what she calls 'proper classes.' Every holidays there's a special week or fortnight, when classes are held every day, and people come from all over the country to go to them. The Christmas School is always held in London, at the Chelsea Polytechnic; and Jen has been teasing us to go to it. It costs a little, and at first we hardly felt we ought to do it. But when I got a little extra money, quite apart from my ordinary pay, the very first thing I decided to do with it was Chelsea."

"Your articles!" Ruth cried eagerly.

Mary flushed. "It's rather fun," she admitted. "At first we had to use the money for clothes we were needing; but when I got a cheque for five guineas all at once, I went straight off and paid our fees for the Christmas School. I've a week's leave from the office, and Biddy is having holidays. The School starts two days after Christmas, and we shall be there all day till evening. You'll be able to do your sightseeing and shopping and so on, just as if we were at our ordinary work. I'm just afraid we may bore you by talking shop in the evenings!"

"If she's sensible, she'll come to Chelsea and see it for herself," said Biddy, from her perch on the stool in the dark.

"Can I come to watch? I'd love to see what your dancing's like. And—oh, would I see all the people you talked about in your letter? The Pixie person? And will Jen be there? Is that what she meant by 'after Christmas'?"

"That's it. Everybody will be there!" Biddy said exuberantly. "Joy's coming up to live in town for the week, and she's bringing Ros and Maidie with her, and I shall see them every day. Rosamund's my age and Maidlin's fifteen, and it's their first school, too."

"There's folk-singing every morning, and a lecture at night; and there are demonstrations of the dances by the best dancers in the country," Mary added.

"You'll see Madam dance," Biddy said joyfully.

"No, I'm afraid she won't," Mary remarked. "Madam isn't coming to Chelsea."

"*Not—coming?* But why not? They can't have a school without her!" Biddy cried indignantly.

"She's sure to have a good reason. Perhaps she wants a rest," Mary suggested, gazing into the fire. "Perhaps she doesn't like Chelsea."

"She was there last year! Joy said so. I think it's just mean of her!" Biddy cried wrathfully.

"There are plenty of others," Mary was taking Madam's withdrawal more calmly. Jen was in Madam's confidence, and had been definite about the reason. "You won't see all the new friends we've made, I'm afraid, Ruth.

Cicely Everett and Joan Raymond, the married ones, are both staying down in the country and don't mean to come up to town at present. But you'll like Joy and Jen. We felt a little guilty when we heard you would arrive before the week's school, for fear you'd be utterly bored; but we'd arranged it all by then and didn't want to draw back."

"Oh, but I don't think I shall be bored! I'm looking forward to it! I shall come as a visitor, and watch all your classes. I want to see you doing things in that tunic!"

Mary laughed. "Suppose I wash up in it, then! It's time we made a move. And I haven't asked a single question about your journey! Aren't you very tired?"

"Oh, I asked all that kind of thing!" Bidy sprang up to switch on the light.

"I'm going to help," and Ruth sprang up also. "Yes, you must let me, or I shan't feel I'm really one of the family!"

While she piled plates together and carried them to the kitchen however, her eyes were constantly on Mary, a twinkle of amused appreciation in them. Mary was very slight and small, and her brown hair had here and there a grey thread, which looked oddly out of place beside the childish blue tunic which left her thin legs bare. She looked very neat and slim as she moved lightly about, and stood presently washing dishes at the sink.

"Are you very much amused? You look it!" she said, catching sight of the twinkle as she reached up to put a plate in the rack.

"I like it. It's very graceful, and must be awfully comfy. All this—this dancing, and these friends—must have made a great difference in your life, Mary," Ruth said tentatively, as she dried the spoons and forks.

"I'm happier than I've been for years," Mary said, in a low voice, as Bidy disappeared with a bottle in each hand. "It's the writing, of course; the feeling of being at work again, and doing work that has results. And I owe it all—*all!*—to Jen Robins and Joy Shirley. They made me start; and the dancing and the music—the exercise and the new life and new friends—stirred me all up till I had to write. I had to do something, to work off the excitement. That letter you spoke of was the first thing I wrote, the day after I'd danced for the first time, at the Pixie's children's party."

"That letter has been puzzling me for months!" Ruth exclaimed.

"It *was* unlike me; I felt that myself. I was beginning to wake up. But I don't think the dancing alone would have meant so much to me," Mary said thoughtfully. "It's the work, the writing, that I'm so happy about. If the dancing hadn't led to work, it might not have been satisfying. Come into my room and see my 'brown pots,' as Bidy calls them!"—and she hung up her dishcloth and led the way.

“We never used to do anything new,” she continued. “Now we’re always having new experiences. You must hear how we went to stay at the Hall with Joy; and about the Abbey! We’ve been several times. Biddy’s absolutely devoted to the girls who live there—Rosamund and Maidlin, Joy’s wards. The Chelsea School will be a new experience, too.”

“I’m awfully glad you’re going to have it! I hope you’ll go every year,” Ruth said warmly. “How lovely these things are, Mary!”

“They’re all part of it; part of the new life I’ve come into,” Mary laughed, a little uncertainly, as she took up a shining brown candlestick and turned it round and showed the gold inside the rim.

“They’re beautiful! I shall feel nervous of using Biddy’s, though!”

Mary laughed. “Biddy vows she won’t touch these; she’ll use the bathroom! She says she’d shake with fear.”

“I should drop them, from sheer fright,” Biddy said solemnly, from the doorway. “Ruth, are you using *both* our rooms? Oh, if Mary’s worshipping her pots and bowls, I can understand it!”

“I’m only gloating over them!” Mary laughed.

“I’m gloating too,” Ruth assured her. “Good night, you two!”

CHAPTER FOUR

RUTH'S CHRISTMAS SHOPPING

Ruth was using Biddy's peacock-blue basin with much enjoyment next morning, when the sound of music in the outer room made her pause and listen. She hastily finished dressing and hurried out, to find Mary putting on her hat before the mirror, while Biddy sat cross-legged on the "humpy" footstool, like a very sturdy Puck, and whistled "Rufty Tufty," her fingers playing swiftly over the six holes of a long yellow pipe.

"I couldn't do that!" Ruth said yearningly. "You're jolly clever, Biddy! Mary, you look ten years older in a skirt! Must you go? It's so very nearly Christmas!"

"I've Christmas Eve as a holiday. But Biddy will look after you. It's holidays for her. Tell her what you want to do," and Mary said good-bye and hurried away.

"I want to hear that whistle again. I want to see Jen Robins and her pipe. I want to see the shops and buy things. I want to see London," Ruth proclaimed, as Biddy brought her porridge and eggs and coffee. "Is it still foggy?"

"No, quite decent. You can't see Jen. She's going off to Yorkshire to-day for Christmas in their own home; but, she's coming back for Chelsea. But the shops are there, and fearfully busy. And London's all right! We'll go out as soon as you like, when I've tidied up. Shall we meet Mary for lunch? I know where she goes."

"I'd love to. Will you help me to buy things?"

"I love buying things!" Biddy said warmly. "But I'm rather poor just now. I'm saving up for next week."

Ruth asked again if she might hear the whistle once more.

"It's a dear!" Biddy said enthusiastically. "I've three. We've no piano, and we simply had to play the dances and songs somehow, so Jen lent us the music, and I soon found I could get some of the tunes on a whistle. I'll pipe while you're eating."

She sat cross-legged on the "humpy" and whistled tune after tune, and Ruth laughed and applauded and asked for more. But Biddy sprang up at last, throwing down the whistle, and brought the carpet sweeper.

"We must get out, or the shops will be too crowded! And we must leave the house decent."

"I want them to be crowded! I want to see the Christmas crowds!"

"You will! Don't worry!" Biddy said briefly.

"Had enough of crowds?" she inquired, as they struggled out of the mob in a big Oxford Street shop.

Ruth laughed breathlessly. "I began to think we'd never get out alive! It *is* true! There are more people in London than anywhere else in the world! And I've seen them at last. They were all—*all!*—inside that one shop!"

"You'll find a few left in Selfridge's!" Biddy mocked.

"Biddy, will you help me with some shopping?" Ruth asked earnestly, when they had lunched with Mary, and were entering the fray again.

"Try me! I'm first-class at that! But you can't send home Christmas presents now?"

"I know that. Come along and do as you're told."

Biddy followed meekly, and after a severe struggle with the rest of London's population, found herself actually near a counter where knitted jackets and jumpers were for sale.

"But you've got a lovely green one, Ruth!" she remonstrated. "There's nothing whatever wrong with it. I only wish mine was half as nice!"

"It's not for me. It's for Mary," Ruth said briefly. "What colour would she like?"

"For Mary?" Biddy gaped at her. "Ruth, you mustn't—she won't let you—you can't——"

"I'll see to that! Your job is to help me to choose the right colour."

"But, Ruth!——"

"Would she like yellow? Don't waste time, Biddy. It's Christmas, and everybody is busy. They can't wait all night while we argue."

"She's dying for an amethyst one!" Biddy burst out. "She goes and gazes at them in the shop windows! Oh! But that one's far too good, Ruth!"

"We'll have that one," Ruth's tone was final. "It will suit her. Now what about you? Blue?"

Biddy's incredulous eyes roved over the colours before her. "Oh, I don't want to wear blue! Oh, Ruth! That rust-red! I've been wanting it for years!"

Ruth laughed. "You'll look very pretty in it. I like your choice. Right! We'll have those two."

"I think we'd better go home before you spend any more money," Biddy murmured rapturously, as she clasped the bundle to her breast.

"I'm frightened of what Mary will say!" Biddy said, as they climbed the long flights of stairs wearily.

"I'll manage Mary! We'll make her plates of buttered toast, drown her in it, make her drunk with it!"

“She won’t be able to say anything when she sees that lovely jacket! She was more sick of her old one than you’d believe. And you’ve paid your own expenses all day! She won’t like it, Ruth.”

“I’m going to make her let me pay for my lunch too.—And if she says a word against it,” and Ruth leaned over the rail at the stairhead and addressed the darkness below, in which she had heard Mary’s step, “I’m going right off to-morrow to the Gordons in Devonshire, and I shan’t see any more of London, or go to Chelsea, or meet Jen Robins and the Pixie, or see the Tower or Westminster Abbey, or anything, and I shall be fearfully disappointed, that’s all!”

“Goodness, what’s the matter? What has Biddy been doing?” and Mary followed them into the room.

Biddy flew to put the kettle on. “Giving Ruth her own way in everything. Mary, you’ve no idea what she’s like! She’s a fearfully strong-willed person. I’m sure she’ll bully you!”

“I’m sure she will. Nobody could call me strong-willed! What dreadful things has she been doing, Biddy?”

“She’s paid all her own bus fares, and mine, too, sometimes. She wants to pay for her lunch. And—look!” and Biddy tore open the parcel and, before Mary’s bewildered eyes, put on her rust-red jacket and held up the pretty amethyst jacket.

“I couldn’t resist them, Mary,” Ruth’s tone was apologetic.

Mary looked at the amethyst jacket and then at her. There was that in her look which made Ruth go to her, and say, speaking hurriedly, “Mary, I didn’t mean to tell you yet. Father left it to my judgment to tell you or not, as I thought best. But I can’t go on living with you and taking kindness from you, and not be honest. Mary, we’ve heaps of money. It’s all happened within the last few months. They’ve found diamonds on the farm, on our land; and father’s sold the land, partly for a big sum and partly for shares in the mining company that’s been formed to work it. He’s only kept the house, because he has to live in South Africa, and we all love the place. We aren’t farmers any more; and we’re going to travel; and we can have things if we want them, and we can give things to our friends. Perhaps that’s best of all. I’m starting with you and Biddy. You’ve been kinder than kind, giving me your beds and all; and you’ve made me feel as if I’d been here always. And these are Christmas presents; so that you’ll look pretty and festive at Chelsea, Mary!”

“A millionairess in *our* family!” Biddy whispered, in awestricken tones.

“It’s not so bad as all that,” Ruth assured her. “Mary, do you like yours?”

“Oh, it’s beautiful! Just the colour I love to wear! But, Ruth, I am glad!—for your mother and father and his sisters! We’ve often said what a hard

life it was for them, to be farming out in those wild places. We wished they could come home and live more comfortably. This will make things easy for them. I am so glad!”

“And you’ll let me pay my own bus fares?” Ruth pleaded, laughter in her eyes.

“You shall pay mine, too!” Biddy proclaimed enthusiastically.

“I will! And you’ll come to the theatre with me?” Ruth begged. “I can’t go alone. If you’ll take me to Chelsea, I’ll take you to the theatre!”

“We’ll go out to-morrow morning, and see what seats we can get for Boxing Day!” Biddy assured her gleefully.

“It’s as good as a story!” Mary said fervently, and threw off her hat and coat and tried on the amethyst jacket before Ruth’s delighted eyes.

CHAPTER FIVE

NINE-THIRTY AT CHELSEA

“And now the fun begins!” Bidly proclaimed excitedly. “Your quiet Christmas is over, Ruth!”

“It didn’t strike me as so frightfully quiet!” Ruth retorted. “Christmas music in the Abbey with you, while Mary cooked a real English Christmas dinner; the theatre for us all on Boxing Day, and a lot of running round London seeing things I ought to see. I’ve had just what I wanted,” Ruth assured her. “And if you’re full of your dancing and your own friends for the next week, I’ll forgive you. I quite understand what a great occasion it is!”

“Chelsea! Oh, cheers!” and Bidly checked herself in the very act of turning a somersault. “No, I won’t. I’d have to do my hair again. I must be decent. I can’t have Ros and Maidie saying I look a fright!”

“Shoes—ticket—money—handkerchiefs; I’m ready!” Mary announced.

“Why, how many handkerchiefs do you need? What are you going to do? Weep?” Ruth teased.

“You’ll see presently, dear,” Bidly said kindly.

Ruth did see before long, when a class of thirty stood ranged in a small hall, every girl with a big handkerchief in each hand. Intensely interested, Ruth sat in a corner to watch. She saw the revision of “Blue-Eyed Stranger,” with amazed interest in the morris movements, and stared incredulously at Mary when she found the amount of energy this dancing demanded.

The class came to grief at once in its “one-hop, one-hop, step, and jump,” and the sets were ruthlessly broken up and bidden to make a big ring and practise steps. The teacher was full of energy and lost no time; her orders and criticisms were emphatic.

Already, in this first class, Mary and Bidly had found friends, though they had told Ruth they knew no one who would be there. At sight of someone all in brown, Mary had turned in astonishment to Bidly—“There’s that Writing Person! But how weird! She can’t be in this grade!”—and when a moment’s interval came for rest, she went to ask the explanation.

“You were in the advanced class, with Jen Robins and Joy Shirley, when I saw you first!” she remonstrated. “Grade VII., at least!”

“Yes, but keep quiet about it!” and the Writing Person’s eyes laughed behind her glasses. “I’m really here because I’ve a friend whose first School

it is; I promised to go into classes with her. That long child over there, making friends with your sister, is with me.”

Mary looked at the tall brown-eyed schoolgirl, in a very short blue tunic and very long thin legs, and a long dark plait, who had swung herself up on to the vaulting-horse and invited Bidly up too. “How nice of you to give up your own classes to be with her!”

“Oh, but it isn’t. I’m enjoying this. I love being in a class where I know the work and don’t have to worry. As a matter of fact, I’ve always been in trouble for my step-and-jump; out of time, you know.”

Mary nodded, laughing. “Mine’s bad, too. But I never expect to be really good at morris. I’m glad I’ve begun it though, and that was partly due to you. Do you remember telling me I ought to try?”

“You looked on so longingly. Have you seen Joy Shirley yet? Heard the news? Oh, then, I won’t tell you! I couldn’t spoil it for her. I met her just now, outside the Polytechnic, and she had to tell somebody. You’ll hear before long!”

“How unkind of you!” Mary said, laughing, but did not look particularly troubled at being kept in suspense.

“How is your book getting on?”

Mary flushed. “How nice of you to remember! I think I’ve done about half, but I can’t quite tell.”

“Of course not. But don’t make it too long, you know. It’s easier to lengthen than to cut down; at least, *I* think so!”

The end of the hour came surprisingly soon, and Mary and Bidly tossed their handkerchiefs to Ruth to be folded neatly, and plunged into the noisy crowded dressing-room to find their coats and shoes.

“Joy’s here, and she’s got something to tell us,” Mary told Bidly, as they hurried down the dark vaulted stone passage together.

“That’s the Poly., Ruth; that huge building! There *are* a few people about, aren’t there?” Bidly laughed exuberantly, as they saw girls and men approaching the great doorway from every direction.

The entrance steps and porch and vestibule were crowded with excited girls in tunics and dancing shoes, all greeting friends they had not seen for months.

With a shriek of joy, which drew amused glances in her direction, Bidly hurled herself on two schoolgirls, and Ruth looked eagerly to see the beloved “Ros and Maidie,” of whom she had heard so much. Rosamund was fair, with two long yellow pigtailed, and wore a bright green knitted jacket over her blue tunic; Maidlin, half Italian, was very dark, with shadowy eyes and dusky hair, a vivid study in contrasts, with her lemon-coloured jacket.

They fell on Bidly also, and one more excited group was added to the crowd in the noisy corridor.

“I say, Mary-Dorothy! Have you heard?” a tall girl with bright bronze hair and a masterful manner accosted Mary.

“Mary-Dorothy, I’m a godmother once and perhaps twice over,” was the cryptic greeting of a still taller girl, with bobbed yellow curls and laughing face.

Ruth knew who they must be, and gazed at them critically. But they had no eyes for her, but cared only to see the effect of their news on “Mary-Dorothy,” as they seemed to call Mary.

“We’ve had twins!” Joy proclaimed dramatically. “Well, almost twins; next thing to it, anyway. Joan and Cicely, you know. Joan had a daughter on Christmas Day. And then the President went one better by going and having a boy on Boxing Day!” Joy grumbled.

“I’m so glad! I do congratulate you both!—and the mothers and fathers too, of course!” Mary said earnestly.

“We haven’t seen Cicely’s baby yet, of course,”—Rosamund had been telling the news to Bidly—“but Joy motored us down to see Janetta yesterday, on our way to town. She’s sweet!”

“Is Joan’s really to be called Janetta?” asked Bidly.

“After me. I’ve arranged that,” Jen said calmly. “I’m her godmother, of course. Joan may go and call her something else, of course though she’d promised to call her first daughter after me. But I must say I’ll be surprised if the child isn’t Janetta! I’m glad she’s a girl. I’d much rather have goddaughters than godsons; much easier to bring up, I assure you!”

“You having had so much experience!” Joy laughed.

“Come down and take your hat off, Mary-Dorothy!” Jen commanded, and led the way down to the basement and through white corridors, to long ranges of cloakrooms, busy with happy excited girls. Bidly was already there with her companions, wondering at the size of the building, hopelessly lost in its mazes.

“Don’t go and leave me!” she implored. “I shall never get out again! You’ll come back next year and find me still wandering about those passages looking for the way out.”

“You can always ask the way to the front door and start from there,” Jen said helpfully. “That’s what I mean to do. It’s rather like an ant-heap, isn’t it?”

“Every modern convenience!” Joy said proudly, as if she owned the building. “Yes, it does take some time to know your way about. The one place I can find is the refreshment room.”

“I feel I may never see my hat and coat again,” Mary said mournfully. “But perhaps you’ll be very kind and bring me back to them.”

Ruth had followed, and was listening and laughing at the chatter. Mary turned in dismay. “Ruth, I forgot all about you! I’m sorry! But we told you how it would be.”

“You gave me fair warning. But I stuck to you for fear I’d never see you again.”

“We must hurry or we’ll never get seats upstairs,” Joy urged, when the introductions were over. “Are you children ready? Then follow the crowd, and we’ll come to the big hall!”

“If we can’t get seats, we’ll sit on the floor,” Rosamund said happily. “Nobody minds a little thing like that!”

CHAPTER SIX

A BLOW FOR MARY

The big gym of the Chelsea Polytechnic was even more of an ant-heap than the dressing-rooms. The whole six hundred students were gathered there, all excited, all happy, all looking for friends or greeting them eagerly. The noise was deafening; Ruth, bewildered but intensely interested, kept close to Mary and watched. Girls hung over the edge of the gallery to wave to friends just discovered below; girls on the window-sills called greetings to others who had climbed up on the ladders and bars of the gymnastic apparatus; girls ran about looking for chairs or song-books.

Someone began to clap, and the hall rang with the welcome of six hundred folk-dancers to their chief. The white-haired Director appeared on the platform and smilingly acknowledged the greeting. He struck a chord on the piano, and silence fell; he announced, "Number One," and began to play a rippling accompaniment.

"*How* they sing!" Ruth murmured. "Oh, I love this part of it!"

The half-hour's singing was all too short. The Director gave out a few notices, and particularly cautioned newcomers against too hard work in the first few days—"I say this at every School, but nobody ever listens to me!"

"Old dear!" Joy murmured. "He does try to take care of us! Who minds being a little stiff to-morrow?"

"You don't want not to be able to go downstairs at all, though," Jen said cautiously.

Soon the ant-heap was in movement again; floor-space was appearing as if by magic, and the crowd was packing itself densely round the walls, while those in the gallery and on the platform looked on with comfortable superiority. Ruth found herself somehow sitting on the very dusty floor in front of the first row of chairs, while six dancers in blue or brown tunics and carrying handkerchiefs came out to dance "Laudnum Bunches."

"Who's that in Madam's place?" Joy whispered jealously.

"Don't know her name," Bidy said in reply. "But she's teaching us morris. She's a hustler!"

"Which is the one you call the Pixie, Mary?" Ruth drew a long breath at the end of the dance.

"There, on the edge of the platform at this end—in a pretty yellow coat—beside the tall girl in lighter blue, and the jolly dark one in the jacket like

Biddy's."

"Shall we speak to her?" Ruth looked curiously at the little person of whom she had heard so much.

The Pixie's eyes fell on Joy and Jen at that moment, and her face lit up in a smile of eager greeting. She waved her hand. "Come and speak to me afterwards!"

The country-dances appealed to Ruth as much as the morris, and seemed to her far more possible. She watched with keen delight; then the Director rose from the piano and made a sweeping gesture with his hands; and in a moment the big hall was in wild confusion again,—girls running to the doors, climbing over chairs, jumping down from window-sills, rushing after friends, seizing others by the arms with excited greetings.

The Pixie leaned over the edge of the platform to speak to the Abbey crowd. "Meet me in this room after lunch, will you? And we'll have a real good chat. Good-bye!" and she was off.

"A Vacation School is *not* the place to talk to the Pixie!" Joy said solemnly. "If we get one good talk with her we'll be lucky."

"If we don't, we'll go and see her at the shop afterwards," Jen remarked. "Now what about coffee?" and they pushed their way in a crowd into the still bigger crowd surging in and out of the refreshment room.

"I feel rather dishevelled but triumphant!" Jen said proudly, when she, Joy and Rosamund emerged from the queue around the counter with two cups of coffee each and piles of biscuits in the saucers. "I haven't spilt more than half of mine!"

"Biddy, have you heard Jen's gorgeous plan for next term?" Rosamund cried, above the clatter of cups and voices, as Biddy appeared with her cup of coffee.

"I'll tell them," said Jen, perched on the lid of a desk, swinging her long legs. "Mary-Dorothy, I've got to give up that club. Their gym. leader is coming back, so they don't need me any more; I only took them on for six months you know. I'm not going to be in London all spring."

"Not—in London?" Mary put down her cup and stared at her. She had not realised how she depended on Jen's help, on her visits, on the constant sight of her at classes.

Jen read something of this in her startled, frightened face; but not all, for she could not know how much she had meant to Mary. She saw that she had unknowingly dealt her a severe blow, however.

She said swiftly, "You'll have your cousin. You're going to be very busy with her. She'll keep you lively. Won't you?" to Ruth.

"Oh, I'll keep her busy! She'll have heaps to do, looking after me," Ruth said promptly. "Are you going home to Yorkshire again?"

Mary looked up, pulling herself together hastily, conscious that she might have betrayed too much. "Is your father so much better? Doesn't he need to live in London now?"

"He isn't better," Jen said, her happy face clouding. "He's to go to Paris for special treatment for three months. And I can't live in London all alone, Mary-Dorothy!"

"Aren't you going too?"

"My sister-in-law from Glasgow is going with them. They meant me to go, too; but they don't need me, and I'm not keen on Paris. So I'm going to stay at home and go to school again."

"Jenny-Wren! You're grown-up!"

"Since when?" Jen demanded indignantly. "I'm only nineteen! Do I look grown-up?"

"Not at this moment, certainly," Ruth said, laughing.

"That's only her tunic. She's *quite* grown-up!" Biddy insisted, listening round-eyed. "They won't have you at any school, Jen!"

"Oh, won't they! I'm going back to Wycombe with Ros and Maidie. Miss Macey's delighted to have me," Jen said haughtily.

"Really?" Mary, her heart like lead, felt she must say something.

"They're starting a special Domestic Science course at Wycombe," Jen condescended to explain. "I'm going to learn how to put on patches, and all about washing-up, and upholstering furniture; and cooking and dressmaking and hygiene, of course!"

"You won't learn all that in one term!" Joy jeered.

"Ros says Nesta and Molly and others of my old crowd are going to take the new course," Jen explained.

"If you'll stop all summer, we'll make you the new Queen, Jen," Rosamund, the reigning May Queen, promised wistfully.

"You won't need a Maypole if you make Jen the Queen!" Joy mocked.

Jen rose majestically to her full height, and towered above her. "When I'm a schoolgirl, I shall wear a tunic all the time," she announced. "You'll be green with envy!"

"You won't, then. Miss Macey won't let you," Rosamund warned her. "The Sixth aren't allowed to, and you're two feet taller than anybody in the Sixth."

"Don't you think it's a good plan, Mary-Dorothy?" Jen looked at Mary keenly.

"Splendid! You'll enjoy it, I'm sure. Shall I take your cup away?" Mary spoke bravely.

Jen looked after her with troubled eyes, but made no comment.

“Time’s up!” Joy said briskly. “Now for country! We go to the downstairs gym. Sure you can find Room G, Rosamunda?”

“Right at the top! We’ll go on till we can’t go any higher and then go round and round till we find it,” Rosamund said cheerfully. “Come on, Maidie!”

“Where on earth’s Room B?” Bidy demanded of Joy.

“It’s across the yard. I’ll show you. We were there for morris. Fly, though! Or I’ll be late for my class,” and Joy ran off at full speed, all long flying legs, dodging through the crowd, with Mary and Bidy and Ruth plunging after her and trying vainly to keep her in sight.

“There!” Joy hurled herself downstairs and along passages and round corners, and at last pushed open a swing door. “Go straight on across the yard, that way, and you’ll find it on your left.”

It was a long narrow hall, with doors and windows all along one side. Ruth slipped into a chair near the piano, and watched with increasing interest, and with deepening respect for the brains that could remember all these different dances and movements. The teacher was small, and very neat in her blue tunic, with dark hair and rosy cheeks which soon grew redder still with the excitement of keeping the class up to the mark. Ruth watched her quick, bird-like movements with amused appreciation, but soon also formed a warm respect for her as a teacher, for she was very thorough and her knowledge of her work was absolute. But while Ruth watched her and the whole class, she never lost sight of Mary, and she knew that Mary had not forgotten the news Jen had brought. While she was dancing, her whole mind was given to it, and she enjoyed herself fully and quite obviously loved every tune; she concentrated intently on the figure of the moment and had no time for wandering thoughts. But in the rest intervals there was a shadow on her face; she was no longer radiantly happy and excited, as Bidy still was; there was a cloud in the background, and it came down on her when she gave it the opportunity.

When they had, by following others from the class, found the refreshment room, received their plates of hot meat and pudding from the kitchen, and secured seats at the end of one of the long tables, Mary was quiet still; but accounted for it, realising that the change from her morning mood demanded some explanation, by saying she was starving and tired out.

“I’m sure you must be! How you ever keep going I can’t imagine! I’d have been dead half-way through,” Ruth said warmly.

“Oh, you don’t die as long as the music goes on! But when it stops, that’s the time you feel limp.”

“It’s a strenuous life, isn’t it? May we sit with you?” the Writing Person came up, carrying two plates of fruit and custard.

“Do sit here!” Ruth said eagerly; anything to cheer Mary up!—and she had smiled at sight of a friend.

“Are you eating only pudding to-day?” Mary asked.

“My Margaret’s queueing up for the first course. I’ve been ordered to go and sit down,” and the Writer collapsed exhausted in a seat. “It’s nice to be waited on! I had my coffee brought to me, too. She said she’d go into the scrum and fetch it out to me. I don’t believe she’s even tired.”

“I’m dead!” the tall girl said solemnly, and put down the meat plates tenderly. “What country are you doing?” to Biddy.

“Grade III.—‘Newcastle.’”

Ruth addressed the Writer, who was hungrily busy with her dinner. “I’ve read one of your books out in South Africa. It was lent to me by a girl on a farm only a few miles away from us.”

“Then you must live near Odzi? I’ve cousins there, and they like to have new books.”

“Yes, I know them. They’ll be thrilled to hear I’ve met you.”

“I’m owing them letters. I always am,” the Writer said sadly. “I’m afraid my letters to Odzi are few and far between.”

Mary caught Ruth’s eye and laughed guiltily. “I’m just as bad,” she said.

“I’ll fetch your coffee; shall I?” the schoolgirl was not too “dead” to be helpful.

She and Biddy were already good friends, and presently wandered off together to hunt for the cloakrooms, to do their hair and “make themselves respectable,” as the schoolgirl said.

Mary and Ruth followed the younger girls, to make room at the table for other hungry students, who kept crowding in to demand food.

“We’ll go and have a wash. Joy says there’s lovely hot water downstairs. And then we’ll find a corner and rest,” said Mary. “There’s nothing now for an hour and a half.”

“Good thing, too! How you can do any more I can’t think!”

“Now this is a real voyage of discovery! Where are those stairs? And which way do you turn at the bottom?”

“Mary, why do you care so much about Jen Robins going away?” Ruth asked insistently, as they revelled in the hot water and got rid of some of the dust.

Mary looked at her quickly. “Did you see? I’m sorry. I don’t quite know, Ruth. I’ll try to tell you to-night; not here! She often comes in to see us for a few minutes. It will be queer not to have her running in and not to have club nights to look forward to; and very horrid!”

“Yes, but that’s all the same for Biddy, and she isn’t as much cut up as you are!”

“No, there’s more behind. I’ll tell you as much as I can to-night, but not before Bidy. She doesn’t understand.”

And Ruth had to be content with that for the moment.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GOING “SHENZI”

“Why aren’t you in our classes?” Joy demanded of the Writing Person as they rested in big chairs. “Where have you got to? You’ve been with Jen during term!”

“I’m doing Grade IV. Country, II. Morris.”

“But why are you wasting time like that?”

“She’s taking care of me,” said the schoolgirl. “I don’t know any of those advanced dances yet. She’s going into classes with me.”

“We’ve got the most super class!” Joy was saying, in answer to a question from Mary. “It isn’t a class at all; it’s a perpetual country-dance party! We haven’t a teacher, but just a very nice hostess. She goes round asking those who are left out of sets if they want to dance; she asks what we’d like to do next. She’s quite a darling, and we’re going to have a lovely time!”

“Here comes the Little One!” Jen said.

“I’m so sorry! Some girls caught me and kept me talking. Now just half an hour!” and the Pixie dumped her case on the floor, took the chair Joy had kept for her, and put up her feet on another, in approved style. “Isn’t this *nice*! I’m going to darn my stockings; don’t you think it’s a good plan? It is nice to see you all together like this! And how are the babies?”—anxiously.

Joy gave the latest bulletins. “Jenny-Wren’s going down to see Janetta as soon as the School’s over. She hasn’t seen her goddaughter yet.”

“I only came back from Yorkshire yesterday,” Jen urged.

“And are you all living with Jen?” said the Pixie.

“Help, no! I wouldn’t have them!” Jen teased.

“We’re all at King’s,” Joy said eagerly. “We thought we’d like to try the hostel life. So we’ve each got a little bedroom, all on one corridor, each with a gas fire and a gas ring and a shilling-in-the-slot meter; and last night——”

“Shillings have quite a new meaning for me now!” Jen said solemnly. “My fire went out as I was changing for dinner last night, and I hadn’t a shilling, and Joy hadn’t, and Maidie hadn’t, and Ros hid her purse and laughed at me. So we raided her room and found it, and confiscated all her shillings and put them into a common fund, which I’m taking care of; and we rescued my fire. At bedtime hers gave out, and she had to come and beg

for one of her own shillings; she had to ask on her bended knees, and wait ten minutes, before she got it, too. I had my revenge!”

“What fun you must have!” Bidy said wistfully, then turned eagerly to Rosamund. “Couldn’t I go home with you one day after classes, and see your cubies? Will you take me?”

“Rather! We’ll ask you to dinner!” Rosamund said joyfully.

Maidlin leaned forward, her cheeks red with excitement, and whispered energetically.

Rosamund’s eyes dilated. “Maidie, how gorgeous! Of course we will! I say, Biddums——”

“Will you have tea with me one day, Pixie?” Jen was asking. “Just with me? I want to talk.”

“I’ll come! I’ll love it! To-morrow? After the lecture?” Then, with a lightning change of subject, because she had seen that Jen was in earnest and did not mean to say more in public, the Pixie turned to Mary, subconsciously aware that all was not well with her and that her silence had more than shyness lying behind it. “How are you getting on? I liked your article in last week’s paper. I really did like it.”

“Oh!” Mary coloured scarlet. “I never thought you’d see it.”

“Jenny-Wren sent it to me, for a Christmas card. She knew I’d be interested.”

“You’ll never advertise yourself, so I’ve got to do it for you, Mary-Dorothy,” Jen retorted briskly. “When your book comes out, I shall give away dozens.”

“We’re going up to the top with Margaret,” said Rosamund, and they went off together, followed by Bidy and Maidlin.

“I’d rather you than me!” Joy called after them. “Why can’t you kids rest when you have the chance?”

“We want to talk!” Rosamund retorted, over her shoulder. “Nobody else gets a chance while you lot are about!”

“There’s something up. I know Maidie’s danger-signals,” said Joy. “Did you see her red cheeks? They’ve a plan, and they want to discuss it without us.”

“And what do you think of us all? Are we a very funny crowd?” and the Pixie turned to Ruth.

“I think this is a real *shauri*,” Ruth said solemnly.

“What’s that? Is that African?”

“It’s what they say in East Africa for a great event. I like it. I’m coming every day. I’d like to join in the dancing; the easy kind! Some of it terrifies me. I’m going to make Mary take me to classes when they begin again. Then I’ll go home and introduce it into Rhodesia.”

“True for you!” said the Pixie delightedly. “Come to my classes! I’ll take care of you!—Now I really must go and change,” and she bundled her darning into her case again. “Or I shall be keeping my class waiting. See you to-morrow! I won’t forget about our tea!” to Jen, and she hurried away.

“This is not a place for private talks with Pixies!” said Joy again. “We’re lucky to get hold of her at all.—Oh, help! I’m stiff already!” as she rose carefully from the depths of her chair.

When the afternoon class was over, and the Director’s lecture had held Mary and Biddy and Ruth fascinated for half an hour, it was time, as Biddy said, “to roll into a bus and go home.”

“Why do we live so high up?” she groaned, as they toiled up the flights of stairs.

But when tea was over she had revived. “Would you mind if I went out, Mary? I want to tell Vivien all about it. She’s coming with me one day to see the School. Ruth will keep you company.”

“Go along, then! But don’t faint half-way up the stairs!”

“I never thought she’d want to go out again to-night,” Mary said, as Biddy clattered down the staircase.

“You were going to tell me things,” Ruth suggested, sitting on the big “humpy” before the fire and clasping her knees with her hands.

“Yes. I thought we’d have to wait till Biddy was in bed. I’d rather she didn’t understand. About Jen, and why I felt so breathless and knocked flat to hear she was going away. It’s not merely the pleasure of seeing her all the time,” Mary said slowly. “But I’ve a queer feeling that I depend on Jen; that I must see her regularly, or I shall go all wrong.”

“How do you mean? And how could you ‘go all wrong’? In what way?” Ruth asked, looking both puzzled and worried.

“Drift back into something she saved me from; something unhealthy.”

Ruth turned and gazed at her. Then she said swiftly, “Tell me what you mean, Mary! I knew there was something. You’ve been two people; one who used to write to us, and seemed dull and uninteresting; and the other who wrote that thrilling letter that made me so curious about you—the person you are now, who’s wide awake and does things, and writes, and teaches; who’s alive!”

“Yes,” Mary assented. “And it was Jen Robins and Joy Shirley who brought me to life again. That’s why I care so much about them both.”

“But what was the matter with you before, Mary? You can tell me, can’t you? You’ve said so much that I’d like to know,” Ruth pleaded.

“I must tell you, or you’ll think I’d taken to drink or drugs!” Mary said grimly. “It wasn’t anything like that. But I used to dream, and make up stories for myself, and live in them. There was nothing bad in them; they

were only romantic and silly and a waste of time. I ought to have been writing, but I didn't know how to start; and I was lazy; and so I kept the stories for myself, and never troubled to make them sensible, so that they could be written down. It may not sound very bad; but it had gone on for years, and I couldn't stop it."

"Going *shenzi*," said Ruth, in a low voice. "*Shenzi*? Oh, it's another East African word. It means running to seed, going to the bad, going down."

"Going to seed doesn't express what I was doing," Mary said sombrely. "For that holds the possibility of producing something new. The trouble was that I wasn't doing anything; I was just existing. I see now how unhealthy and unnatural it was. It stopped me from attempting real work of any kind. Then one day Jen floated into our office, carrying violets. She came here to see me about some typing, and brought me daffodils and bluebells from Yorkshire; and from the first I felt how healthy and happy and jolly she was. She came again, and brought Joy; and they took me to watch folk-dancing. Then they took us to the Pixie's party, and Jen hauled me in and made me dance; I was scared stiff that I'd make a fool of myself! I began going to her classes; then Joy asked us to the Hall, and we had three weeks in the country with them. By the end of that time, all the unhealthy secret stuff was dropping away from me; I never tried to give it up, as I had done before at times; I simply lost all desire for it. And it has never troubled me again. But then I've been seeing Jen every week. And I suppose I've been depending on the sight of her to buck me up and keep me straight. I'd never realised till to-day how much I depended on her."

"But you'll never go *shenzi* again, now that you understand, Mary. You couldn't!" Ruth remonstrated.

"That's all very well," Mary said restlessly. "But a thing like that, for years and years, leaves results. I'm not strong-minded. They've been helping me; I don't know if I'm strong enough to stand alone."

"I think you are! You're well again. You don't live on tonics when you're better, Mary!"

Mary leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, and stared into the fire. For a long time, as it seemed, there was silence. Ruth was waiting hopefully.

"No!" Mary said at last. "Jen and Joy have given me a big thing, and now I've got to fight to keep it. I will fight, Ruth. I won't go *shenzi* again without a struggle. I don't know that I'll win, but I will have a try for it."

"I knew you would! And you will win!" Ruth said warmly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MISCHIEF AFOOT

“It will have to be to-night,” Rosamund said excitedly, as the four younger girls found themselves in no fear of being overheard. “Couldn’t you come too?” eagerly, to the new friend.

“I’ve got to hurry home after the lecture. Sorry! I’d love to come. But Mother’s in Scotland, and I’m doing the housekeeping.”

“Then you must slip away to-night,” Rosamund turned to Bidy. “Leave a note on your pin-cushion; that kind of thing! Mary-Dorothy’s got your cousin; she’ll be all right. You see, Joy and Jen are going to the theatre to-night with some girls from our table. They say we’re to go to bed very early, because we’re so tired,” Rosamund scoffed.

“Right-o, Ros! I won’t ask Mary till afterwards. I say, Maidie, we’ll talk all night!” And with that cryptic promise Bidy fled to find Room B and Mary, and the smart little teacher with the rosy cheeks; and was very innocent, if rather excited, all the way home and all through tea, excitement which passed unnoticed by Mary in her own weariness, however, and by Ruth in her preoccupation with Mary’s trouble.

“We’ve asked Bidy to dinner to-night, Joy,” Rosamund said airily, as she and Maidlin climbed into Joy’s waiting car beside Jen.

“Oh!” Joy knit her brows, not sure if it were such a good plan; she knew her adopted daughters. “You might have consulted us, Rosamunda!”

“We only arranged it just before this last class.”

Joy turned and spoke sharply over her shoulder. “You went up on purpose to arrange it. Be straightforward, please, Rosamund, or I’ll have no use for you. I saw your faces as you went.”

Rosamund looked at Maidlin, raising her eyebrows. Joy’s outbursts of temper did not come often, but she spoke sharply now and then, and at such times she had to be treated with respect. In the present instance she had some right on her side, and Rosamund knew it.

“I’m sorry, Joy. We didn’t mean any harm.”

“We didn’t think you’d mind, Joy. You don’t mind us having a bit of a joke now and then, do you?” Maidlin asked anxiously.

Joy’s face softened. “Of course not, Madalena. But I don’t like to feel you’re cheating me!”

Maidlin subsided, but telegraphed a look to Rosamund. "We'll have to tell her all about it, Ros," she whispered.

"Don't be an idiot! She won't mind!"

"I'm not, and she might. I'm not going to risk it."

"You'd better not risk it!" They had forgotten Jen, who spoke severely. "I don't know what it is, but we're quite aware you're up to something."

"It's only a joke with Bidly," Rosamund said hurriedly, and eyed Maidlin anxiously.

"Is Bidly going home first, then? Why didn't you bring her home with you now?" Joy demanded, as she put them down at the big doors of the college hostel, where over a hundred students, all folk-dancers, were spending the week.

Rosamund raised her eyebrows again. "She wanted to put on a frock. She didn't think a tunic would do for dinner."

"Oh, I see! There's something in that. When is she coming, then? She'll have to fly round."

"It isn't far from their flat. She's to get here just before seven."

Maidlin, looking grave, climbed the wide staircase slowly, while Jen and Rosamund looked for letters in their pigeon-holes. Maidlin stood at the door of her bedroom, her face troubled and irresolute; then switched on the light, threw her bag of shoes and handkerchiefs on the table, and knelt to light the gas fire. She drew her curtains and sat down in the big chair and stared into the fire, still in her big coat and blue tunic and scarlet beret.

The students' rooms were convenient little places, with light-coloured walls and dark green woodwork; mantelpiece, window-frames, and the panelled doors of the big cupboards, one all shelves which drew out like trays, the other fitted with hooks as a wardrobe and holding the precious gas meter. Each room had its low, and very narrow, couch-bed; its desk, with pigeon-holes and drawer, and cupboard beneath; its big lounge chair with cushions; its writing chair, and folding table which could be opened out and drawn up to the fire, for work or tea parties. Below each gas fire was a tiny gas ring, pushed out of sight.

At last Maidlin sprang up and went along the corridor to Joy's door. As she passed Rosamund's room the door opened, and Rosamund, who had been listening nervously, looked out. "Maidie! You're never going to tell Joy? It's only a joke, Maidie!"

"Then it doesn't matter telling her," Maidlin retorted. She ran past Rosamund and into Joy's room, and Rosamund gazed after her in dismay.

Joy, still in her tunic, was sitting on the edge of her bed reading a letter from Joan. She looked up. "Hallo, Madalena! What's the row?"

"Joy, Bidly's going to stay all night!" it came out with a rush.

“*What?*” Joy dropped the letter and stared at her.

“Just for a joke. You don’t mind, do you?”

“But where is she going to sleep?” Joy gasped. “What does Mary say? What’s the point of it?”

“Mary’s got her cousin, so she’s all right. We just thought it would be fun. I thought of it, when Bidy said she’d like to see our rooms. Ros asked her to dinner; and I said, ‘Wouldn’t it be fun if she could stay all night?’ And after that you couldn’t stop Bidy.”

“No, I suppose not,” Joy said grimly. “And you meant us to go off to the theatre knowing nothing about it?”

“It won’t do anybody any harm,” Maidlin whispered, pleading vehemently. “Other people needn’t even know she’s here. We’ll say she’s come to dinner; and then she’ll come up to our rooms to talk; and it won’t hurt anybody if she just stays on, will it, Joy? And it will be such fun!”

Joy’s lips twitched. “I don’t really see that it will hurt anybody, except perhaps you and Ros. But I want to know where she’s going to sleep?”

“We thought perhaps we could share. We said we’d make a bed on the floor, in front of the fire, in one of the rooms, with the cushions from our chairs and our big coats; and we could sleep there and in the beds in turn.”

“Quite so!” Joy said grimly. “Now you can tell Rosamunda this. These are my terms! You can make up a bed for Bidy; I’ll lend you the rugs from the car, and if you let down the back of your chair, it will make a better bed than the floor. But I will not have either you or Ros jumping in and out of bed at all hours of the night, on to that cold wooden floor, in this draughty place. Now will you promise?”

“Yes, oh, yes! You are a dear, Joy!” Maidlin said fervently.

“Right-o! Now go and tell Ros. What are you going to do with Bidy in the morning, by the way? Are you going to smuggle her porridge up to her?” Joy asked sarcastically.

“She says she’ll go out and get it at a shop. She knows she mustn’t be seen at breakfast.”

“Right-o! You seem to have planned it very thoroughly. You must give me one other promise, Madalena. I know you want to sit up and talk to Bidy. You’ll be in bed by nine. You may talk till ten, and Ros may come into your room, if Bidy sleeps there. But at ten you’ll all go to your own beds and stop talking. Ten’s the limit. Now fetch Rosamunda to hear my conditions. I’ll have her promise for herself!”

“Ros! Ros! Come and promise all Joy wants!” Maidlin cried joyfully, at Joy’s door; Rosamund was waiting anxiously at hers to hear the result of the conclave. “Ros, it’s all right! Joy’s a perfect dear, as usual!”

CHAPTER NINE

BIDDY'S NIGHT OUT

At the sound of steps on the stairs outside, Mary went towards the kitchen, to put on the kettles for cocoa and hot water bottles. But a ring at the bell warned her that the newcomer was not Biddy. She went to the door and found a note in the letterbox.

"It's—goodness gracious! It's from Biddy!" she cried sudden sharp anxiety in her voice. "Can anything have happened?"

"I shouldn't think so," Ruth said hastily, as Mary tore open the note. "Biddy can look after herself."

"No—yes—she's all right," Mary had recovered from the moment's fright, and was reading the note hastily. "Oh, the silly children! Biddy might have told us." And she handed the note to Ruth.

"DEAR MARY,—Don't be scared! I'm all right. Viv will take this round for me. I'm going to spend the night with Ros and Maidie. I've got my gymmy and shoes. I'll meet you in the Scouts' Hall at 9.30 to-morrow morning. I wouldn't have left you all on your own. But you've got Ruth for company, so where's the harm?"

"See you both to-morrow! Yours,

"Bridget."

"I'm glad I'm being of some use in the world!" Ruth laughed.

Mary looked worried. "I wish she had consulted me!"

"Would you have let her go?"

"Not unless Joy and Jen had given permission. I don't feel at all sure that they've been consulted."

"I'm sure they haven't. They were going to the theatre, weren't they? It's to be a secret; that's where half the fun comes in," Ruth said promptly.

"I don't like to annoy them, all the same. I'm not worrying about Biddy; she'll be all right. But if Joy and Jen don't know, I'm afraid there'll be trouble when they find her there."

"You know, Mary-Dorothy—I like the name!—you think too much of those two," Ruth said decidedly, as they stood by the fire before going to bed. "You think they're both perfect; you think nothing's good enough for

them. You've put them up on pedestals, as if they were too good for this world, and you gaze up at them worshipfully from a distance."

"Ruth, don't be absurd!" Mary began to laugh. "How silly you are! I don't. I'm very fond of them, and very grateful to them; that's all."

"I just want to warn you," Ruth retorted cheerfully. "They're jolly nice girls, and kind and friendly, and all that; but they aren't the sort of goddesses you think them. Sooner or later you'll find out they're only human and no better than other people, and then you'll get a shock. They'll disappoint you somehow, and the images you've stuck up on pedestals will come down with a crash, and you'll be fearfully upset. I don't want you to break your heart some day, when your ideals vanish like soap-bubbles."

"Joy and Jen will never break my heart!" Mary said stoutly. "I feel quite sure of them. Now what about supper and bed, since we haven't got to wait for Biddy?"

Biddy was uncomfortably conscious all through dinner of the amusement in Joy's eyes as she looked at her. "Does Joy know?" she whispered to Rosamund at last.

"Maidie went and gave the show away. It's all right; Joy says you may stop. I'll tell you all about it later. We had to promise some things, to please her," Rosamund murmured in reply.

"I hope you'll have a very pleasant evening!" Joy said politely, as she rose with the rest of the theatre-goers. "Maidie, I'm trusting you."

"Hope you have a good time! Don't be too late home, or you'll be locked out!" Rosamund called after them.

"Maidie, why did you tell them?" Biddy burst out, as soon as the doors had swung shut behind the elder girls.

"I can't cheat Joy. I never have, and I never will. But she doesn't mind, Biddy."

"She thinks we're idiots, though," Biddy grumbled. "I hate to be looked at as if I were a silly kid! What did you have to promise?"

"We'll tell you upstairs. Finished? Then come and see everything!"

"What a huge place!" Biddy said appreciatively, as they went up the first flight of stairs.

"That's the common room," Rosamund announced, as proudly as if she had built it herself, and pointed down a long corridor to where the glow of a big coal fire showed through glass doors.

There were lounge chairs and big couches, each looking more comfortable than the last; rugs on the polished wood floor; books in the cases against the wall, a piano in an alcove. With the blazing fire, it was a very tempting resting-place, and Biddy tried all the chairs in turn, and then lay and rolled luxuriously on the sofa. But other girls arrived and sat down

with books and writing-pads; and with a meaning glance at one another, the three first-comers slipped away and left them in peace, to seek more excitements upstairs.

“I want to dance down these long corridors!” Bidy laughed exultantly. “Or have races! What’s in here? Bathrooms?”

“Washing cubies. Each bedroom has its own cubicle; we told you about them. Here’s mine!” and Rosamund switched on a light and showed a little corridor, all white, with three white doors on each side.

“Isn’t it all neat? See the dinky little shelves, and rods, and hooks! Everything you could possibly want! And boiling water at half-past seven in the morning! Maidie’s cuby’s next door. Now come and see our rooms!”

“That’s your bed,” Maidlin introduced Bidy to a pile of rugs and coats heaped in her big chair. “We had to promise faithfully we wouldn’t change in the middle of the night; Joy wouldn’t hear of it. But she said you’d be quite comfy.”

“Said you’d be as comfy as you deserved, anyway,” Rosamund amended. “We may talk till ten, but then we’ve got to switch off. That’s hours and hours yet!”

Bidy, enraptured, poked into every corner of the room and then examined Rosamund’s as thoroughly. “Now let’s sit round the fire and talk!” she said gleefully, when she had peeped into Joy’s and Jen’s rooms also. “I brought some things, so that we could stodge. Where’s my case?”

The refreshment-room at the Chelsea Polytechnic had proved a boon, in view of an entertainment of this kind. Chocolates, fruit, cakes, fancy biscuits, and shortbread were all on sale; and each of the girls had laid in a stock and brought the plunder home in her shoe-bag. Bidy had brought shelled nuts and almonds as well, and an aluminium cup. The coffee was mixed in this, and they all drank in turns, while more water boiled for the next instalment. And though all three had seemed to enjoy their dinner downstairs, the fact made no appreciable difference to the disappearance of the feast. Maidlin arranged the biscuits and cakes, sweets and nuts, on sheets of notepaper on the broad flat fender, and bade the visitor help herself. Rosamund spread rugs from Joy’s car on the floor, and told her to make herself at home. Bidy proceeded to do both with much enjoyment, and, by way of contributing her share, described the Christmas festivities at the flat, and told the stories, in great detail, of the Christmas play, and the film she had seen the night before.

Maidlin gave a little shriek of horror. “It’s nine o’clock, and we haven’t made Bidy’s bed yet! And we promised to go to bed at nine!”

Rosamund sprang up to help. “Fly round, then! You put on water for the bottles and clear up this mess. We’ll make the bed. Then we’ll all undress,

and I'll come and sit on your bed till it strikes ten, and we'll put the light out and talk in the dark. Joy knew we'd want to talk in bed, so she arranged it for us beautifully."

For an hour they sat on the beds and chatted, Rosamund rolling out at intervals to fill bottles and convey them to beds. "I'll do Joy's and Jen's, too, though they don't deserve it, gadding about like this! If they aren't hot enough for them, they can heat them up again."

"It's ten o'clock, Ros. You'd better go," said Maidie.

"You're not to go on talking to Biddy, then!" Rosamund grumbled.

"This is a real big *shauri*!" Biddy said happily, and snuggled down among her rugs and coats, and lay gazing into the fire, which they had decided to keep burning for an hour or two.

The theatre-goers returned an hour after "lights out," and apparently ran up and down the wooden corridors in high-heeled shoes. Lights had already been flickering across the room at intervals, but there were many more of these now, and Biddy raised herself on her elbow at last, to say to Maidie, "I say, Maidie! If you have a week of this, you'll need a rest-cure at the Abbey before term begins!"

"Still talking?" Joy's voice sounded in the doorway. "Maidie, what about your promise?"

"We weren't!" Biddy spoke up hurriedly. "We've been quiet for hours and hours. Maidie hasn't said a word even now. Did you have a good time? Did you laugh?"

"Once or twice." Joy stood in the doorway, night-light in hand, wearing a pale green kimono, her hair hanging over her shoulders in two thick tawny plaits. "Are you quite warm?"

"Rather! Thanks hugely for the rugs. We had another supper after you'd gone!"

"I'm sure you did," said Joy, laughing.

CHAPTER TEN

THE KINDNESS OF THE PIXIE

Very early in the morning, Ruth crept out of her room, felt her way to the kitchen, switched on the light, and put a kettle on the gas. By seven, she was standing by Mary's bed with an early cup of tea.

"Ruth!" Mary sat up with a start. "Oh, you angel!"

"Breakfast will be ready for you at a quarter to eight. I'm seeing to everything," said Ruth calmly. "I've been amusing myself in your kitchen for half an hour. Do you think," scornfully, "that a Colonial can't cook? The porridge is boiling, and the scrambled eggs and the toast and the coffee will be ready when you are. *I'm* getting the breakfast to-day! Methinks I hear the kettle preparing to boil over! You dress slowly. You'll be stiff when you move," and she ran to the kitchen.

"Stiff!" groaned Mary, as she stepped out of bed and collapsed upon it suddenly. "Are my legs broken? I've never felt like this before!"

She hobbled in to breakfast presently, with an exaggerated air of lameness. "I'm crippled for life! At least I was when I got up first. It's going off a bit now. Ruth, what a beautiful breakfast! You are good! It is nice to have things done for one!"

"I'm curious to hear how Bidly slept, and how they managed to conceal her this morning, and what Joy and Jen said about it," said Ruth.

"Oh, it was quite easy!" Bidly said airily. "I put on my gymmy and big coat, and went down at breakfast time with the rest. Everybody was in tunics, I looked like all the rest! While they were all waiting for the gong, I slipped out at the big door and ran for my life, and had eggs and bacon in the teashop by the station. It was fun last night! It's a gorgeous place, but you don't get much sleep," and she gave an eager account of the evening to Mary and Ruth and the schoolgirl, Margaret, who had come up to ask questions also.

That day, and those that followed it, were much like the first. There were the same classes and the same teachers, but different dances; the morning singing was an endless joy to Ruth, and the short demonstration never failed to thrill her. There was the usual scramble for coffee and biscuits at eleven; the usual hearty meal in the uproarious clatter of the dining-hall; the quiet chats in little groups during the rest interval.

Though it was not easy for the Pixie to find time for private conversations during a Vacation School, Jen was one of those who was accorded the privilege. Perhaps it was the tempting bait of a “problem in psychology,” a thing she loved, that made the Pixie refuse all other friends that afternoon, and retreat with Joy and Jen, and a pot of tea for three, and a tray of buns and butter and a plate of cakes, to one end of a long table in the dining-room. They turned their backs on the rest of the world, and plunged into the problem.

“Now, Jenny-Wren, what’s the matter with you?”

“It’s Mary-Dorothy,” Jen said swiftly. “You know my plans for next term? To live with Joy and go to school again? And you remember what you said to us last summer about Mary-Dorothy; how we had rescued her from the inside life of stories she was living in, and how we had to hold her up till she was safely ashore and in no danger of going back?”

“Yes, I know all that,” the Pixie said thoughtfully, her eyes eager and interested.

“The trouble is, Jenny-Wren thinks Mary-Dorothy can’t live without her,” said Joy bluntly.

Jen flushed. “Pixie, it sounds awful, but if you’d seen her face when she heard I was going away! She looked as if I’d knocked her down. You don’t think me a conceited idiot, do you? It’s nothing I’ve done, any more than Joy or anyone else; it’s only that I’ve happened to be in town. Pixie, what *do* you think? Am I imagining it?”

“I should say not. I expect she has learned to depend on you,” the Pixie said gently. “You mean a lot to her. You stand for everything that’s new, and happy, and healthy, in her life. She feels she owes it all to you. I’ve heard her say so; she’s quite certain and quite frank about it.”

“But I haven’t done any more than Joy!” Jen protested.

“She feels nearly as much for Joy. I’ve talked to her, and I know. She thinks the world of you both.”

“But what am I to do?” Jen demanded, looking deeply troubled. “You make me feel as if I oughtn’t to go away! But she can’t depend on us for ever, Pixie!”

“No. You must go,” the Pixie said decisively. “She must learn to do without you. If she finds she can stand alone, all will be well, and she’ll be stronger than she’ll ever be while she has you to lean on.”

“Yes, but if she can’t?” Jen pleaded.

“Then Joy will send for her into the country, and you’ll have to start again. But I don’t believe it will happen. I’ll see her sometimes, and I’ll know if she’s all right. She doesn’t know I know anything about it, of course, so I’ll have to be careful. I’ll tell you how she’s getting on.”

“Now Mary-Dorothy’s provided for! If you take her up, all will be well!” Joy said dramatically.

Jen’s face lit up. “Oh, Pixie, will you? But you have so many people to see after! I know you look after heaps of people!”

The Pixie’s eyes laughed at her. “Tell Mary-Dorothy to come to my classes. I’ll make room for her. She mustn’t drop her dancing.”

“Then you do think I can go, Pixie? I’ve been wondering if I ought to give it up, and arrange to stop in town somehow.”

“Not a bit. You ought to go. It’s good for her. You’re only giving her the chance to stand alone,” the Pixie said briskly. “I believe she’ll rise to it, and show you she can get along without you. She’d have to do it sometime, you know. Having the pretty little cousin there will help; and I’ll keep an eye on her. Now I’ve got to get home. Are you going in to the lecture? I can’t stop for it to-night. I’ve got some sewing to do. See you to-morrow!” and she picked up her case and hurried away.

“There’s Madam!” and Joy and Jen, turning back to the world again, descended joyfully upon their first folk-dance friend, who had just strolled in and was demanding tea.

“But we thought you weren’t coming at all! We’re missing you fearfully!” Jen cried.

“How do you like being a lady?” Joy mocked. “It’s funny for you! Most unnatural!”

“I’ve been teaching this afternoon,” Madam retorted. “I took the supers.”

“Oh! But ought you to?”

“I’m all right. How are you getting on? You seemed very busy over there.”

“We were getting reams of good advice,” said Jen. “I’m going back to school again. Have you heard? To learn how to wash pots and pans and hem dusters and make gravy.”

“Will they really have you back?” Madam asked, much amused. “I shouldn’t have thought they would. I thought you thought you’d grown up years ago?”

“I aged too soon,” Jen said sadly. “Oh, they’re delighted! I shall be welcomed with open arms by all the staff.”

“I doubt it!” Madam sounded sceptical.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MARY'S WIRELESS

The Chelsea week drew to a close. Ruth, fascinated by the infectious atmosphere of enthusiasm and enjoyment, went with Mary and Biddy every day, and postponed sightseeing and shopping till the Vacation School was over. Her desire to learn the country-dancing, at least, grew steadily, and she began to long for the School to be over so that regular classes might begin again. She made purchases of music and songs and instruction-books in the book-room; and talked to the Secretary in the office; and, being a businesslike person, soon knew as much about the Folk-Dance Society as Mary did.

The country-dance party, the biggest ever held in London, was a revelation and a new experience to Ruth. Held on the last night of the School, in the great hall of the Imperial Institute, it was a wonderful sight, with its medley of brilliant colours, its constant change and movement. Ruth sat on the platform, and watched seven hundred dancers make lines for "Haste to the Wedding" and "Childgrove," rings for "Mage" and "Gathering Peascods," and squares for "Hey, Boys" and "Oranges and Lemons." "Sellenger's Round," in three huge rings, each four or five circles deep, was a thrilling sight. Then, with a sigh of regret that it was all over, the hundreds went wearily home to bed; and Ruth said fervently, "I must learn those as soon as ever I can, Mary!"

The next morning, with the burden of the exams off everyone's mind, brought especially enjoyable classes, tinged only with regret that the end of the week had come.

Then came hurried good-byes on every side, and a rush to catch trains on the part of those long-distance people who had not gone already; while the Londoners, taking things more easily, enjoyed a last sad tea and a last talk before reluctantly separating to their homes. Jen saw Joy, Maidlin, and Rosamund off in the car; then joined the Pixie, Mary, Biddy and Ruth for tea, and made it last as long as they could.

"We shall be turned out! Or locked in here till next year," Jen said sadly.

"Let's go home and make buttered toast," said Biddy sadly. "We'll give you some, if you'll come, Jen!"

"My mother and my father are expecting me every minute. They were arriving in town last night. So I'm afraid I mustn't, much as I should like to,

Bridget. Oh, I say! Isn't it sad that it's all over?" Jen groaned.

And this proposition being accepted unanimously, the party separated and all went sadly home.

Mary and Bidy hung up their tunics regretfully, while Ruth began to make the toast.

"And that's the end of it all for a year, unless we can manage to go in the summer. But that costs more, because it's not in London," Bidy said mournfully, coming to make the tea. "But at least there are Jen's classes—oh, no, I suppose they won't begin again. Oh, bother!"

Ruth glanced anxiously at Mary. But Mary faced the inevitable steadily. "I don't know when we shall see Jen again," she said lightly. "She begins school next week. But she'll come to say good-bye, if she can."

Mary knew intuitively that there was only one safe way for her just now. There were two possible ways before her; and one—to forget Jen and the blank her going had left, and to plunge into that unreal life Jen did not like—would have been treason and could not be thought of.

"I'm going to be unsociable," she said, after the second tea was washed up. "Don't you want to write home and tell them all about us, Ruth? Or if Bidy likes to take you to the pictures, I won't mind."

Ruth looked at her anxiously. "And leave you all alone? Not likely! What would you do, all by yourself?"

"She's got a scribbling fit coming on," said Bidy. "I know the signs. We'd better go out; she won't speak for hours!"

So Ruth and Bidy took pity on the authoress or on themselves, and left her.

Mary was working in earnest now, thoroughly gripped by her story; and night after night Bidy and Ruth went out, so that she should be left in peace. It was still holidays so far as classes in folk-dancing were concerned, and "the pictures" would have been their only refuge if Ruth had not developed a passion for bus-rides through the lighted streets by night. Bidy enjoyed these rides also, so, well wrapped up, they went out night after night and boarded a bus and went "there and back," no matter where "there" might be. Sooner or later the front seat would fall vacant, and Bidy would make a rush for it; then Ruth would produce chocolates, and they would settle down to enjoy themselves, only leaving their seats at the terminus to find a cup of hot coffee somewhere before starting on the homeward ride. When asked later about any London district, Ruth would say, "Oh, yes! I've been there. I went in the dark, on a bus. The lights were lovely!"

The importance of not disturbing Mary weighed heavily on both her and Bidy. Mary's working time—she persisted in considering her writing "work," and nothing else worthy of the name—was so very limited; she was

so very eager to get on with her story, now that she had made the new beginning; and the younger girls were both so very anxious that she should. Ruth had been allowed to read the first half of the story, in instalments; Mary had tried a few chapters on her, and had been amused and delighted and embarrassed by Ruth's insistent demand for more *at once*. Ruth was frankly eager to know what happened next, and would go out at any time if that would allow Mary to finish another chapter. Biddy's interest was that of part proprietor; she had helped to suggest the story, which was founded on some of her own experiences at boarding-school; she had discussed it in its earlier stages and knew how it was supposed to end, and how she thought it ought to end. But Mary was proving unexpectedly difficult, and declared herself unable to stick to the arranged plot; it had developed along lines she and Biddy had not foreseen.

"But that's not what we'd decided, Mary!" she wailed one night. "I'm sure the other way was better! What do you want to make her do that for, the silly kid?"

"Because it's what she would do, I'm certain. I can't help it, Biddy. I can't stop her. She did it before I knew she was going to."

"That's silly! It's your story! You can make it go as you like!"

"I'm beginning to wonder if it is mine. Sometimes I think it isn't."

"But you're making it up!" Biddy cried, staring at her uncomprehendingly.

"I suppose so," Mary said doubtfully. "That's not the feeling I have, though. I never have had the feeling of making anything up."

"What do you feel?" Ruth asked curiously.

Mary considered the matter. "That I'm discovering something that exists already. I'm not inventing it. It's there; I've got to put them down as they come to me. That's really what I feel."

"Like listening-in to a wireless; but you're the only person who hears that particular wave," Ruth suggested.

"That's it exactly. I want to find out the rest as much as you do. I'm very fond of the girls; I'm sorry when they make a mess of things, but I can't help it. That's the story."

"And there you are! She can't change the story. This is too mysterious for me, Biddy! Let's go out! But I can see why she wants to get rid of us. We interrupt the wireless."

"I wish you'd go, if you're going to chatter," Mary said politely.

"We will, if we may read the new chapter at supper."

"No, that's too soon. Something may happen to alter it. I'm not always sure I've got it right till I've thought it over."

“It’s beyond me!” Bidly said frankly. “I’m glad it’s your job, not mine. I don’t want any private wireless going through me! You never talked like this about the short things you wrote. You just sat down and wrote them!”

“This is quite different!” Mary said with dignity, a touch of shy colour in her face.

“It’s much more worth doing!” Ruth said warmly. “And a jolly lot more interesting! Your girls are real and alive; that’s why you don’t understand them altogether, and why you can’t always manage them. And that’s why the story’s so thrilling, and why it will be published and will be such a big success. I’m panting to know what happened next!”

“So am I!” Mary confessed.

“Let’s go out, Bidly! Perhaps she’ll find out,” and Ruth hurried Bidly away.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AN INVITATION FROM JOY

“Letters!” Biddy rushed to the door one evening, about a week after the close of the dancing school. “Mary, that’s for you from Jen. A card for you, in such teenywee writing! Whose is it? And big fat letters for all of us, all alike! How weird! What can they be? Here, Ruth!” and she tore open her own letter packet to solve the mystery.

“This is from the Pixie,” said Mary, taking up the card with the neat little writing. “I asked her to let me know when Ruth might go to see her, to see the shop and the handwoven things.”

“It looks like her,” Biddy conceded. “These are magazines. Are yours the same, Ruth? They’re about folk-dancing; how gorgeous! But I wonder who sent them to us, and why?”

“I suspect this is the explanation of the mystery,” and Ruth held up a small card. “Haven’t you one too?”

“What is it? Yes, here it is.—Oh! Oh, I say! But I’m not a member! We’ve never been able to afford it yet. But this says I’m a member of the Society for this year!”

“Ruth!” Mary cried accusingly, and tore open her own packet to find the membership card there also. “Ruth, did you pay our subscriptions at Chelsea?”

“Well, they told me about the parties, and I want to go to them—to watch, anyway, and perhaps to join in one or two of the easy dances. But I can’t go alone,” Ruth explained.

“Oh, but you mustn’t! You shouldn’t have done it! We mustn’t let you _____”

“Cheers! Oh, Ruth, I do love you!” and Biddy hurled herself on Ruth and hugged her.

“Mary, did you say you’d been arranging for me to go and see your Pixie, and her hand-woven dresses and things?” Ruth demanded.

Mary looked alarmed at her tone. “I thought you’d like it. You said you’d like to see the shop.”

“I’m dying to go. I want to see her again, and I want a frock like those Joy and Jen had. But don’t you see? You’re doing far more for me than I can do for you, things I could never do for myself. What’s spending a guinea or two, compared with getting me the chance of going to see a person like that?”

Think of the interesting people you've introduced me to! I think the giving has been on your side, not mine."

"It's nice of you to feel like that," Mary said doubtfully.

"Ruth, this is for you," Mary had found an enclosure in her letter from Jen. "It's from Joy. This letter of Jen's is to say good-bye; no, you can't read it, Biddy. It's full of good advice to me," and Mary flushed and laughed. "Jen's pleased to look on herself as my fairy godmother, and she tells me what she thinks is good for me. We must make up our minds to do without her for some time. I'm sorry you won't see more of her, Ruth."

"But I shall, if—if you don't mind!" Ruth looked up from her note. "Mary, this is from Joy Shirley, and she asks me to go and stay with them at her house. Would you mind? It's delightful of her to ask me; but it seems horrid of me to go, when you'd like it too and you can't go."

"Oh, we couldn't possibly go," Mary said quickly. "We've been away from work too much already. But you must go, Ruth! I'm glad she's asked you. It's a delightful house to stay at."

"I'd like to go. I'd love to! In fact, I'm dying to go, if you're sure you and Biddy won't feel too bad," Ruth confessed. "I don't expect you to miss me, but I do think you may wish you were with me."

"We'll do that all right!" Biddy assured her.

"But we shall miss you, too. You make a big difference in this little place," Mary added. "But you must go, if it's only to see the snowdrops! Jen says they're quite a sight under the trees."

"At least, I take Biddy off your hands at night! What will happen to your work if I go away?"

"Biddy will settle down, when she hasn't you to set her off," Mary retorted. "When do they want you?"

"She says as soon as I can come. They'll meet me at the station, if I let them know the day and train. Or Joy will take me back in the car next Thursday, if I care to wait till then."

"I should wait and go in the car. You'd save your fare," said Biddy.

"I don't want to wait a week!" Ruth confessed. "But I want to go and order my handwoven frock to-morrow. How would Monday do?"

"There's something you might tell us," Biddy said thoughtfully, her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands, as she gazed at Ruth. "I want to know if that man's back yet, and if he's still hanging round Joy, and if he proposes again, and what she says this time, and all about it."

"Biddy!" Mary said indignantly.

"It's because I'm so fond of her. I'm naturally interested. We're sure he proposed last summer; Ros and Maidie both think so."

“I don’t see any need for you and Ros and Maidie to talk about it. It’s none of your business.”

“Maidie hates the thought of it. But he did save her life, and she can’t say he didn’t. Of course, he isn’t good enough for Joy, but then no man ever is good enough for a girl you like.”

“You leave me gasping!” said Ruth helplessly. “I had no idea Joy was concealing a love-story! Who is he, please? Would you mind giving me a few details?”

“We don’t know if it is a love-story. That’s the point,” Biddy explained. “We can’t ask her, of course. He’s the lord of the Manor, and Joy’s the lady of the Hall; and the Hall and the Manor are next door—most romantic! He’s Sir Andrew Marchwood——”

“A bold bad baronet? How thrilling!”

“His brother died last year, and he came into the title. He’s been a great traveller, and out of England for years,” said Mary. “The Manor has been shut up all the time Joan and Joy were growing up, at the Abbey; the Abbey belongs to Joan, and is in the grounds of the Hall. Now this man and his mother have come to live at the Manor, less than a year ago.”

“And last summer, when we trespassed in his garden and all fell into the lake, he fished us out and brought Maidie back to life when she was drowned,” Biddy supplemented.

“And you want me to tell you how his courting is getting on?”

“He’s been abroad again, all the autumn. We don’t know for certain, but we rather think he proposed to Joy last summer; and she either sent him away for six months, while she thought about it, or else she said ‘No’ straight out. But he may come back; and then things might happen. So I thought you’d better be prepared.”

“Thanks very much!” Ruth said, laughing.

Ruth’s visit to the Pixie was paid next day. They met at a busy corner in the West End, and lunched together at a quiet table in a big restaurant.

“Now tell me!” said the Pixie. “How is Mary Devine going to get on without Jen Robins?”

Ruth’s face showed her surprise at this understanding of the situation.

“She’s missing Jen,” she said cautiously, anxious not to betray Mary, and not sure how much the wily little person knew. “But she isn’t pining. She hasn’t time; she’s working too hard.”

“Oh, *good!*” There was real heartfelt relief in the Pixie’s delighted voice. “That’s what she ought to do. I *am* so glad she’s taking it that way. That will keep her safe. Now she’ll be all right! Jen will be glad! Now come along and choose your frock!”

“Oh, but I can’t!” Ruth wailed, when the handwoven goods were spread before her. “I want them all!”

“That’s what Joy Shirley said. You mustn’t have them all, for they wear for ever, you know!”

“Oh! What a simply heavenly green! Oh! I’ll have that! Take all the rest away!” Ruth begged.

The Pixie swept the materials aside. “It’s the green of a beech leaf in early spring, and the pattern is the beech brown of autumn. It’s a lovely thing. I’ll make it like this!” and she sketched the frock on the spot, altering details to please Ruth, till all the points were settled.

In her workroom upstairs they sat and talked, Ruth sitting on the floor, because every seat was piled with frocks in various stages of progress.

“And you’re going to stay at the Abbey with them? Good! Give them all my love!”

“Ought I to go?” Ruth queried, as Jen had done. “You told me to help Mary. It feels like deserting her.”

“She’ll pull through. If she’s working, she’ll be all right. Oh, you ought to go! Of course you must go. But write to her, you know. Don’t let her think you’ve forgotten her.”

“I do want to go!” Ruth confessed. “I’m looking forward to it tremendously!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE MEETING AT THE STATION

The train drew in to the station at Princes Risborough; and Ruth looked eagerly for Joy and her car. But instead of Joy, it was Jen who hailed her and hauled out her suitcase. "I'm ever so glad to see you! Please excuse Joy; she'll meet us with the car at our own little station."

Ruth laughed, as they crossed the platform to the motor train awaiting them. "Oh, what a sweet little train! And are you looking forward to school?"

"Oh, yes. It's three years since I left. But"—ruefully—"my headmistress wants me to swot at French and music, besides the household stunts! How is Mary-Dorothy?"

"Very well and very busy. I steal each new chapter of her book when it's finished." Ruth assured her.

Jen's face had lit up. "She is working at it, then? Oh, I *am* glad! And you really like it? You think it's good?"

"I get wildly excited over it, so I think it must be good! The girls are so real; that's what I like about it," Ruth said warmly.

"Yes, I felt that. She let me see the beginning, when I'd teased her for weeks. She was shy about it, but I got it out of her at last. She feels things so, and they're so real to her, that I think her work ought to be very good, though I'm no judge," Jen, speaking soberly, seemed in a moment years older, and almost motherly in her tone.

"Mary says it will be half yours and half Biddy's," Ruth ventured. "She looks on you as her fairy-godmother."

"Oh, I am! That's understood!" Jen said, laughing. "Now here we are at our little station. But where's Joy? If she's left us to walk, I'll never forgive her!—Oh! Oh, I *say*!"

"What's the matter?" Ruth had been forced to lift out her own case, for Jen had forgotten her, as a huge car drove up to the station gate.

A tall man had been the only other traveller to leave the train, which had been delayed while a pile of luggage was taken out of the van. He stood giving directions as to this, while a couple of travelling bags were being placed in the car.

Jen's surprised eyes rested on him, in delighted anticipation. Ruth, looking from her to him, knew who he must be, and was seized with joyful

amazement at her own good luck. Was she to see the end of Joy's romance, after all?

Jen looked round in anxious indignation for some sign of Joy. Ruth was beginning to say that she would enjoy the walk and she did not mind the mud, when the traveller turned from his car and came towards them.

"Can I give you a lift to the Hall, Miss Robins?"

Jen's face grew radiant. "How kind of you! Joy's let us down badly; she promised to be here. We would be so grateful." She turned to Ruth, to introduce Sir Andrew Marchwood—"Our next-door neighbour. Miss Devine is coming to stay at the Hall. This seems a poor welcome to give her! But your kindness will make up for it."

"I am glad to be able to help," said he, and made room for Ruth's case and helped the girls in.

Jen, lying back luxuriously on the cushions, said warmly, "It's very nice of you! We didn't know you were expected home. Have you had a pleasant trip? And shot lots of creatures?"

"It has been interesting——"

Then a small car flashed past them going towards the station, as the limousine climbed the hill; and both girls caught a glimpse of the amazed indignant consternation in Joy's face. Sir Andrew stopped the car and Joy turned as soon as she could, and came up alongside them.

"Sorry I was late!" she cried, her astonished eyes going from Jen, placid and amused, to Sir Andrew, whose grave face showed no change of feeling. "We had engine trouble, and got held up outside Thame. Awfully good of you to come to the rescue!" to Sir Andrew. "I'll take them off your hands now."

"Oh, we're very comfortable! It's a pity to disturb us!" Jen said lazily. "You can follow on, and we'll get in with you when Sir Andrew drops us at the gate. When he's been so kind, we couldn't think of deserting him."

Joy's car shot forward and vanished round the bend of the road.

Jen grinned wickedly. "Now I've done it! She'll leave us to walk up the avenue, and it's half a mile, and very damp."

"If you will allow me, I will drive you to the door, and thereby, no doubt, incur Miss Shirley's deeper displeasure," said Sir Andrew grimly.

"Oh, we couldn't think of troubling you! Ruth will like to see Joy's beech avenue. I don't think it's you Joy's wild with! It's me!"—the schoolgirl had suddenly come uppermost in Jen. "And I'm used to it; it doesn't affect me in the slightest."

But her protests were not needed, for at the gate of the Hall they found the car waiting.

“Jump in!” Joy said briefly. “Oh, we couldn’t think of troubling you any further, thank you very much! You took me by surprise,” she went on politely, as Ruth’s case was lifted from the limousine, and Jen reluctantly consented to transfer herself to the small car. “I didn’t know you were coming home yet. I hope Lady Marchwood is well?”

“She is well, thank you. I expect her here to-morrow,” said the man of few words.

“Aunty will come to call. Thank you again for rescuing these two!” and with a nod Joy turned to her steering-wheel.

Joy did not refer to the incident again, but turned to Ruth with another apology for being late.

“Jen looked after me splendidly,” Ruth assured her hostess. “Is all this really your garden? What wonderful old trees! But you promised me snowdrops. Where are they?”

“Look under the trees, carefully,” and Joy slowed down. “You must see them in the morning, in sunshine.”

“Oh, but I can see them now!” Ruth peered into the dusk, and found the moss beneath the trees carpeted with snowy stars. “Why, there are thousands of millions of them!”

“Golden winter aconite,” said Joy. “Among the snowdrops they’re rather a pretty sight. But you’ll be catching cold. You shall have all the snowdrops you want in the morning.”

“Could I have a few, really?” Ruth begged.

“To send to Biddy and Mary-Dorothy?”

“Yes, and your little Pixie-lady, for herself and the weaving girls in the shop.”

“Oh, you’ve been there, have you? How many frocks did you order?”

“Only one, at present. But I shall have more. I wanted to give Mary and Biddy one each, but they were so much upset at the idea that I had to give it up,—for the time being!”

Joy laughed. “You shall pick and pack for them all to-morrow morning, while I attend to my letters,” she promised. “The children will be at school, of course! I was afraid you’d be dull.”

Jen made a face at her. Then she wailed, “Oh, ‘Traveller’s Joy!’ You don’t know what you’re in for. What do you think? Mackums insists that I’m to practise regularly! Scales, my dear! And arpeggios!”

“Not on my piano; no, you don’t!” Joy said emphatically.

“You let Maidie use yours!” Jen said indignantly.

“Only sometimes. And you’re not Maidie. Your great fist’s a very different thing from Maidie’s fingers. Here’s the house, Ruth, but you’ll see it better in the morning.”

“There is a lot of it!” Ruth said, awed and astonished. “It’s what I’ve read of and dreamed of, a real old country mansion. I’ve longed to see one.”

Joy was opening the door. “You’ll like the house.”

The great square hall, with its family portraits and panelled walls and the wide oak staircase, was warmed by two blazing wood fires on open hearths. A round table was drawn near one of these for tea, and Mrs. Shirley, a dainty but frail little lady, sat near this to preside, as soon as the greetings were over. Rosamund and Maidlin came rushing down the stairs to welcome Ruth, and in ten minutes were waiting on her with scones and bread and butter and tea, and she laughingly felt the “friendliness” of England once more.

“Oh, girls! Mrs. Shirley!” Jen had forgotten the biggest bit of news; but Joy had not, Ruth thought. “Who—*whom!*—do you think we met at the station just now? The old man from the Manor—I mean, Sir Andrew! He’s home again! Did any of you know he was coming?”

Ruth, well primed in the situation, thanks to Bidy, saw “the children’s” swift looks at Joy; Rosamund excited and eager, Maidlin obviously dismayed.

Joy rose and put down her cup. “Auntie dear, I told him you would call on Lady Marchwood. She isn’t coming till to-morrow. She’s very well. Jen, you might show Ruth anything she cares to see to-night; I’ll take her round properly in daylight. I’m going out,” and she left them staring at one another.

“Out? At this time? But it was dark ages ago!” cried Rosamund.

“Please note! I will *not* be teased about Sir Andrew Marchwood! Things are getting serious!” Jen said sadly.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ROSAMUND'S REVENGE

“Oh, Jen! Do you think she’s going to have him?” Rosamund cried eagerly.

“I wish he’d stayed away,” Maidlin sighed, and gazed into the fire, her black hair falling across her face.

Ruth looked from one to another of them, her eyes bright with interest. Mrs. Shirley’s face was very grave, without Rosamund’s excitement; and Ruth wondered if perhaps she knew more than the girls did.

But at that look on Ruth’s face, Jen remembered that they had a visitor, who was not one of the family yet; and she mentally called herself a thoughtless idiot. She rose briskly. “Shall I show you things, Ruth? Since Joy’s given me the chance, I may as well take it. As a rule, she wants to show people round herself. Come and explore the house from attic to cellar!”

“Yes, that’s the Abbey,” she said, as they stood in her room, looking out over the garden, lit up by a full moon. “You can just see the ruins at this time of year; in summer you see only trees. Those are the windows of the refectory. Would you like to do something original?” and she began to laugh.

“I’d love it! What can we do?”

“I’ll take you to see the Abbey for the first time by moonlight. We’ll go by the secret passages, of course,” Jen said, laughing.

“I’d love to see it first by moonlight! But will Joy mind? Won’t she want to show it to me herself?”

“Oh, no, not the Abbey! It’s Joan’s Abbey, you know. Joy likes it *very* much!—but it’s her house she loves. Every stone and every corner of it! All right! Get your big coat and come down to the hall. And escape the infants, if you can. We can’t go in a chattering crowd.”

Rosamund caught them on the stairs, however, and this ruthless sentence had to be repeated with emphasis, to her vast indignation. She caught Maidlin, and drew her into a corner to pour out her indignation; and Jen said grimly, “They’ll plot and plan some fearful vengeance.”

She pushed back a strong little bolt and unlocked a door, almost invisible in the panelling; and led the way, by steps, and a narrow passage, and another door, and more steps, and a much longer passage, till Ruth felt she had been wandering underground for hours.

They had passed the parting of the paths and had reached a flight of steps leading upwards. Jen passed these also, and led Ruth into the crypt, and threw her light around to show the Saxon pillars and the tomb of the first Abbot.

“Oh!” breathed Ruth, as they crept round the corner of the chapter-house, and saw the cloister garth, and the cloisters beyond, and the high arched windows of the refectory, and the low Norman doorways, and the beautiful Early English chapter-house behind them, all dreaming in the light of the full moon. “Oh, I am glad you brought me to-night! It couldn’t be more beautiful in sunshine!”

“It’s very nice in sunlight, though. We once danced here by moonlight, to the music of a fiddle,” Jen said reminiscently. “The fiddle was very sweet, but listen to this!”

She had picked up her little morris pipe, only a foot long and made of dark brown wood, as she came through the hall to the secret door.

Ruth listened entranced; the melody seemed to turn the moonlight into music. “I’ve heard of your English nightingales,” she said, as Jen paused for breath. “Are they anything like that? Oh, please go on! Couldn’t you—oh, couldn’t you dance one of them for me, there on the grass?”

Jen looked at the garth, and hesitated. “One oughtn’t to; but I don’t believe they’d mind. They know how we love the garth! It was the graveyard of the old monks, you know. But that was so very long ago!” She put the pipe into Ruth’s hand, slipped off her coat, ran out into the moonlight, and began to dance.

“You lunatics!” A voice at Ruth’s elbow woke her from her dream with a start, and she turned to stare at Joy, who stood in a low doorway near the chapter-house.

“I’m sure we’re not! We were feeling most poetical!” Jen said indignantly, slipping on her coat again. “Why did you go and spoil my jig? Where have you been, anyway?”

“In the sacristy. I heard your pipe,” Joy said abruptly.

“Oh! But what is there to do in there, all in the dark?”

“Tisn’t dark to-night. I was sitting up in the rose window. I always have sat there, ever since I was a kid,” Joy said briefly.

As Ruth followed Joy to see the great rose window, and then was led to the dormitory, the refectory, the Abbot’s garden, and every corner of the ruins, she kept hearing the high sweet notes of the pipe, as Jen walked round and round the cloisters and poured out country-dances, morris times, jigs, and folk-song airs.

“Rosamunda, if you’ve put black beetles in my bed, you may just go and take them out again,” Jen said suggestively, as they entered the hall.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Rosamund jeered.

“What’s she been doing, Maidie?”

“We heard the pipe,” Maidlin said evasively. “Were you dancing in the Abbey?”

“Only a little jig or two,” and Jen went leaping up the stairs to find the traces of Rosamund’s vengeance. “Come and help me, Ruth!”

They searched Jen’s room together, but found bed, nightdress, and wardrobe untouched. “Rosamunda’s decided to be original!” Jen said grimly. “She’s sniggering downstairs all the time, of course!”

“Perhaps she’s done nothing,” Ruth suggested.

“And means me to spend all night looking for it, you mean? ’Tis possible!” Jen said sadly. “She’s quite capable of it. But how are we to know?”

Rosamund, cross-questioned by Jen, asserted that she had “done nothing at all to the room or bed.”

“Well, what have you done to anything of mine?” Jen demanded, suspicious and indignant, but vague.

“Go and find out!” Rosamund retorted.

“Stop squabbling, you two!” Joy said, her tone peremptory, and went to her piano.

As she listened to the music and gazed at Joy, Ruth’s thoughts were busy. First with Rosamund; what had the monkey done to tease Jen, who was looking worried and anxious still? Then with Jen herself; such a queer medley of teasing schoolgirl and thoughtful grown-up, neither one nor the other for very long at a time. Then with Joy; Ruth felt she would give anything to know; to go up to Joy at the piano and say, “Are you going to marry that man?”

Jen, with a sudden idea which proved all too correct, strode across the big hall and upstairs to her room. In a corner lay her attaché case, ready for the morning. She opened it suspiciously; then, with a yell of wrath, sprang to look in her drawers. And then she went flying downstairs to hurl her full weight on Rosamund, who sprang to get behind Maidlin.

“My beautiful overalls! All smutty and dirty! And I must have them tomorrow for school!”

Rosamund was behind the settle by this time, but Jen caught her by one yellow plait and hauled her out, both protesting vehemently.

“We left you one clean set!” Maidlin cried, identifying herself with Rosamund quite unnecessarily, for she was innocent in the matter.

“But you’ve got to find them!” Rosamund jeered triumphantly. “And the sooner you start the better! They’re somewhere in the house; I’ll tell you that much!”

Joy had risen from the piano with a resigned air. "What are you silly children scrapping about?" she demanded.

Jen poured out her tale of woe. "And I don't know where the infant lunatic has put the one clean pinny she says she's left me! It will be all crushed, too."

"'Tisn't crushed! It's all right. But you've got to find it," Rosamund insisted.

"We'll all help, Jenny-Wren," said Joy.

She, Ruth, and Jen searched the house from attic to cellar, but Rosamund had done her work well, and it was only after long and hard search that the cooking apron was found, still carefully folded and beautifully smooth and fresh, in the bottom of a hat-box under Maidlin's Sunday hat.

"Mind this, Rosamunda!" and Joy turned on the culprit, while Jen lifted out her property tenderly from the box. "You'll pay for the laundrying of those overalls yourself. I'll take it off your pocket-money."

"Oh, rot!" Jen said cheerfully. "Never mind old Joy! It's not her business; they're my overalls. I'm not going to have you paying my laundry bills; not likely!"

"Jen, you're ridiculous!" Joy said indignantly. "She ought to be made to pay for fooling about with your things!"

"All right, Joy dear! When it's your things, you can make her pay up," Jen said soothingly. "I shouldn't be a bit surprised if it were yours next."

"But it's bad for her character. I'm supposed to be bringing the child up."

"Auntie!" said Rosamund promptly.

"You might do this for me, Ros!" Jen's tone was commanding. "Come and collect all those rags you've messed up, and remove them from my room!" and she marched away, carrying the rescued overall.

Joy and Maidlin went downstairs together, and Ruth followed the other two to offer to help fold the soiled aprons. So she heard the words with which Jen turned on Rosamund, as soon as they had entered her room.

"You idiot, why do you go cheeking Joy to-night? Can't you see she's all on edge because that man's turned up again?"

"Oh!" said Rosamund blankly. "Is *that* what's wrong with her? She generally likes a joke. I say, Jen! What's going to happen?" and she dropped on the end of Jen's bed and gazed at her eagerly.

"I don't know! But I know it's asking for trouble to tease her just now." And then she caught sight of Ruth. "Oh!" she said blankly, in her turn. "I'd forgotten——"

"I came to ask if I could help," Ruth said swiftly. "Please don't look so upset! You haven't told me a thing I didn't know. Bidy told me just that

much; that there was somebody, and who he was, you know.”

Jen was putting away her clean overall carefully, her face very sober. “I’m glad you know that much,” she said. “I can’t tell you any more. Ros, you and Ruth had better scoot downstairs; I can fold these by myself. I only wanted a word with you! We can’t let Joy think we’re talking about her. Fly, both of you, if you love her! Tell her I’ve turned you out.”

Jen, in this grave mood, was a person to be obeyed. Ruth and Rosamund retreated without a protest, and glanced at one another out in the corridor; then went tactfully down to the hall to ask Joy to play folk-songs for them to sing.

“That was something like!” Rosamund said warmly, when the sing-song was over. “We shan’t have time for this to-morrow night! Prep.—ugh! Thanks awfully, Joy! You’re a dear, after all. I’m sorry I behaved like a pig. I will try to be a better child to you after this!”

“There’s room for improvement!” Joy informed her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RUTH'S VALENTINE

That night before she fell asleep, Ruth heard a door close very gently; and wondered wistfully if Joy had been in Jen's room, sitting on her bed to brush her hair and talk about Sir Andrew. How she would have rejoiced to share their confidence! Perhaps her turn would come, she thought hopefully.

It came on Thursday, when Joy had driven off to town to take a few of the Pixie's crippled children from the East End slums for their country outing.

On Thursday after tea, having seen that Rosamund was practising hard and Maidlin was busy with her prep., Jen caught Ruth and drew her into her room.

"I want somebody to talk to; aren't you dying for a talk?" she asked coaxingly.

"I'll love it! Is she going to marry him?" Ruth went straight to the point.

Jen dropped on the hearthrug before the blazing fire. Ruth switched off the light and joined her.

"My dear, she doesn't know herself," Jen said seriously.

"Oh! Can't she make up her mind? Then she can't love him enough," Ruth said decidedly.

"That's what I said. But she says she's been missing him a *lot* all the autumn! It's fearfully awkward for her. For so many things she'd like to marry him so much. You see," Jen explained, "it would be just what she'd like—to settle down here, or next door, and live here all her life, and join up the Manor and the Hall and all their garden. It's just ideal. But she can't trust her own feelings. She can't tell whether it's Sir Andrew or the Manor she wants to marry. She's too honest to marry him unless she's sure she loves him. She isn't sure yet. That's how we stand!"

Ruth sat gazing into the fire. "He'll have to wait," she said at last. "He'll have to go away again. Joy's right to wait till she's sure. Does he know just how she feels?"

"Not the whole of it, I think. She'll need to have it out with him, and she's dreading it. You saw how she put off going to call there. But Mrs. Shirley says they must go to-morrow, so we'll see if anything happens then."

The thing that happened was unexpected. Joy went with her aunt reluctantly, but came home in radiant high spirits. She had avoided any talk

with Sir Andrew, and had found a new interest.

“Ruth! Where’s Ruth? Ruth, do you think Mary-Dorothy would do something for me?”

“Sure she would; anything you like to ask, if she can! She’ll be delighted to be asked,” Ruth said promptly.

“I want her club kiddies to give a show,” Joy said eagerly, sitting on the arm of a settle in the big hall and explaining to the four younger girls, who crowded round. “It’s to please Lady Marchwood. I’d want it to be very, *very* good! Lady Marchwood has some friends who are keen on a children’s playhour in North London, but they’ve never done any folk-dancing. She asked if I could get some friends to give a show, to let them see what it’s like. Mary-Dorothy’s the only person I know who has a children’s club. You’ve seen them, Jenny-Wren; would they be good enough?”

“With a few extra practices, at definite dances, I think they might be,” Jen said eagerly.

“Oh, she’d do it! She’ll love to be asked,” Ruth said quickly.

“If I were in town, I’d help,” Jen said wistfully. “I think someone should explain they’ve only been at it for a few months, Joy. Will you be there yourself?”

“Oh, rather! I’ll do all that. I thought I might do a jig, to make a change.”

“They’d love that!” Ruth exclaimed.

“I don’t know,” Jen said doubtfully. “Do you think you should, Joy? Wouldn’t it be better for it to be just the children?”

“Sir Andrew asked me to dance something,” Joy said shortly.

Jen raised her eyebrows, but said no more. “You’d better ask Mary-Dorothy at once. When is it to be?”

“In about a month. If she promises, Lady Marchwood will get the date fixed with her people. I’ll write to-night,” said Joy.

As Ruth had foreseen, Mary promised her help gladly, and was obviously delighted and proud to have been asked.

Every detail of that visit to Joy remained with Ruth throughout her life as chief among the delights of her first months in England. The Hall itself was such a fulfilment of her dreams of the Manor houses of the old country; she came to understand and sympathise fully with Joy’s love for her beautiful home. Joy was a difficult hostess at times, her thoughts obviously burdened; she forgot her guest occasionally, and apologised later. But where there was so much to interest her, Ruth never felt neglected or bored. She chose a Thursday for her return to town, that being Joy’s “cripple day,” as she called it; and was whirled homewards in the little car very early in the morning. Ruth had called at the offices below the flat to leave her suitcase, so had no need to hurry back there, knowing Mary and Biddy would be out

at work for the day. So she met them for lunch instead, and demanded a latchkey so that she could get in and have their tea and toast ready.

“How well you’re both looking! February seems to suit you!” she said.

“We can certainly return the compliment! The country seems to have suited you! I’m so glad you’ve had such a good time,” Mary said warmly.

“We’re dying to hear all about it!” Bidy cried.

“We’re fearfully busy, Ruth,” said Mary, her face lighting up. “There’s shoals of work waiting for you!—preparing for Joy’s show, you know.”

“But what about your book, Mary?” Ruth asked severely. “That mustn’t suffer!”

“No, but it can wait. It must wait! If we’re to do this for Joy, we must do it well,” Mary said definitely.

“Or Mary will know the reason why! Ruth, what have you been buying at Farnham?” Bidy burst out. “There’s a huge crate waiting for you!”

“Oh, have they come? Then I must go home and unpack them! I’m dying to see them!” Ruth exclaimed.

“So are we! Your dress came last night. I wanted to open it; I was sure it would be getting crushed! But Mary said that was only an excuse, and the Pixie knew how to pack frocks without crushing them by this time,” Bidy said indignantly. “We’re aching to see it.”

“So am I! I’m aching worse than you! I’m going right home now to unpack all my treasures!”

Ruth bought mimosa and white narcissus on her way home, and a big cake for tea. She rummaged in Mary’s linen cupboard till she found a large white cloth to cover the whole table. Then, with hammer and chisel, she attacked the crate, and lifted out its contents.

It was the green ware which had attracted her, knowing, as she did, the plans Mary and Bidy had made for their sitting-room. But the pieces of pottery she arranged on the tea-table, after a careful loving polish to each to bring up the full sheen of its glowing colour, were not for herself. She drew a long breath of excitement and delight.

By a happy chance Mary and Bidy met on the stairs that night; or rather, Bidy came flying up just behind Mary and caught her at the door. “I ran all the way, so that I shouldn’t be left behind!” she panted. “You shan’t go seeing Ruth’s things without me!”

“Come in!” Ruth called, cheerily if a little nervously, and came to meet them in the silky hand-woven frock, of the vivid emerald of a spring beech leaf, patterned in the russet of autumn.

“Oh, I *do* like it!” Bidy cried.

“Ruth, it’s lovely!” Mary said warmly.

“It’s very comfy, and beautifully finished, and so easy and simple to put on!”

Then a shriek from Biddy cut her short. “Ruth! Mary! The table—look!”

Mary stood and gazed at the green and white and yellow table, her colour going and then coming again.

Ruth spoke swiftly, her eyes fixed anxiously on Mary. “I simply had to buy them, and I can’t choose for ourselves till Mother comes. I shall take her to the factory, of course. These are just to go on with. Mary, you mustn’t mind. I loved buying them, and I’ve loved arranging them, and I’ll love washing and polishing them every day, and I’ve loved planning them for you; and—and it’s just because I’m so glad to be here with you, and it’s Valentine’s Day and they’re my present to you and Biddy. You do like them, don’t you, Mary?”

“Like them?” Mary said dazedly. “They’re beautiful! but it isn’t right, Ruth——”

“It must be, when it makes me feel so good. Jen was in love with them; she told me to tell you she’s coming to tea with you as soon as she can escape from the clutches of school. Won’t you examine them and talk about them while I get ready a little treat for tea?”

“A little *treat!*” said Mary. “A *little* treat! Ruth, the whole room looks different. We could never thank you enough! You know there’s nothing we’d have liked half so well!”

“Then let’s settle down to enjoy them and be happy about it,” Ruth said cheerfully. “Now take your coat off, Mary; and then look at each pot separately!” and she hurried out to the kitchen.

It was indeed a festive meal. Mary pulled herself together and poured the tea from the quaint green pot, round and low and flat in shape, with great enjoyment. Biddy gloated over the individual egg dishes, the green and yellow plates, the bulgy milk jug. Ruth revelled in their delight and in the success of her “Valentine,” and responded graciously when Biddy drank her health and called for a speech.

When the green “pots” had been washed and polished tenderly for the first time—Ruth wearing Mary’s big overall because she refused to take off her beautiful dress—Mary produced piles of coloured print and cotton from a cupboard and spread them on the table. “Children’s pinafores,” she explained. “For the show, Ruth. It was Jen’s idea; did she tell you? They haven’t party frocks, and some of the things they come in would never do. So Jen suggested coloured overalls, quite simple, but bright and pretty. The club leaders liked the idea, for they want to give a show for the parents and their own friends soon; so they provided the material, and everybody’s

helping to make them up. These are our share; we knew we could count on you!”

“Right-o! Give me a pretty one! Do we all sit round and sew? Then I’ll tell you about Jen at school, and Joy and her Sir Andrew, while we make buttonholes!”

Ruth went with Mary and Biddy the following evening, to watch the practice and form her own opinion. Mary was sure of what she wanted and was very gentle with the children; but Biddy, looking very official in her tunic, and, to Ruth’s vast amusement, with her hair put up for the occasion to make her look really *old*, was stern and commanding, and shouted her orders like a drill-sergeant. The children all worked well, and seemed to Ruth to be very good already; but Mary was not satisfied, and pulled them up continually on small points.

“They’re all putting a tremendous lot of work into it!” Ruth said to herself, as she watched, and wondered that Mary could be so good a teacher. “I hope Joy will realise, and be properly grateful! I shall have to see that she does. It’s sure to be a success! It couldn’t help it, after the way she and Biddy have worked.” And Ruth looked forward to the evening of the show without much misgiving, not nervous as Mary was, but with much anticipation, more and more sure that “the event of the season,” as Biddy called it, would be a triumphant success.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“THE EVENT OF THE SEASON”

The night of “the event of the season” came at last, early in March, after one or two postponements and changes of date to suit the various interested parties. Joan and her husband and baby were staying at the Hall, to the joy of the grandmother, the godmother, and Ros and Maidie, who claimed to be adopted aunts; so Joy could be away from home for a week or two. Released from her usual attendance upon Mrs. Shirley, she accepted an invitation from Lady Marchwood to spend a short time with her in town, and postponed her own share of the baby-worship till later.

The children’s demonstration was one of the first events of her visit to town. She came to tea with Mary, Ruth, and Biddy; admired the green pottery and exclaimed over Ruth’s green frock; approved of the children’s coloured pinafores, and talked over the plans for the evening.

“Isn’t Joy worked up about it?” was Biddy’s comment, when she had gone. “I never saw her more thrilled about anything! I suppose that man will be there, and that’s the reason.”

“If her friends are all going to be there, she naturally wants it to be very good,” Mary said nervously.

“Don’t worry, Mary! It will be all right,” Ruth said hastily, seeing that Mary’s nervousness was increasing. “After the first two dances or so, no one will criticise anything. They’ll be enjoying it all too much. There’s only one thing I don’t like about it,” she added, “and that’s Joy dancing a jig. It hardly seems to fit in. It’s a children’s show; the whole reason of it is to show what children can do. A jig by a grown-up seems out of place. It almost looks like swank.”

“Joy doesn’t mean it so,” Mary said quickly. “And she’ll look charming doing it, Ruth. They’ll like it.”

“You’ll wear your white frock, Mary-Dorothy?” Ruth asked anxiously, when it was time to dress for the great event. “You’re not going in that dull old grey thing. I won’t allow it!”

“Oh, don’t you think the grey would be better? It’s quieter,” Mary urged. “I don’t want to look showy. The white’s all right for a party, when I’m going to dance myself and everybody else is in light things; but for an occasion like this I’d rather wear the darker frock. I shall be only in the

background, looking after the children. I don't matter; nobody's going to look at me."

"Oh, rot!" Ruth said briskly. "You've done all the work. You can't funk the thanks! And when you see what a thumping success it is, you'll be so bursting with pride that you'll want to stand in the middle of the floor, and pat your chest and say, 'Alone I did it!'"

"I'd simply hate it!" Mary said warmly. "And I didn't do it alone. You've done as much as I have; and Jen helped a lot, too."

"We'll come to the rescue, if Joy gets too effusive," Ruth promised. "If we think you're getting too much of it, we'll create a diversion somehow. But, of course, you must wear your white frock and look as pretty as ever you can, Mary-Dorothy."

"You will sit at the back, and be 'audience,' and tell us what people say, won't you?" Biddy begged, as they entered the hall surrounded by two dozen excited small children. "Mary's going to take charge in the dressing-room and send out the right sets in their turns; you know the row kids make when they're worked up! Mary says she couldn't bear to watch; she'd be so fearfully nervous. But we want to know how it looks from the back, and if people seem pleased; and that's where you come in!"

"I'll go right to the back, and I'll watch every single thing, including Mary's tour of the platform, and I'll tell you every word and every comment I hear," Ruth promised.

Her sense of discomfort over Joy's morris jig, forgotten in the excitement of meeting and travelling with the children, returned as she sat watching the show. After several country-dances, some by all the children and some by the separate sets, Joy came out alone from her place beside Lady Marchwood on the platform. She wore a pretty blue dancing-frock, with ribbons and touches of bronze embroidery which matched her flaming hair; and with big handkerchiefs in her hands, began to dance "Princess Royal." She looked beautiful and she danced beautifully, and the tumult of applause at the end seemed to justify her, and sent her back, with heightened colour and gratified eyes, to dance "Jockie to the Fair." But Ruth's unsatisfied feeling remained.

"Somehow that morris seems out of place! It's a children's display. It draws all the attention to Joy and away from the children, too. That hardly seems the thing. And I shouldn't think it was very good for Joy. They're all congratulating her and raving about her dancing. She'll think no end of herself after this," and she knit her brows as she looked at the delighted crowd on the platform, all thanking Joy so warmly.

"Who's the pretty red-haired girl who danced alone?" asked a man behind. "Club leader, or something? I suppose she has taught the kiddies?"

“Oh, I expect so,” said his wife vaguely. “She has obviously organised the show. See, there’s Sir Andrew Marchwood talking to her now; he’s introducing her to those people who came with the chairman.”

“This won’t do!” Ruth said uneasily to herself. “I can’t butt in and tell them Joy’s done none of the work, but she seems to be getting all the credit for it! Mary is an idiot, keeping out of sight like this! She ought to be on the platform. People can’t even see her; half the time she’s outside with the children!—Biddy!” as Biddy collected the ribbons at the end of the dance.

But Joy from the platform, was calling to Biddy. “Let us have a few more turns of that, please! Sir Andrew says it was over too soon,” and the audience broke into warmly-approving applause.

Mary came forward from her corner, flushed with the effort and with the excitement and strain of the evening. “The children are getting tired, Joy. Do you think it’s wise? If they’re overtired, they’ll begin to forget.”

“Oh, a little more won’t hurt them!” Joy said easily. “Kiddies can always keep it up a little longer. Give them the ribbons again, Biddy!”

Mary shrank back, doubtful and disapproving, and the dance began again.

Ruth was staring indignantly from her place at the back. “Joy had Mary out of her corner at last, and yet she never dragged her up on to the platform! How long is she going to leave it? Mary will never go unless she’s made to. Has Joy forgotten all about her?”

Ruth, as hot and breathless as the dancing children, slipped out of her seat as the dancers trooped away; she could not have sat still for another moment without giving vent to her indignation. But she was glad she had restrained herself. Who was going to believe, on the word of a stranger, that the whole credit for the show was due to the quiet person in the background? Joy, with her vivid blue frock and flaming red hair, was so much more noticeable!

“Biddy!” It was ten minutes’ interval, and Mary and Biddy were serving much-needed lemonade and biscuits to the children in the dressing-room. “Biddy, has Mary been introduced to Lady Marchwood yet?”

Biddy laughed. “No, she’s trying to escape. You know what she is. Do you think it’s going well, Ruth? Are people pleased?”

“Delighted! They all love it. I’ll tell Mary; it will cheer her up.”

“Is it all right, Ruth?” Mary asked nervously; she, like Biddy, had only one thought—the success of the evening. “How does it look from the back? There’s been nothing very bad so far, has there?”

“Old thing, it’s going splendidly! You needn’t worry; they’ll enjoy anything now. The kids have risen to the occasion like little sports!” Ruth said encouragingly.

Joy appeared in the doorway. "Mary! Is Mary here? Where has she got to?"

"Oh, so she's remembered at last! Better late than never!" Ruth said aloud.

Mary looked up, flushed and nervous; to go out and be presented to the visitors might be her duty, but it would be an ordeal and no pleasure, and she was very tired. "Here, Joy! Do you think it's been all right so far?"

"Yes, jolly good. Everybody loves it. But I came to see if they could go on again almost at once? They aren't getting done up, are they? The Countess has a long ride out into the country, and she doesn't want to be late."

"The Countess! *Dear* me! Which is the Countess? I didn't know we were so highly honoured!" Biddy cried, half mocking, half in earnest.

"She's quite fascinated. Thinks it's so good for the children, and will make them so *graceful*! She's the pretty one in yellow, talking to Sir Andrew. And they want me to do another jig; do you think Bampton 'Lumps' would be best, or 'Ladies Pleasure'?"

"Oh, 'Ladies Pleasure'! They'll be thrilled by the kick-jumps, and yours are smashing, Joy!" cried Biddy.

"I should do 'Lumps,'" Mary said hurriedly. "Kick-jumps are all very well in a class, when you're in a tunic, but it is a man's dance, Joy! A girl looks beautiful doing Bampton."

"Think of Madam! Yes, I believe you're right, Mary-Dorothy," and Joy regretfully put aside the thought of showing off the more sensational movements. "I'll do 'Lumps,' then; and perhaps 'None-so-Pretty,' if they want two. They won't criticise my galleys!"

"I wouldn't do one with galleys in it. They're for men," Mary ventured.

"My dear, they're *all* for men!" Joy retorted crushingly. "Let's start again! The kids have rested long enough, haven't they?"

"They're getting very tired," said Mary. "You must excuse them if anything goes wrong."

"Oh, nothing will! They're jolly good. But if we find it's getting late, you could cut out one or two dances, if they seem tired. I'll say we're ready, then."

She whirled away, followed by the admiring eyes of the children, who had watched the morris jigs spellbound, and felt honoured and uplifted by the momentary nearness of the radiant figure.

"We won't cut out anything, after all our work!" Biddy cried indignantly. "Joy can cut out her jigs, if it's too long!"

"Yes, that would be only fair," Mary said soberly. "The children would be disappointed if we left anything out."

“She *has* forgotten Mary!” Ruth said, under her breath. “Joy, how can you? There’s no excuse! The interval was late enough; but Mary and Biddy both ought to have been introduced, as the teachers of the children, whether they liked it or not. She’s forgotten all about them.”

And she watched the new set of dances with heavy foreboding in her heart.

Tired though they were, the children danced well. The entertainment was well planned, with good contrast in the dances. How Mary and Biddy had worked and worried over the programme to gain just this result, altering it time after time till they were satisfied with the sequence of the dances!

Ruth was standing near Biddy now; the comments of the crowd had been too irritating to her peace of mind, and she had refused to go back to her corner. “I shall say something, something strong and bad, if I do!” she had said to herself.

As the programme drew to a close, and all still went well, Mary began to enjoy herself at last, and her anxious face grew less set and strained. Biddy, with leisure to think as the burden of responsibility lightened, turned suddenly to Ruth.

“Ruth, I suppose somebody’s told all those swanks on the platform that Mary’s done all the work of this show?”

“Oh, of course,” Ruth said hastily. “Joy’s sure to have explained. She’ll say something to the rest of the crowd presently.”

“I jolly well hope she will! For it looks awfully much as if it were Joy’s show!” Biddy had awakened to the true position at last, and her jealousy for Mary’s credit, once aroused, grew with lightning speed.

“You go and tell them, if you think they don’t know,” Ruth said rashly, and would have given much to be able to recall the words the next moment.

“I’d love to. But Mary would never forgive me. I do hope people understand,” Biddy said gloomily.

Ruth could say nothing to comfort her. She could only hope that the inevitable vote of thanks would put everything right in a few minutes.

Then the children danced “Sellenger’s Round,” and the show was over, and all had gone very well. Mary’s tension relaxed, and she sat down limply, with a sigh of relief, while the applause broke out again and again.

The chairman rose to make a few remarks. He thanked Miss Shirley, “who has provided this excellent entertainment for us”; he congratulated her on the success of the evening and spoke of the pleasure it had given him personally; he said a few words of appreciation of her own beautiful dancing; he hoped the children of the neighbourhood would soon be dancing as prettily as those they had just been watching.

Joy, smiling graciously, declined in laughing embarrassment to make a speech. Teased by those around her on the platform to “say just a few words,” she rose, flushed and prettier than ever, and acknowledged the thanks gracefully. Then she sat down, to be complimented again, this time on her “charming little speech.”

From close beside the platform, a hurt girlish voice rang out, clearly heard while the pianist hunted wildly for the music of the National Anthem. “Aren’t you going to say anything about Mary? She’s done *all* the work!”

“Biddy! Oh, how could you?” Mary groaned, and, white and shaking, caught Biddy’s arm and dragged her down into her seat.

Ruth caught her breath; she had grown cold with horror as Joy sat down. “Good for Biddy! But oh, how awful of her! Joy will never forgive her!”

Joy, crimson, was on her feet again. She was not in the least shy; her diffidence in speaking had been merely polite. “I ought, of course, to have explained that the children have been trained in their dances by Miss Devine. I thought that was understood. We are all much obliged to Miss Devine for the trouble she has taken.”

It was little enough, but so far as outsiders were concerned it covered up the awkward moment. There was more applause, and Mary, shrinking and distressed, anxious only to disappear with Biddy out of Joy’s sight, stood up in her place and bowed, then hastily turned to beg the pianist to play the chord. The audience rose also, and the incident was over.

Biddy had fled to the dressing-room, white and angry. As Ruth reached Mary, Joy passed them in the crowd, and paused.

“You’d better keep your sister at home till she learns how to behave in public, Mary Devine!” Joy flung at Mary and Ruth in a low tone, and passed on to Lady Marchwood’s car.

Mary, quivering under the blow, yet drew herself up suddenly. “Biddy wasn’t *all* to blame. I think she had some excuse,” she said, to Joy’s relentless back, with a brave attempt at dignity.

But Joy did not turn back.

“I’ll sit down for a minute, Ruth,” Mary said breathlessly. “Will you—will you ask Biddy to see to the children?”

“Where is the little girl who spoke up so pluckily?” a voice asked behind Ruth. “I think I have met her before.”

She turned quickly, and Mary looked up with startled eyes, to face Sir Andrew Marchwood.

“I want to thank her,” he said, with blunt ignoring of the delicacy of the position. “We had had no opportunity to thank this lady for all her work. It was, of course, the fault of the chairman, who failed miserably in his duty. I apologise for his carelessness, and wish to add my thanks to Miss Shirley’s.

I should like to thank the little girl also for speaking up so bravely. It was not an easy thing for a child to do.”

Mary’s eyes met his. “It wasn’t a very polite thing to do,” she said. “I’m very sorry about it.” She had pulled herself together in a moment, with a plucky effort which did not escape him. His keen eyes, trained to notice every smallest detail, had seen she was white and shaking, and he understood, more fully than she realised.

“You must forgive her. She was thinking of you,” he said. “She is your sister? It was only natural, if a little unusual. I hope you will not scold her. Tell her I wished you to thank her for me. May I congratulate you again on the success of the evening and the splendid results of all your work? I know Miss Shirley would wish me to do so.”

Then he passed out of the hall, and Mary and Ruth looked at one another. “He understands. Oh, I hope he isn’t disappointed in Joy!” Mary whispered.

“Mary dear, I’ve been dying to get hold of her and shake her all evening!” Ruth said vigorously. “But you mustn’t be too cut up, Mary. It’s only that she was excited because he was here. She’d have remembered tomorrow, and come round to thank you.”

“Yes—oh, yes! I didn’t care. But she’ll never forgive us now,” Mary said hopelessly. “If only Bidy—oh, if *only* Bidy had been content to wait!”

“Yes, but Bidy had been boiling for some time for your sake; and at last she boiled over. Mary, old thing, can’t you forget it all till we get home? We *must* see to those children!”

Mary rose hastily. “Yes, we must. I’m an idiot. The bus will be waiting. I’ll go and help Bidy.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MARY'S LETTER

Biddy met Mary nervously and shrank from her look. She was hastily getting the children into their coats and shoes. Mary went to help without a word, and for the moment Biddy felt relieved.

But when they had driven with the children to their usual hall and dismissed them to their homes, and Ruth, heeding no remonstrance, had hailed a taxi, and they were speeding homewards together, and still Mary said nothing, lying back in her corner worn out and silent, Biddy grew uneasy. She knew she had done wrong, and she wanted to justify herself. She felt defiant, and wanted to say what she thought of Joy. But Mary was gazing out at the lighted streets and did not meet her eyes. Biddy sat in gloomy silence till they reached home.

“You sit by the fire, Mary-Dorothy,” Ruth commanded. “It will be hot in two minutes. Biddy and I will get the supper ready.”

She caught Biddy alone in the kitchen. “Don’t worry her to-night. She can’t judge, and neither can you. It will all look different in the morning.”

Biddy gave her a scared, defiant look. “Is she wild with me? Joy was hateful, Ruth!”

“But you made it ever so much worse. Mary feels you’ve made it quite impossible to smooth things over, as she would have liked to do.”

Mary was so obviously determined not to talk about Joy that there was nothing to do but postpone or ignore the whole matter. She questioned Ruth during supper on many points, as to how different dances had looked from the back of the hall, how the colours of the pinafores had blended, if the timing had seemed good, and so on; and Ruth talked hard, and even drew Biddy on to give her opinions.

As they rose from the table, Mary said wearily, “We’ll get to bed as soon as we’ve washed up. Oh, yes, I’m going to help. If you’ll fill the bottles, Biddy, we’ll all go to bed in a few minutes. There’s just one little thing I have to do.”

The feeling in the flat was so tense, they were all three so silent, and yet so expectant of something about to happen, that Biddy was glad when she could escape to bed.

“I’ll come in ten minutes,” Mary said briefly, speaking for the first time since supper. “I’m not quite ready. Won’t you go, too, Ruth?”

“What is it you’re going to do?” Ruth had guessed at the answer, however.

Mary faced her steadily. “Write a note to Joy, apologising for Biddy’s rudeness. She must get it in the morning.”

Ruth pushed her gently into a chair beside the table. “Must you, Mary? Can’t you leave it? Joy was in the wrong.”

Mary’s face quivered. “She didn’t mean it. She isn’t unkind really, Ruth. You know she’s kind. In the excitement she had no time to think, that was all. She’d have remembered afterwards, and been sorry. Don’t you see?”—her voice broke—“don’t you see how awful I feel? Biddy asked her to thank me! She’ll think I was expecting it; that I was proud and offended—with *her!*”

“You had every right to be,” Ruth urged.

“I wasn’t. I hadn’t thought of it. I did it all to please and help her, not because I wanted to be thanked. For Biddy to say *that!*—I couldn’t sleep unless I had apologised.”

“Write it, then, and I’ll run down to the post with it.”

“You’re a dear, Ruth!” and Mary fetched her pen, and wrote swiftly for a few moments.

“That’s all,” she said briefly, as she folded it. “I’m not going to discuss the matter unless she wishes it. I’ve merely said I realise that Biddy was unpardonably rude, and I wish to apologise on her behalf, and that she spoke without thinking and when she was excited and overtired. We can say more later on, if necessary. Ruth, I had to write! I don’t want to quarrel with them all,” and she looked at her cousin anxiously for sympathy.

“Yes, I see,” Ruth said gently. “It keeps the door open between you, anyway; or if it’s closed, it will have to be closed by Joy. Yes, you’re right, Mary. I’ll post your letter.”

“Leave the door open, so that Biddy won’t hear,” said Mary, and was sitting by the fire when Ruth came back.

“Won’t you tell Biddy you’ve written, Mary?”

“I may, if it seems best. But not to-night. To-night it would only make her very angry, and she’d want to argue. And, Ruth, I’d rather not tell her either what Joy said about her or Sir Andrew’s message; not at present.”

“I told her what he said,” Ruth said quickly. “I’m sorry. Do you mind very much? She said he was an old dear, and she hoped he’d marry some one much nicer than Joy!”

“Oh, well, it doesn’t matter. He told us to give her the message. She met him a year ago, at the Hall. But don’t tell her about Joy; she didn’t hear, and it would only make her very angry.”

“She’s quite angry enough,” said Ruth sombrely. And then, doubtfully, hesitating how far she dare go—“Mary, it was hard lines! It spoiled your evening. And it was such a splendid show. The children danced beautifully, and everything went so well. You ought to be feeling so happy and relieved. Jen will be delighted when she hears how good it all was. I’m so very sorry this has happened!”

Mary looked at her, and tried to speak. Then her face dropped into her hands, and she broke down, worn out with all the strain and excitement and disappointment.

The bedroom door opened, and Biddy’s frightened face looked out. Then, with a whirl of kimono and nightdress and falling brown hair, Biddy was on her knees beside her sister.

“Mary, I’m sorry! If you mind so much, I’ll say I’m sorry!”

“I’m going to bed. Don’t forget to put out the fire, you two!” said Ruth, and retired.

“*I shan’t refer to it again!*” she said to herself. “We’ll consider the subject closed, until Joy answers Mary’s letter. Then we’ll know where we are!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A LETTER FROM JOY

Joy's reply came promptly; too soon, in fact. The letter was waiting when Mary came in from the office next day; Ruth had been gazing at it anxiously for half an hour. It was so very prompt that she felt nervous as to its contents, for it had obviously been written immediately on receiving Mary's note.

Mary went into her own room with the letter.

"You won't mention this to Bidy when she comes in, Ruth?" she begged, pausing at the door.

"Right-o! But come quickly and have your tea," Ruth said.

Mary, sitting on her bed, her hat thrown aside, read the letter, her hand shaking as the meaning reached her.

"DEAR MARY,—I can quite understand that you expected to be thanked last night, and I am sorry I forgot. But Bidy was abominably rude, and until she learns how to control herself you had better keep her at home. If excitement and tiredness can make her behave so badly, she ought not to be allowed out without a nurse and should be sent to bed at seven.

"I am,
"Yours,
"JOY SHIRLEY."

Mary sat staring at the letter. Then she looked up, her eyes dazed. It was as if Joy had struck her. Something she had cherished for a year died at that moment.

It was not the words that had hurt so. There was nothing in them to have stunned her so completely, no hint that Joy did not want to see her again, that their friendship was over. It was the cold angry tone of the letter, the feeling behind it. But one sentence did wound her acutely, and for a long time; and not, she felt, without reason. "You expected to be thanked"!

How could Joy have misunderstood so completely? How *could* she? No appreciation at all of the joy it had been to prepare that show, the delight in feeling she was helping! "Expected to be thanked!" As if she had worked for thanks!

Ruth found her still standing on the hearthrug, her head resting on her arm on the mantelpiece.

“Mary! What’s the matter? What did Joy say?” Her voice was sharp with anxiety.

Mary pulled herself together bravely, as she had done the night before. “Not very much. She’s a bit annoyed with Bidy still, of course. Have you made the tea? How good of you! I’ll come at once.”

Ruth glanced at her doubtfully, but postponed further questions, for the moment. She watched Mary during tea, and listened to her disconnected remarks on the weather, the office, her lunch, the walk home.

“Won’t you tell me about Joy’s letter, Mary?” she asked at last.

Mary’s lips quivered. “I don’t want to talk about it. But you may read the letter, if you like; and you may talk some sense to me. I don’t mind listening. But I haven’t anything to say about it yet.”

Ruth fetched the letter and read it, her face troubled. Then she dropped on the rug at Mary’s feet, and spoke quickly, while they both stared into the fire. “Mary, she doesn’t mean half as much as you think. She wrote in a hurry, still in a temper. She doesn’t mean any harm by this letter; she’s only a bit irritated with Bidy.”

“And she thinks I did it to be thanked!” the cry came from Mary’s hurt soul.

“Oh, that’s only that she doesn’t understand!”

“I know,” Mary said drearily. “That’s all. But it’s a good deal, Ruth.”

“You won’t write again? But of course not; you couldn’t.”

“There’s nothing to say. I’m not going to write and say—yes, I would like to say that!” She rose quickly and found a postcard, and scribbled a few lines on it. “I’d like to send that. I’d feel better. I hate to sit down under her letter. Will it do any harm?”

Ruth read the words thoughtfully.

“DEAR JOY,—You have misunderstood me completely. I wouldn’t have believed you could. I did not try to help you in order to be thanked. I am sorry you should have thought so.

“Yours sincerely,
MARY DEVINE.”

“I should send it,” Ruth said quietly. “You’ll feel better. It won’t do Joy any harm. I’ll post it for you.”

“Now that’s done with!” she said, when she returned. “We’ll try not to go on thinking about it, Mary. What are you going to do now? You ought to get on with your book. You’ve left it for weeks. It ought to be finished.”

“Perhaps I will. But not to-night; I’m very tired,” Mary said wearily. “But I have had one idea, and I mean to act on it,” and Mary made a brave attempt to put Joy out of her mind. “We can’t go to classes now this term. There are only three weeks before Easter. But it’s time we had some dancing for ourselves; we’re getting out of practice. I’m going to write and ask the Pixie if she’d have room for all three of us in one of her classes at Plaistow, if they’re not too far advanced.”

“That’s a gorgeous idea, Mary!” Ruth said warmly.

The Pixie’s reply came promptly. “Come to my party next Wednesday at seven o’clock, in the big gym! I’ll find you partners and tell you all about classes then. How nice to see you again!”

For the next few days Mary looked anxiously for some answer from Joy; and Ruth, watching her, saw her disappointment each day when none came.

Ruth was glad when the night of the Pixie’s party came. At least it would give Mary something new to think about!

“We don’t know very much yet,” the Pixie informed them gaily, when they arrived after what felt like a long and adventurous bus journey to Dockland. “It’s a club members’ party; just some jolly London girls and boys. We’re all beginners; but we do know how to enjoy ourselves! Come along and find your partners! We shall do very easy dances to-night. I shall teach, you know; we still have to learn dances at our parties. There are always some who don’t know them.”

Throughout the evening the three visitors found themselves “given to” one or another or “put somewhere,” as seemed best to the little mistress of ceremonies. There was no chance of dancing in a set together; she simply would not hear of it; and they went meekly, amused at their own docility, to any corner she wished.

Mary thought she had forgotten her troubles in the interest of watching the teaching, the tactful management of the crowd, the insistent breaking-up of little cliques whenever they began to form, and the scattering of bosom friends to the corners of the room; and most of all the happy, boisterous girls and lads, whose enjoyment was so infectious, whose devotion to their leader was so obvious.

But the little person saw many things, even while she taught; and in an interval, while Bidy was entertaining her latest partner with her frank opinions of book-keeping and shorthand, and Mary was drawing out a shy teacher to tell of her children in school, the Pixie turned swiftly to Ruth. “What’s the matter with her? With Mary? She isn’t happy.”

Ruth gasped a little. Then she pulled herself together. “How did you manage to guess? She isn’t showing it to-night. She’s trying not to.”

“I know. I can see that. What’s happened to her?”

“Could I have lunch with you? I’d like to tell you the story,” Ruth pleaded. “But Mary mustn’t know.”

“Right! Come on Friday, will you? I’ll book that, then,” and the Pixie dashed for her wallet, whipped out a diary, and made a hasty note. “That’s fixed up! Are you all coming to the party to-morrow night—the official party?”

“Mary says she doesn’t think she’ll go. Biddy and I want to.”

“Oh, make her come! Tell her I said she was to come! All right! You’ll tell me all about it on Friday. Now what shall we have? We must go on dancing! What would you like? Do you like ‘Jenny Pluck Pears’? Don’t know it? Oh, we’ll teach you, then. We love it,” and she called for rings of six, and set the room to dancing again.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE QUEER WAYS OF JOY

On the following evening, in the big hall in the West End, Mary and Biddy were standing together, ready to dance “Flowers of Edinburgh” and waiting for the music to begin, when Biddy slipped out of her place in the line and thrust Ruth in instead. They had agreed to take turns, as there were three of them, and Ruth had begged to be the audience for the first dance.

“I don’t want to dance this! I can’t. She’ll tell you what to do!” Biddy’s whisper came strained and hurried, and before Ruth could protest she had fled to the farthest corner of the room.

“What’s the matter with her?” Ruth began amazedly; then at the same moment she and Mary saw, and the music began.

“She won’t take any notice of us,” Ruth said swiftly, as she skipped the turning change, “and we won’t go and speak to her, naturally! Cheer up, Mary! It’s a big hall; we can easily lose ourselves in the crowd. She may never see us. Don’t let Joy Shirley spoil your party!”

“She’s spoiled Biddy’s,” said Mary, taking refuge in the obvious, for the sight of Joy in the crowded doorway, piloting Lady Marchwood towards the platform, had quite upset her mental balance.

It was easy enough during the longways dance to pretend to be ignorant of Joy’s presence; and easy enough, when the music stopped, to join Biddy in her far-away corner. But then came “Pop Goes the Weasel.” Mary and Ruth were working up the line, enjoying the running rings, when led down the middle by her “man,” Avice Everett, came Joy. She was talking to Avice, laughing as she came; and she did not notice them; but they knew that in a few more turns she must make the ring with them and “pop” under Ruth’s raised arm.

It was a difficult moment for Ruth, a horrible one for Mary.

Ruth held out her hand to “first woman,” her face grave. Mary, left standing outside the ring, looked strained and set.

Joy, catching Ruth’s hand and Avice’s, ran round and “popped” home to her place. Then, as Avice and Ruth took Mary into the ring instead, she cried, “I’ve been wanting to speak to you two, but there are such stacks of people I know here. I hope you weren’t too tired after that *shauri* last week? Have you quite got over it? It was fun, wasn’t it? I want Mary to come and tell Lady Marchwood about the children’s club. Will you, while we’re doing

the Running Set?” she called over her shoulder, as Avice skipped her out of the line.

Mary’s eyes met Ruth’s, dazed bewilderment their only expression. Ruth, gasping for breath, laughed and sprang into her new ring.

“Look here,” Ruth whispered hastily, in a corner of the dressing-room, to which they had fled. “I know you won’t believe it, but Joy hasn’t the remotest idea she hurt your feelings. She simply doesn’t understand. To her it’s all over and done with. To her, it was just a few words said when she was in a temper, and tired, and excited; and she’s forgotten all about it.”

“Forgotten!” Mary whispered dazedly.

“Mary, it’s all right about Joy!” Bidy came up eagerly, her face radiant. “I’ve been talking to her. I was mad with her at first, of course; but I suppose I was rude, and I’ve been worrying for fear she’d never speak to us again, and it would be so awful for you, when it was all my fault. But she’s as jolly as ever, so that’s all right!”

“Yes, that’s all right!” Mary said quietly, and turned away to watch the Pixie in the dance.

“I’m not going to dance this,” and Joy came up to join them, glass of lemonade in hand. “I’m dead after that last go! I say, have any of you heard from Jenny-Wren lately? Since Tuesday? Then you haven’t heard the news. She’s simply thrilled about it. The Hamlet Club met on Tuesday, and they absolutely insist on having Jen for the next Queen. They say she must wait with us till after May-Day, and then if she has to go away they’ll choose another Queen. But they’re determined to crown Jenny-Wren. If you can come for the Coronation, we’ll put you all up somehow; if not at the Hall, then in the Abbey. But you’d love to stop in the Abbey, and I know Jen will want you to be there.”

Mary flushed, but was spared the need to answer by a query from Bidy, who had been talking to a friend and had not heard the invitation. “Where’s Madam, Joy? She never comes to anything now!”

“She’s all right. I saw her this afternoon. I had to take her a parcel from Jen,” Joy regarded Bidy seriously. “She said she didn’t think she’d come to the party. She was feeling a bit tired.”

“And she isn’t teaching any classes this term!” Bidy grumbled. “I’d ask if Ruth might go to watch, if Madam was teaching anywhere, but they say she’s not. I did hope she’d be here to-night!”

“You can’t get everything you hope for,” Joy told her.

Sitting together in a crowded bus, with Bidy on another seat some distance away, Mary and Ruth snatched a few private words on the way home.

Mary's eyes met Ruth's, pathetic still in their bewilderment. "Isn't it queer?" was all she had to say.

"Joy? Yes, it seems queer to us, but we had seen only our own side of it," Ruth said vigorously. "It's as I said, Mary. She's forgotten there was any trouble. She's even asked you to the Abbey again straight away. And Biddy's happy about it. It's only you."

Mary stared out of the window at the lights of Oxford Circus, her eyes troubled and wistful. "I've lost something," she said at last. "I'm very fond of Joy. I don't want anything to come between us. But I am most awfully disappointed. And I feel something has gone that I used to have."

"Yes, but don't you think it's something you'd made yourself? Something your own imagination had created? Is it fair to blame Joy because she hasn't lived up to your picture of her?" Ruth asked, very gently.

CHAPTER TWENTY

BACK TO THE ABBEY

Entering the upstairs luncheon-room off Oxford Street with its cream-washed walls, and brown wood settles, and brown and yellow Doulton china, Ruth had been dismayed to find the Pixie in earnest talk with a man; then amazed, when he turned to see that it was Sir Andrew Marchwood. He had said good-bye at once, however, and left them to their lunch; and the Pixie explained.

“I’ve known him for some time; I know his young brother too, incidentally. Such a nice boy! He’s growing coffee in Kenya now; and Sir Andrew visits him when he goes off on his wild expeditions. He’s been telling me he’s just going off again, as soon as he can get things arranged to leave his mother for some months.”

“But—going away? But what about Joy? Oh, has she sent him away again?” Ruth forgot Mary in her intense interest in this new development.

“Joy hasn’t been consulted. She doesn’t know yet. Come and sit over here! I like this corner.”

Ruth followed her. “Please tell me more!” she begged. “Have they quarrelled?”

“Sir Andrew ought to talk to your Mary,” the Pixie said grimly. “He won’t, of course. But I fancy they’re both feeling much the same. They’ve both been loving an imaginary Joy, and they’re both up against the same problem now: do they love the real Joy well enough? Mary has to get down to it and work it out at home; he’s going away till he feels sure of himself. Till now, it was Joy who wasn’t sure; now it’s the man. He’s a *good* man!” she spoke with very definite emphasis. “I like him. Joy’s very fortunate. He thought she was all that’s beautiful and good; he made a fancy picture of her, as Mary did; and he’s been in love with it for a year. I’ve heard only to-day how he found out last week that there was another Joy; that she could be quick-tempered and forgetful and hasty, unjust to others in her own excitement. He saw through the whole of that little tragedy; he doesn’t miss much! And now——”

“Oh, I’m sorry; and Mary will be sorry!” Ruth cried. “But won’t he come back, Pixie? For I think Joy really wants him all the time.”

“Of course she loves him, but she hasn’t found it out yet! If she should happen to think she has lost him, it may help her to find out what she really

feels. He's a good man, and he loves Joy. But he's got to realise he's going to marry a real girl, with real faults, and not a fancy picture. He'd be tired of his ideal Joy, always sweet and kind and gentle, in a month; the real one will always give him plenty to think about!"

"But sometimes she's seemed so kind and thoughtful!" Ruth remonstrated.

"Ah, but that's Jenny-Wren!" the Pixie said quickly. "You must remember that they talk everything over together, and Jen supplies the understanding and keeps Joy straight. Joy tries very hard to do right and to be kind and to use her position well; and on the whole she does do very well indeed."

"Oh, she does a lot for people, we know! Yes, I see what you mean," Ruth said thoughtfully. "May I repeat all this to Mary?"

"I want you to," said the Pixie.

Mary listened thoughtfully to all Ruth had to say that evening, but made almost no comment at the time. "I like her way of looking at things. She's a dear!—as she says about so many other people. I'm sorry Sir Andrew feels like that about Joy. It may be better he should know, but I'm sorry I was the cause of his finding it out. I hope it won't be too long before he comes back to her; and I *do* hope she'll never know why he went!"

It was a week before she re-opened the subject; but she was writing busily in the meantime and the book was reaching its last chapters, so Ruth was satisfied. But one day there came a cordial letter from Joy, bringing an urgent invitation to all three to spend Easter at the Abbey, and to stay, if possible, for Jen's Coronation in the following week.

"We shan't have a corner in the Hall for you, I'm afraid," Joy wrote. "The house is going to be packed with relations. And you know what it is with a baby; bibs and bottles on every chair! Janetta takes up as much space as three grown-ups. She's really Janice, you know; but Jenny-Wren will call her Janetta. But though the house will be full, there's always the Abbey, and I know you both love it, Mary and Ruth. (I understand that Biddy is to share Rosamunda's room; I know Biddy won't mind, and Ros and Maidie have set their hearts on it.)"

Biddy was out when the letter came. Mary and Ruth read it together, since it was addressed to them both. Then they looked at one another.

"You'll go, Mary-Dorothy?" Ruth asked anxiously.

Mary gave a little laugh. "I'm beginning to see the funny side of it, Ruthie."

"The funny side?"

"Yes, of Joy's unconsciousness. She's so absolutely, blissfully ignorant of having done anything wrong. And I got so fearfully worked up about it! It

has a funny side, once you see it.”

“You have got outside it all, as I said you’d have to do!” Ruth said warmly. “Then we’ll go to the Abbey next week? Cheers!—oh, cheers! How I shall love to live in it!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

JOY IN TROUBLE

“Oh my dears!” Jen pulled Mary and Ruth and Biddy out of the train. “I’m a broken-down wreck, the shadow of my former happy self! For three solid months I’ve swotted at French and hygiene and the theory of cookery and diet, and done prep. like an infant, and practised.”

“But you’ve enjoyed it?” Ruth asked, laughing.

“Every second of it. It’s been frightful fun. But it has been a fearful swot, and I’m jolly well ready to chuck everything up and have a good time now. And if your professional literary mind objects to my school slang, Miss Devine Senior, you’ll have to stop in the Abbey and not come near me, that’s all. In fact, the purity of my speech, my beautiful English, has suffered a bad relapse, and I now talk like a kid of fifteen instead of a grown woman, as I’m convinced I did when you first knew me.”

“I can’t say I’ve noticed very much difference yet,” Mary said, her eyes on the happy face.

“How’s the book getting on? Are you going to finish it in the Abbey?” Jen asked eagerly.

Mary coloured, grateful for the real interest which had made Jen ask so soon. “To correct it, perhaps,” she said flushing.

“It’s finished?” Jen gave a shriek of delight. “Really finished? Oh, Mary-Dorothy, how wonderful! And it will be dedicated to me, won’t it?”

“It *is* dedicated to you,” Mary assured her. “Aren’t you my fairy-godmother?”

“I’ve grown two feet taller,” Jen solemnly assured Rosamund and Maidlin, who came racing up to claim Biddy.

“Crawl out of the station gate on your hands and knees, then!” Rosamund advised. “Oh, Biddums, it is joyful to see you again!” and they dragged her and the suitcases to the waiting car.

“You’ll let me read it, Mary-Dorothy?” Jen pleaded. “You wouldn’t ask me to wait months and months, until it’s published—my own book?”

“It’s really *very* good,” Ruth said earnestly.

“Of course it is. Now tell me—no, don’t tell me anything! I want to hear about the town parties, and the Pixie and her classes, and her party, and your children’s show; Joy says it was terrific! But she wants to hear, too, and she won’t be home for an hour yet.”

Jen, acting hostess for Joy, showed them their room in the Abbey with a certain wistfulness; obviously she would have liked to be staying in it herself.

“When Joan and Joy lived here, this was Joy’s bedroom,” Jen explained. “When they went to the Hall, Joan made this into a little private room for herself, where she could hide if visitors came to see the ruins while she was wandering in the Abbey. But you’ll be with us at the Hall most of the time.”

“Oh, no, we won’t!” Ruth said emphatically.

“I think we shall be here most of the time,” Mary said in delight. “I love the thought of living in the Abbey.”

“Don’t tell Joy, but we like it far better than the Hall!” said Ruth.

Jen laughed. “I feel rather like that myself. But you must come and see us sometimes. Come up to the house now, and be introduced to my goddaughter! Ruth hasn’t seen Joan yet, I suppose.”

Joan, just another Joy with her bronze hair and pretty colouring, but with deeper thoughtfulness in her eyes than Joy had ever known, was pushing her tiny red-haired daughter up and down the terrace in her pram. She greeted Mary as an old friend and Ruth as one of whom she had often heard, and proudly allowed them to look at little Janice.

“Are you really going to be the new May Queen?” Mary looked across at Jen, as they sat in the sunshine on the terrace for afternoon tea.

“The children seem to want it,” Jen’s tone was elderly and maternal, but she could not hide the gleam in her eyes and the pleased flush on her cheeks.

“They all want her, Mary-Dorothy,” said Rosamund. “But she’s going to be a brown Queen. Doesn’t it sound dingy?”

“Now, I appeal to you, Mary-Dorothy!” cried the Queen-elect. “Does brown need to be dingy? Think of your brown and gold pots! Think of the woods in autumn! Think of our moors in winter!—the most glorious soft brown velvet!”

“You’ll choose a pretty brown, of course,” Mary said warmly. “With your hair it will be lovely,” and she looked at Jen’s crown of waving yellow curls.

“I think so!” Jen said haughtily. “I shall have buttercups on my train, and I shall carry brown and yellow wallflowers from the Abbey walls.”

“Do you mind living in the Abbey?” Joan turned to Ruth. “It’s not that we haven’t a room for you at present, though we shall be much more crowded after Easter. But Jen was sure you would like the Abbey; and we didn’t want to have to ask you to change next week.”

“Oh, but we love the Abbey!” Ruth said warmly. “We’re delighted to have the chance of being there.”

“Here comes Joy!” said Maidlin, and ran to meet the new big car.

Joy waved her hand, but drove away at once to the garage. She came back presently, her arm round Maidlin.

“There’s something wrong,” Jen said hurriedly, before they were near enough to hear.

Joy said nothing of any trouble, however, and whatever it was, she was evidently bent on keeping it to herself. She greeted Mary and Ruth and Biddy warmly, if soberly, kissed Mrs. Shirley, who had come out at sound of the motor, looked at Janetta, and demanded a cup of tea from Joan.

But though she tried to talk as usual, it was plain that her thoughts were busy elsewhere. She rose presently, without any word of explanation. “I’ll go and change. Oh, by the way!” and she turned in the doorway. “Madam has a son. I forgot to tell you. I heard yesterday.”

“You *forgot?*” cried Jen, in wrathful amazement, while Joan looked up, delight and relief in her face. “Forgot to tell us!—a boy, did you say?”

“And are they both well, Joy? Did you hear any more? When was it?” Joan asked eagerly.

“Madam with a baby! Isn’t it funny to think of?” Jen said meditatively. “As funny as Cicely and Joan!”

“He’s called Roger. Both very well,” Joy answered Joan briefly. “She loved your presents, Jenny-Wren, and sent very many thanks and her love.” And she turned and went into the house, leaving them talking over this exciting piece of news.

“All the same, there’s something wrong with Joy,” Jen said anxiously to Mary and Ruth, as she walked back to the Abbey with them, while Joan put her baby to bed, and Biddy ran upstairs to the room she was to share with Rosamund. “Madam and babies are all very well, and rather thrilling when you think of them together. But what matters to us is that Joy has shut herself up in her own room, and anyone can see she’s got something on her mind. I’d give pounds to know what’s the matter!”

And though Ruth and Mary thought perhaps they could guess, they did not feel sure enough to speak.

There was a cloud over the Abbey and the Hall that night, for Joy remained silent and burdened and would not explain, and no one else could be light-hearted while she looked grave. It was so unusual, and her personality ruled the whole house so completely, that without Joy to set the pace even Jen and Rosamund were subdued, and Maidlin was miserable.

It was a state of matters that could not last very long. In desperation, after dinner, Jen took courage and forced her way into Joy’s room.

“Let me in, ‘Traveller’s Joy.’ It’s only your old Jenny-Wren. Now, you poor dear, tell me all about it!”—for Joy was sitting by the open window, staring out at the pear-blossom in the orchard with hopeless eyes.

An hour later, Jen ran through the twilight of the garden, through the old Abbey gate, the Abbot's garden, and the tresant passage, and sped like a white ghost across the cloister garth.

"Mary-Dorothy! Ruth! Are you in bed? Then come out and talk to me! I must have someone," she said feverishly, "and you're best." She caught up cushions and a rug, and spread them on the step leading from the cloister down to the garth. "Put on your coats, and lend me a woolly or something. I forgot to get mine. Thanks! Now listen!" when they were seated and waiting eagerly.

"Has Joy told you her trouble?" Mary asked anxiously.

"It's that man. Being in love's a fearful disease!" Jen sighed. "I hope I never catch it. On the way home in the car, his mother told Joy he was going away again. And this time it's different. Last time Joy sent him away for a little while, till she would feel sure about herself; but she knew he'd come back. This time he hasn't told her he's going; or said anything about coming back. He's just going to come and say good-bye in a day or two. And she doesn't know if he will ever come back. She thinks perhaps she's been too long making up her mind, and he's tired of waiting; and now she knows she wants him. The question is, how can we stop him?"

"You're sure she does care?" Mary asked thoughtfully.

"Oh, she cares right enough. If he'd come and ask her now, they'd be engaged straight away. If only we could tell him! But how can we? Mary-Dorothy, what can we do? What would girls in a book do?"

But Mary was strangely unhelpful. Gazing across the garth at the arched doorway and windows of the chapter-house, she said slowly, "It seems to me we can only wait. None of us can go and ask him to ask Joy again."

"She says she'll do it herself!" Jen said darkly. "Of course she won't; Joan won't let her. But she did say she thought she'd tell him she'd changed her mind. The trouble is, she thinks perhaps he's changed his. Joy's got an awful fear that he's been avoiding her because he's discovered he doesn't like her enough; and now he's going away rather than say so."

"She'll know, when he comes to say good-bye," said Mary. "Besides, he'll tell her; he's a decent sort."

"I won't answer for Joy," Jen said gloomily. "She does things in a hurry and thinks about them afterwards. You aren't very helpful, Mary-Dorothy! Can't your imagination see any way out of the mess? Has he got to go off indefinitely, leaving Joy miserable?"

"I'd like to think it over. After all, you wouldn't expect to do anything to-night," Mary pointed out.

"Well, hardly," Jen admitted. "But I did want to tell somebody. Don't tell Joy I came, though!"

“Could you wait a moment?” and as Jen rose, Mary disappeared into the little bedroom.

She returned in a moment, and handed a flat parcel to Jen. “Don’t look at it while you’re worrying about Joy,” she said shyly.

Jen caught the manuscript to her breast. “Not look at it? I shall sit up and read it this very night!” she cried rapturously. “I can’t help Joy by worrying, so I shan’t worry any more. I assure you, it will be the greatest comfort to me, Mary-Dorothy! Thanks a billion times!” and she raced off, clasping the story in her arms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE MAN NEXT DOOR

“We know more than Jen does,” Mary said to Ruth, after a time of silent strenuous thought. “We know what has made Sir Andrew change his mind. I hate to think it has something to do with me. Jen mustn’t know; we can’t give Joy away. It would mean telling too much. That’s why I couldn’t say much to her. And Joy mustn’t know either.”

“It might be good for her,” Ruth hinted.

“It might make her hate me for ever!” Mary retorted. “Let’s get to bed!”

During the night, Ruth knew Mary was not sleeping, and wondered whether the story or Joy was to blame. But Mary did not explain. There was nothing in her manner, as they sat down to a country breakfast in Ann’s little sitting-room, to hint that she was nerving herself to an act of real courage for Joy’s sake.

They were still enjoying Ann’s ham and eggs and butter and honey, and revelling in the sense of holiday-making and of freedom from all engagements and business ties, when Mary remarked, “Jen’s coming across the cloister garth,” and her colour rose nervously.

Jen stood in the arched doorway. A sudden fit of shyness had made Mary unable to go to meet her; she would have run away, but there was nowhere to run to. Jen saw her feeling written in her face, and understood.

“Mary-Dorothy, I’ve come to say thank you! Do you know that I sat up half the night, having the best read I’ve had for ages?”

“Do you like it, really?” Mary asked doubtfully.

“My dear, it’s great! It’s really good, I’m sure of that. And it’s such fun! I loved every word of it. I’m proud of you, Mary-Dorothy!”

“I am glad you’re pleased!” there was a world of relief in Mary’s tone. “I’ll type it as soon as I can, if there’s nothing you think I ought to change?”

“Not a word! But I’m going to read it again, really carefully. I simply flew through it last night; and I kept thinking Joy would see that my light was still on, and come to know what I meant by it.”

“How is she this morning?”

“I haven’t seen her. She was away out before I came down. Now what are you going to do this morning? Since Joy’s got something as big as Andrew Marchwood so heavily on her mind, I must look after you for her! I’m quite sure Ros and Maidie will see to Biddy.”

Mary looked up, shy colour in her face. "Might I go for a walk in the woods by myself? I won't lose my way."

Ruth and Jen looked at her quickly. "Don't mind me!" said Ruth. "I'd just love to wander about the Abbey and see it all again."

For a time, when Jen had gone, Mary and Ruth wandered together among the ruins, talking earnestly.

"I'm sure it's the best thing to do," Mary said. "I'm 'scared stiff,' as Biddy would say; but I feel it's got to be done, and the sooner the better."

"I'm coming with you," Ruth said soberly.

"I'll be glad to have you," Mary confessed.

"I wish Joy could know!" Ruth said wistfully. "And Jen still more! I suppose we couldn't just tell Jen, Mary-Dorothy?"

"No! It would be giving Joy away. I'd hate for Jen to know all that happened in town, Ruth."

"She ought to know," Ruth insisted, but Mary would not agree.

They walked through the woods together, talking all the way because they were too nervous for silence.

But when they entered the gates of the Manor, they were both silent, from sheer fright; Mary was white as she asked steadily if she could see Sir Andrew, and Ruth was glad she had not let her come alone.

When he appeared, however, he was not the silent unapproachable great man whom Rosamund and Maidlin rather dreaded but the kindly understanding friend who had spoken to them at Joy's concert; and their dread of him vanished, though not their fear of how he would take what they had to say.

He greeted them as friends, which was reassuring. Mary rushed into her errand at once, as she always did when very much afraid.

"Forgive me for troubling you when I know you must be busy! And please remember that Joy doesn't know I have come; she hasn't an idea. None of them know. Last night Jen Robins told us you were going away."

He assented, looking puzzled; a shadow had filled his eyes at mention of Joy.

"Forgive me if I'm wrong," Mary pleaded. "But I can't help fearing that what happened that night at the children's concert may be to blame."

His eyes met hers in instant understanding. He asked quietly, "How do you mean, Miss Devine?"

Mary spoke breathlessly. "I'd thought Joy perfect. Of course it was foolish, but I hadn't believed she had any faults. That night, and for some days afterwards, I felt as if I'd lost her. I found after a while that I was wrong. All I had lost was my own picture of her. She has so much that's good and beautiful in her. And—and if someone she loved very much

helped her, perhaps she would get over the weaknesses. Don't you think perhaps she needs someone to help her?"

His face had lit up in interest as she began to speak; but the light went out of it suddenly. "I see your point. You are probably right. But I cannot help her, Miss Devine. It is the thing I want to do with all my heart. But Joy does not care for me in that way. I saw a new side of her character that night; and though I loved her still, I realised, as you did, that there was another Joy I had never known. If I thought she wanted me, it would make no difference. But I have no reason to think she does, or that I could help her."

"I can't give her away," Mary said wistfully. "But please, oh, *please!*—don't go till you're quite sure! Tell her you're thinking of going, and see if she seems to mind. Perhaps you'll decide not to go, after all!"

"Do you mean—?" he began, his face lighting up again in excitement. Then he checked himself. "But you're right. I must ask her herself."

"He won't go! He won't go!" Ruth danced down the avenue. "Oh, if *only* Joy could know what you've done for her, Mary-Dorothy!"

A letter lay waiting for Mary in the Abbey. She looked at it, turning whiter than she had done at the Manor door. Then she tore it open, glanced at it, and with an incredulous laughing cry threw it across to Ruth. Then hand in hand they ran through the Abbey, into the Hall, to find Jen.

"I must tell you first of all!" Mary panted, catching her in the garden. "That Writing Person, in London, told me to type my first few chapters and send them, with a synopsis of the rest, to a publisher, because it's getting so late for this year. And this is a letter to say he likes the beginning and the idea of the story very much, and if the rest comes up to the opening chapters, he'll be pleased to publish it." She stopped for breath.

"Mary!" Jen gasped. "Mary Devine! Really? Oh, how simply gorgeous! Won't Joy be pleased? Oh, Mary-Dorothy, I *am* so glad!"

Later, Bidy, Ros and Maidie, Joan and Mrs. Shirley and Janetta, all collected on the terrace to hear the great news.

They had not been able to find Joy. So far as anyone knew, she was out alone in the woods somewhere.

But while they were all talking excitedly, except Janetta, who showed no interest in Mary's book, Joy appeared from the avenue. She came walking across the lawn, swinging her hat.

"Something's happened. Look at her face!" Jen whispered. "Glory! Has he—has she——?"

Joy came up the bank to the terrace with a bound, and stood looking round at them all; and not even Rosamund could mistake the change in her now.

“Dear people, I’m going to marry the man next door,” she announced airily.

“Oh, I’m glad we were here!” Mary whispered happily to Ruth, while Joan and Jen were kissing those parts of Joy which had not disappeared in her aunt’s arms, and the children were asking excited questions. “But she must never know, Ruthie!”

“The future Lady Marchwood!” Jen announced dramatically, when she could speak connectedly again.

“Isn’t it absurd? I wish he wasn’t,” Joy was not by any means coherent yet.

In the joyful excitement, Mary’s book was forgotten. So it was no surprise to her and Ruth to see Joy and Jen come together across the garth that evening.

“Jen’s told her about you, and she’s come to say she’s glad,” said Ruth.

But Joy had still more to say. Her congratulations on the publisher’s offer were very hearty; but when they were off her mind, there was still one thing to be said.

“Mary-Dorothy, in the woods this morning, he told me all about it,” she began abruptly.

“Oh, cheers for Sir Andrew!” Ruth murmured joyfully. “Mary would *never* have told her!”

“I’ve come to say I’m sorry,” Joy said humbly. “I’m too happy to be really sorry about anything else, but I am really sorry I treated you so badly. He says I did; and it’s true. I love him because he sees how hateful I can be, but loves me all the same. Mary, I was cruel to you; the very thing I was so much afraid of; and I’d never have known if he hadn’t told me. You’ve given me the greatest happiness of my life to-day. Mary, I’m so very sorry I hurt you so!”

“I didn’t want you to know. I’d never have told you,” Mary whispered brokenly.

“He told me every word you said; you were very generous. And he said you were frightened of him; you needn’t have been, but it was brave of you to go, Mary-Dorothy! I’ll never forget how good you’ve been, doing such a big thing for me when I’d hurt you so.”

“Mary-Dorothy, thank you most of all for this,” said Jen, and bent and kissed her gratefully.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *The Abbey Girls In Town* by Elsie J. Oxenham]