

JANDY
MAC
COMES
BACK

ELSIE J.
OXENHAM

THE ABBEY

SCHOOL SERIES

COLLINS

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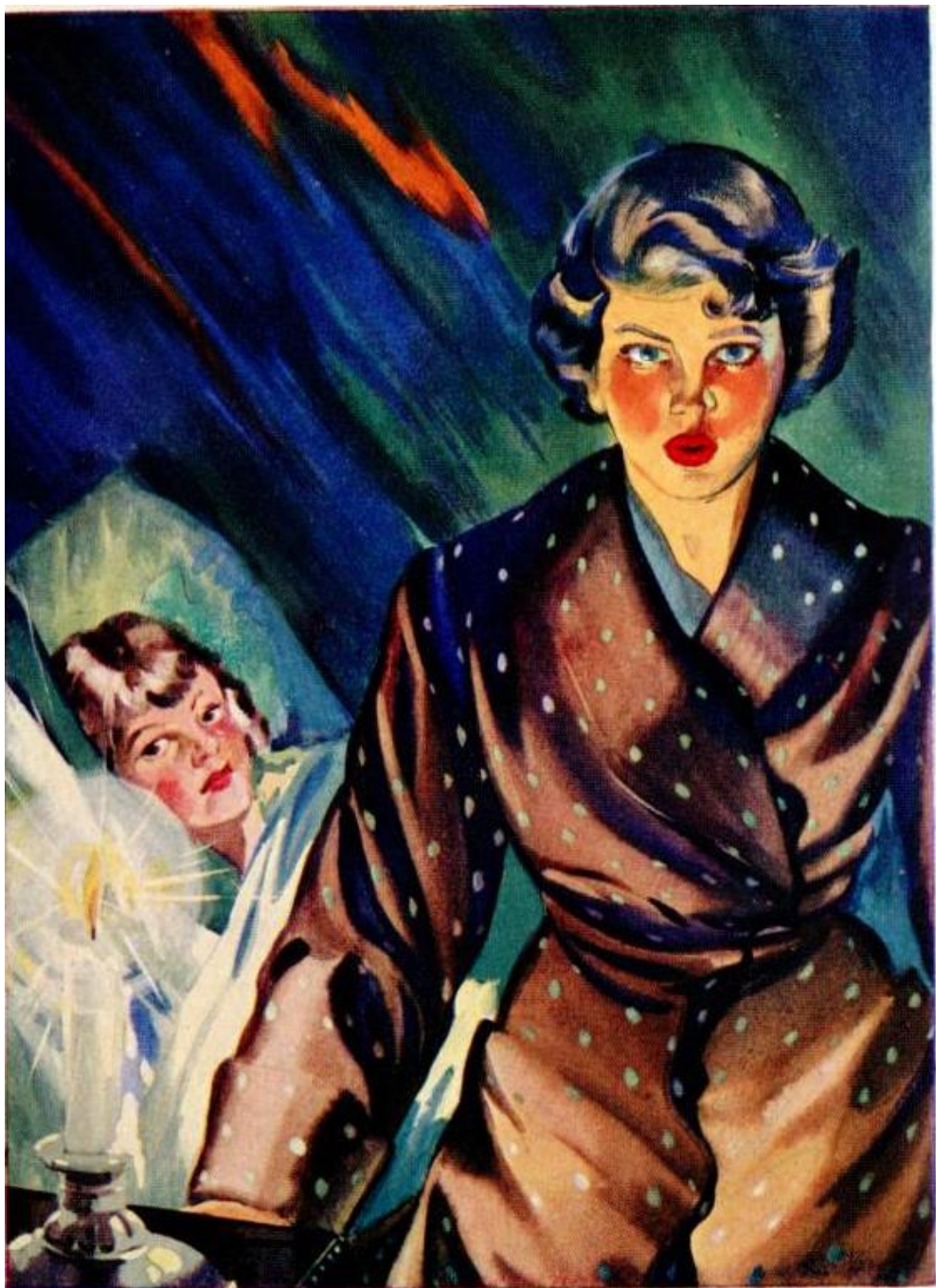
SCHOOL SERIES

COLLINS

JANDY MAC COMES BACK



ELSIE J. OXENHAM



J.M.C.B.

Tansy, looking troubled, said good-night and crept away to bed. (See [page 161](#))

JANDY MAC
COMES BACK

by

ELSIE J. OXENHAM



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To
MY FATHER
JOHN OXENHAM
WITH LOVE AND THANKS FOR
ENCOURAGEMENT AND SYMPATHY
WHICH HAVE NEVER FAILED US.

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CHAPTER I

THE RETURN OF JANDY MAC

“Littlejan!” her mother said severely. “If you don’t stop jumping about, I shall put you out of the car and leave you by the side of the road.”

“And then I shouldn’t see Jansy! But it is so thrilling! How can I sit still? And—oh, Mother! You promised to forget that silly name! You’ll go and give me away to Jansy and Aunt Joan!”

“I’m sorry,” Mrs. Fraser apologised. “But after calling you Littlejan for all these years it’s difficult to remember you want to be grown-up Joan.”

“I’m thirteen,” Joan shook back her dark mop of hair and sat very straight. “And we’re going to see these crowds of people I’ve been told about all my life. I don’t want to be introduced with a baby name.”

“Very reasonable,” her mother agreed. “But hard to live up to, my child! Thirteen doesn’t seem so grown-up to me, and I expect to your father you’ll always be Littlejan. You were so very little when he first saw you, and so very much like me, and he’d always called me Jan, not Janice. So from the first minute he called you Littlejan.”

As she said, they were much alike, with dark brown hair, which both mother and daughter wore cut short and slightly wavy. There were only twenty years between their ages, for Janice had married at nineteen. Joan’s sailor father often asserted that in a few years more, if Janice kept so slim and youthful, they would look like sisters.

“I know all that,” Joan said impatiently, “but with these new people, Mother——! I’m sure Jansy Raymond would laugh if you called me Littlejan! She sort of belongs to you, as she’s called after you, doesn’t she?”

“Sort of,” Mrs. Fraser assented. “And you’re called after her mother. We arranged that long ago. But they’ve turned Janice into Jansy. When I was small I was called Jandy.”

“I know—Jandy Mac, short for Janice Macdonald! And you’ve turned Joan into Littlejan! Will Aunt Joan mind?”

“I shouldn’t think so. There are other children, you know. Jansy must be ten years old now; then John will be eight. I believe there’s another little girl, much younger, but I don’t know her name. I’m sorry now that I was slack about letters. We wrote to one another for a good many years, but then we let the correspondence drop, and I’m afraid it was my fault. I know I didn’t answer Joan’s last letter.”

“Oh, well, it will be all the more of a surprise when we turn up on her doorstep and say, ‘We’ve come. We’re Mrs. Fraser and Joan.’ She will be surprised, won’t she?”

“I shan’t say that! I shall say, ‘Here are Jandy Mac and daughter, as arranged fifteen years ago.’ I’m afraid she will be surprised,” Janice Fraser admitted, her tone rueful. “I’m beginning to think we’ve made a mistake, Littlejan. We ought to have let her know. Perhaps she won’t like the surprise!”

“Oh, but why not?” Joan let the name pass in her astonishment. “We’ve planned all the way home to give her a surprise! You said she’d love it!”

“Yes, but suppose it isn’t convenient? Suppose they’re away from home—or somebody is ill—or the house is full of visitors?”

“Then we’ll say, ‘Hallo! How are you?’ and then we’ll go back to town. But it would be an awful blow.” Joan looked anxious. “I’ll see Jansy, anyway, won’t I? I want to tell her—you know, about my secret! When we’ve come all the way from Sydney, they wouldn’t send us away without letting us see her!”

“I hope you’ll see her. But I feel now we’d have been wiser to write, or even to phone, before we came.”

“There’s a phone-box,” Joan suggested. “You could ring her up now.”

“We’re almost there.” Mrs. Fraser had caught the name of a village a few minutes before. “We may have been silly—I rather think we have—but we’ll stick to it and see the thing through now. If Joan and her family are away, we could try the Abbey. I expect Joy and her twins are there, and I know they’d like to see us.”

“I want to see the twins too,” Joan assented. “How old are they, Mother?”

“I shall have to do sums in my head! Just nine, Littlejan. Jansy came a year and a half before the twins.”

“Quite little girls! Oh, is that Aunt Joan’s house?”

“Probably. Could you ask that old man?” Mrs. Fraser spoke to the chauffeur.

He drew up and called to the man who was cutting the hedge. “Is this Captain Raymond’s place?”

“It be, sir. Gate be just along there.”

Joan grinned at her mother. “I’m glad it be the house, so we shan’t have to look any farther!”

“They aren’t away from home,” Mrs. Fraser remarked. “The house looks lived in—windows open, smoke from the chimneys. One worry removed, anyway!”

“What marvellous horses! Oh, would Aunt Joan let me learn to ride?” Joan shouted.

A groom in dark livery was leading a fine horse up and down, mounted himself upon another.

Janice Fraser knit her brows. “It looks more as if they had a visitor. I don’t think—well, the man, and those horses, and the livery—it doesn’t look quite like my idea of what Joan Raymond told me about her home. I’ve never heard of her riding.”

The car had turned in at the gate and was running up to the door. Janice spoke firmly to her excited daughter.

“Littlejan—well, Joan, then!—you’ll stay in the car till I call you. Remember we’re uninvited and unexpected guests. It may be impossible for Joan to see us. If it’s all right, I’ll wave to you to come. I’m feeling more sure every minute that we ought to have written. Surprises are all very well, but they can be very awkward.”

“You’re shy!” Joan protested. “I’m not, a scrap. Better let me go to the door and ask! When they hear I’ve come from Australia, on purpose to see Jansy and tell her——”

“Nonsense!” her mother said, laughing. “I’m not shy! I’m cross with myself for being silly! Wait quietly here, Littlejan.”

She went to the big door, and Joan leaned forward in breathless eagerness, trying to hear what was said.

She saw her mother ask a question, saw the maid’s puzzled look as she replied, saw her mother’s face change, first to dismay and then to eager interest, as she asked question after question. It was almost more than Joan could do to keep from leaping out of the car and running to ask what it was all about. Her mother wrote a few words on a card and gave it to the girl, and then came back to the car.

“That’s the end of that idea!” she said, half-laughing, but much perturbed, as she opened the door. “Take us away, please!” to the chauffeur. “I don’t know yet where to, but away from here. Back to the main road, where the phone-box was. We’ll have to decide what to do.”

“Mother, I shall *die* in one more minute!” Joan exploded.

“Die, then, Littlejan. It won’t help matters. But I’ll tell you what has happened. Mrs. Raymond has a son a few hours old. He was born early this morning. She can’t have any visitors for a little while. I sent her a message of love and congratulations and good wishes; that’s all we can do. Now where would you like to go?”

“But couldn’t I see Jansy?” Joan wailed. “You know how much I want to ask her about my secret plan!”

“It won’t be a secret long if you talk about it so much. Jansy and John are away from home. The baby—I mean, the one who was the baby until this morning—is called Jennifer, so Joan Raymond has been faithful to the family tradition, and I hope she’ll call the new little boy Jim! Jennifer is only two, so she’s no use to us. I’ve never met Joan’s husband, so I didn’t ask to see him. We shall have to come back later, to see them all. The girl said he was engaged at the moment, in any case. Now what are we going to do with ourselves? Go straight back to town? Where have the horses gone?”

“I don’t know. I was watching you. They’ve disappeared. Oh, isn’t it all rotten?” Joan wailed.

“A gardener spoke to the groom and he went to the other side of the house; round that way,” said the chauffeur, as he turned the car in the drive.

Joan craned her neck, trying to see, but a screen of bushes hid the side door. She sighed. “Everything’s going wrong to-day! I want to know who rides on that marvellous horse, since it can’t be Aunt Joan!”

“It certainly isn’t Aunt Joan,” her mother agreed. “Don’t be so gloomy, my child. We’ve found our way to the house and we’ll come back later. It’s a beautiful place; look at the lake, and those rhododendrons and azaleas on the banks!”

“It’s marvellous, of course,” Joan’s tone was lacking in enthusiasm and extremely despondent. “But I want to see the people it belongs to!”

“I’m disappointed too. But it’s lovely to know Joan has another little boy; that’s four children she has now.”

Littlejan caught her arm. “Look, Mother! The horses!”

While the car crept towards the gate, uncertain of its future course, it was followed down the drive, and passed, by the cantering horses, the groom riding behind his mistress, a tall girl with yellow hair, who rode astride.

“Oh, lovely!” Joan whispered enviously.

“She rides well. Some friend who has been to ask for Joan, I suppose.” Mrs. Fraser’s eyes followed the straight erect figure with admiration.

Then she turned to the chauffeur. “Please take us back to the road; but go slowly. I must think out another plan. You’re sure it will be all right for you, if we decide to try some other friends, on our way back to town? Mrs. Grant said——”

“That I should hold myself at your disposal for the day, madam. Just say where you wish to go.”

“It was terribly kind of her! She’s an absolute angel,” Joan cried. “Oh, Mother! Let’s go and find that Abbey, where the twins live!”

“I’m going nowhere else without first asking if I shall find anybody there,” her mother said firmly. “That’s why we’re going to that phone-box. And then we must all have some lunch somewhere.”

“We can’t phone yet,” Joan pointed out, as they reached the main road and saw the kiosk a short way ahead of them. “She’s using it—or rather the man is.”

“How very odd!” Mrs. Fraser exclaimed. “Why didn’t she ring up from the house? The Raymonds must be on the telephone!”

The groom was in the phone-box. The rider had dismounted and was sitting on the bank, on a mackintosh spread on the grass. At sight of the car she rose quickly and went to hold the horses.

The car drew up, obviously waiting till the telephone was free. The man came out and took his mistress’s place between the horses. “That will be all right, my lady. The car will come as quickly as possible.”

“Good!” The girl went—wearily, it seemed—back to the grass verge and threw herself down to rest again.

“Now, Mother!” Joan’s voice rang out. “Now you ring up and ask if we can go to the Abbey and see those twins!”

“Yes, but I don’t ring up the Abbey. The house is called Abinger Hall. That’s where the twins live,” her mother retorted, stepping out of the car.

CHAPTER II

KIDNAPPED BY ROSAMUND

Janice Fraser, entering the phone-box, did not see the girl on the bank sit up with a jerk of astonishment. She stared at the car, at Joan, at Janice; but Janice was busy with the directory, so she controlled her eagerness and sat waiting, clasping her hands round her knees in their neat breeches.

“He called her ‘my lady’,” Joan marvelled. “I wonder who she is? It sounds like a fairy-tale!”

Janice found her number at last, and after some delay was told she was through to the Hall. “Can I speak to Lady Quellyn? Is that Abinger Hall?”

A clear contralto voice answered her. “This is the Hall. Who is speaking, please?”

“Sounds puzzled,” Janice thought. “What’s wrong now? Has Joy removed? She’d never leave the Hall! We do seem to be down on our luck to-day!” She spoke into the phone. “My name is Fraser. I knew Lady Quellyn years ago, when she was at school. I’ve just landed from Australia, and I thought I’d look her up. Is she at home?”

“Oh! I couldn’t understand why you didn’t know. She’s in America; she won’t be home till July. Sir Ivor Quellyn is directing an orchestra in New York. I’m so sorry!”—as the speaker heard a groan of dismay from the other end of the wire. “I’m afraid it’s a disappointment, but I really can’t help it.”

“No, of course not. I’m sorry to have troubled you. I certainly didn’t understand. Has Lady Quellyn taken the twins with her? My little girl is craving to meet them.”

“No, they’re here. Perhaps you’d like to come to see them? Joy has taken David with her.”

“David? Who’s he?”

A laugh came over the wire. “The baby. He’s six months old; Joy couldn’t leave him at home. She went away when he was just two months. We hardly believe he’s real; we’ve seen so little of him.”

“Joy with a baby boy? But how delightful for her!”

“Oh, lovely, of course! After all these years.”

Janice heard the warning signal. “Time’s up. May I ring you again, when I’ve had time to think this over?”

“Oh, please do! But don’t come this afternoon. I have to be in town.”

“Thank you so much! Whom shall I ask for?”

“Oh, just Maidlin!” and then the line went dead.

Janice came out of the box and crossed the road to the car, without glancing at the girl in riding-breeches, who had sprung up and was coming towards her.

“Is it all right?” Joan shouted. “Can we go to the Abbey, Mother?”

“No, it’s all wrong, my child. There’s nothing for us to do but go sadly back to town, feeling silly.”

“Excuse me!” A clear and friendly, if slightly masterful, voice hailed them.

Janice, at the car-door, swung round to face the rider. “How nice she looks!” The thought shot through her mind, as she exclaimed, “Can we do anything for you? Is something the matter?”

“Nothing serious. But I couldn’t help hearing what your little girl said. You seem to have been ringing up my best friends, and you don’t look too pleased with the result. Can I do anything about it?”

Janice gazed at her in amazement. Then her face cleared. “But, of course, you’ve been to ask for Joan, haven’t you? You passed us in the drive. If you know Joan, you’ll know Joy too. You heard us speak of the Abbey, I suppose?”

“And the twins, and Abinger Hall. But it’s very odd!” The fair girl was gazing at them in wonder. “You know Mrs. Raymond and Lady Quellyn well enough to call them Joan and Joy, and yet I’ve never met you before. How has it happened?”

“Do you know all their friends?” Janice asked, in equal wonder.

“I thought I did! All Joy’s friends, anyway; Joan has lived abroad, of course. But, considering that I spent seven years at the Hall, I thought I knew all Joy’s real friends. May I ask who you are?”

“You lived with Joy for seven years?” Janice cried. “Then you must be—can you possibly be—one of the two schoolgirls whom she called her adopted twins, long before she was married?”

“One of them,” the girl assented, with laughing eyes. “And I strongly suspect that you’ve been talking to the other. Who spoke to you from the Hall?”

“I didn’t catch the name; it was strange to me. It was a clear, very sweet, contralto voice.”

“Quite. It’s singing for the B.B.C. this afternoon.”

“Oh! She said she’d be in town. Broadcasting! She must be very good!”

“It was Madalena di Ravarati; called by us Maidlin, or just Maid. I’m Rosamund, and Joy was more than good to the two of us when we were kiddies. We lived with her for years, and we grew up very close chums. Now who are you? Why have I never met you before?”

Janice Fraser laughed. “Because I went——”

“Because she’s a South Sea Islander!” Joan, shouted. She had been following the conversation with deep interest.

Rosamund glanced at her. “And what do they call you?”

“Joan Fraser.” Joan shot a quick look of warning at her mother. “I’m called after Aunt Joan, and her first little girl is called Janice after Mother.”

Janice finished her explanation. “My name is Janice Fraser. I stayed at the Hall when I was eighteen and Joan and Joy were sixteen. Then I went to the South Seas and married; my husband is a sailor, and we’ve always lived in Samoa. I haven’t been home since. I wrote to Joan Raymond for some years, but lately I’m afraid I’ve been slack. It’s my own fault, but I’m quite out of date in the family news.”

Rosamund was looking at her closely. “Are you, by any chance, Jandy Mac—the girl who helped them to find the Monks’ Path and the grave of old Ambrose?”

Janice laughed. “Jandy Mac I am. My name was Janice Macdonald.”

Rosamund’s hand shot out in greeting. “I’ve heard stories of those days. I’m so glad to meet you! You were buried alive in a tunnel under the Abbey with Joan and Joy! And at one time you thought the Abbey and the Hall might belong to you and you’d have to take them from the Abbey Girls!”

“I wish they had belonged to Mother!” Joan said fervently.

“I felt awful! I still remember how frightened I was,” Janice exclaimed.

“May I come into your car and sit down for a few minutes?” Rosamund interrupted her. “Of course I shall look after you now. As the rest of the family is otherwise engaged or in New York, you must let me take on their job. You’ll come home to lunch with me, to begin with. But if I might come in, while we talk——”

Joan had leapt out and hurled herself into the seat beside the chauffeur. “In there, with Mother! Oh, please do! You were sitting on the grass; did you want to rest? Or were you waiting for somebody?”

“Both.” Rosamund took the seat gladly. “May I explain? It must seem odd. I’ve been to ask for Joan, and I realised suddenly that it was too far and I couldn’t ride home. I didn’t want to confess to Jack Raymond, so I didn’t tell him, but my man has just phoned, and I’m waiting for the car to come and take me home. I hate doing it; I don’t like giving in or owning I’ve made a mistake! But I promised my husband, most faithfully, that if I found it was too far I’d wait for the car. He said it was too much for me, but I was sure I could do it. I’m only learning to ride, and I haven’t done very much yet, and—well, I have a young baby, and it isn’t good for either of us if I do too much. That’s why I was sitting by the roadside like a gipsy! The car will be along in a few minutes. I hope you’ll let me take you home to lunch?”

“It’s extremely kind of you! Are you sure it will be convenient?” Janice hesitated.

Rosamund’s laugh rang out. “Oh, quite! There’s plenty of lunch for two or three extra! I’ll love to have your company. Geoffrey—my husband—had a luncheon engagement, but I was excused, because Hugh—the infant—needs attention; I have to be at home at certain times for his sake. So when we heard that Jimmy Raymond had arrived, I decided to ride over and leave cards on Joan, in proper style. I was told it was too far, and it was, so I’m having to crawl home, feeling crushed. Very humbling! Good for my conceit, no doubt, but unpleasant. Everybody tells me I’m so sure of myself. Do come back with me, and make it easy for me! It will seem quite natural to be using the car, if I’m bringing friends home for lunch.”

Joan, hanging over the front seat, chuckled. “It gives you a good excuse. Oh, Mother, do let’s go! You said we’d find some lunch somewhere! Let’s send the car back to Mrs. Grant and go off in hers!” with a nod towards Rosamund.

Janice explained quickly, in answer to a questioning look. “We met some charming London people on the boat—we only landed four days ago, and we’ve been seeing a little of London. They rang us up to ask our plans, and when they heard about our pilgrimage, as they called it, in search of old friends, they insisted that we should use their car for the day, instead of complicating matters with trains and taxis.”

“Wasn’t it marvellous of them?” Joan cried. “We’ve come all the way from London by car!”

“A good idea, and much the easiest way,” Rosamund said calmly. “In that case, it’s quite simple. When my car comes we’ll all transfer to it. Yours shall follow and we’ll feed your man, and then he’ll go back to town and leave you with me. When we’ve talked things over, I’ll send you anywhere you want to go.”

“We’ll be a royal procession!” Joan shouted, in great glee. “First us, in your car, and then this car, and then the man with the horses!”

“The horses won’t keep up with the cars. They might as well start at once, but I know Ferguson won’t let me out of his sight till he’s seen me in our own car, so I won’t suggest it,” Rosamund said.

“Does he have to take care of you?” Joan asked, round-eyed.

Rosamund nodded. “He thinks so, anyway.”

“But what a bore for you!”

“I manage to put up with it. He wasn’t pleased with me for riding to-day; he said it was too far, and he wanted me to have the car.”

“Did he say you’d been silly?”

“He didn’t say it. He looked as if he thought so.”

“We feel we’ve been silly, to come here without first ringing up to ask if it would be convenient,” Janice remarked.

“We’re silly, and she’s silly. Better send all the silly people home together,” Joan suggested.

“Joan, my child, you’re being too noisy.”

“Haven’t you another name?” Rosamund looked at Joan. “I keep thinking your mother means our Joan. We’ll have to call you something else.”

Joan threw an imploring look at her mother. “Don’t tell her!”

Rosamund laughed. “What is your other name? Out with it! I’m going to call you by it. We really can’t have two Joans!”

“Her father calls her Littlejan,” Janice said ruthlessly. “He thinks she’s so like me.”

“She is like you, of course. But it’s rather young for her. How old is she?” Rosamund looked at Joan with thoughtful eyes.

“I’m thirteen. That’s nearly grown-up,” Joan protested. “I won’t be called by that baby name!”

“No, I agree with you. I shall call you Joan the Second—no, that’s clumsy! Joan Minor—like boys at school; Jones I. and Jones II.; I shall call you Joan-Two.”

Joan began to laugh. “Joan Two or Too?”

“Both—either. But I meant Two; our second Joan.”

“I’d like to be called Joan-Two.”

“Right! Joan-Two you shall be. That’s settled. Will you come and have lunch with me at my little house?”

“Yes, please, Miss Rosamund. It’s terribly nice of you.”

“Not ‘Miss.’ I’m going to show you my baby boy.”

“But you can’t take in the whole crowd of us!” Janice exclaimed.

“That will be all right. I’m thrilled to be meeting the Jandy Mac I’ve heard so much about. To be the first to entertain her is great luck! The rest will be thoroughly annoyed with me,” Rosamund said, laughing. “I shall tell you all about the families, and I’ll hear all your news. I’m the cat stealing the cream off the family milk! So don’t say any more about it. I’m delighted to have the chance to kidnap Jandy Mac and daughter!”

CHAPTER III

ROSAMUND'S LITTLE HOUSE

"Might we know your married name?" Janice asked their new hostess, as they waited for the car to come.

Rosamund gave her a laughing look. "Don't ask questions! You've been kidnapped. Leave everything to me; I'm really quite respectable. I'll tell you as soon as we reach home."

Joan-Two nodded. "Don't ask her, Mother. It's far more thrilling not to know. I believe she's a princess; you saw those marvellous horses! Are you going to take us to Windsor Castle, to see the Queen, Mrs. Rosamund?"

"Not to Windsor," Rosamund said seriously. "I hope you'll like my little house. Tell me what you've been doing since you landed, while we're waiting for the car!"

Janice Fraser looked a little troubled, but Joan entered eagerly into the spirit of "the princess's" wishes and asked no more questions. When the car came whirling round the corner and drew up beside Ferguson and the horses, she looked startled, however.

"Gosh, it's a whopper! Are you a millionaire?" she cried.

"Not at all. It's a struggle to make ends meet," Rosamund retorted. "Wait till you see what we have to do with the few pennies we happen to possess! Come along—hop out and try my car! The men will transfer your baggage."

"We only brought tooth-brushes, just in case Aunt Joan wanted us to stay," Joan-Two explained. "Mother said it would do no harm to have one little bag with us, and we could send for more to the hotel, if we decided to stay."

"Very sensible." Rosamund glanced at Janice. "You aren't really alarmed by that huge car, are you? I know it looks ostentatious, but I can't help it—that long word means 'swanking,' Joan-Two. I can't help it if my husband has a large car, can I? Do you mind, Jandy Mac?"

Janice laughed, in spite of herself. "I don't mind anything from one who calls me that. I haven't been Jandy Mac for fifteen years. It's so friendly, and it makes me feel a schoolgirl again, in spite of this big Littlejan. But I'm puzzled, you know," and she looked from the car to Rosamund.

"Of course you are, you poor dear! But it's only for half an hour. Come along!"

Rosamund said a word to the man who had brought her car, and he took the suitcase which Janice handed to him. Joan had already run to make sure

of the front seat. Janice, with thoughtful eyes, glanced at the crest on the side of the car, as she went to take her place.

Rosamund saw her look, and smiled. She turned back for a word with Mrs. Grant's chauffeur, and then came to join Janice in the car.

"Your man says he'd rather go straight back to town. I've sent a message to your friends and their minds will be easy about you. I begged him to come and be fed, but he asked to be let off. So you're entirely forsaken and in my hands. I'll see that you're sent back to town or to any other place you wish. But don't go to the Hall to-day. Wait till Maid is at home to receive you."

The car was running smoothly and swiftly back the way it had come. Rosamund talked on, to check any questions, and Joan-Two knelt on the front seat and leant over the back to listen.

"Your cushions are so deep that I sink right in and then I'm too low down to hear what you're saying," she explained.

"I'm completely buried in my corner," Janice agreed. "Tell us about your friend who sings! Is it an afternoon concert?"

"It's one of the B.B.C. children's concerts. I said she was too good to be illustrating music-lessons for children, but Maid said—quite truly, I believe—that they give the children the very best they can and that it was an honour to be asked; and anyway, she would enjoy it. That was true; she's to sing folk-songs and she loves them. I'm going to listen, of course; you'd better stay with me and listen too. We'll give Joan-Two a music-lesson."

"I'd love it!" Joan's eyes sparkled.

"I'd like to hear the beautiful voice that spoke over the phone," Janice admitted.

"Maid has a lovely speaking voice and her singing is first class. She's in great demand for concerts and she's making her name in oratorio."

"I had no idea," Janice confessed, "of the way you younger ones seem to have developed. I knew Joy had two schoolgirls living with her, and if I'd thought I'd have known they must be grown-up by now. But you seem both to have gone a long way since your schooldays!"

"Maid's twenty-five, and I'm a year older. I didn't stay at the Hall all the time until I married. I was abroad with my mother, and after she died, with friends, a good deal. And then I kept a tea-shop in a cottage; we'd have passed it on the other road, but I wanted to go this way."

"A shop!" Joan exclaimed. "And did a fairy prince come and marry you?"

"No, he was ill and he asked me to take care of him. He's better now."

"It's a thrill, getting to know you!" Joan said solemnly. "You are an interesting family, all the lot of you!"

Rosamund laughed. "There are more thrills ahead of you, Joan-Two. But I'm keeping dark about them, because if I say too much you'll rush off and leave me, and I want you to see my little house and my little boy."

"Oh! But why should we? Where would we want to go?"

"I've an idea that I know where you'll sleep to-night, and that it won't be with me," Rosamund said, in a tone of mystery. "Now not another question! I'm not going to say one word more!"

Joan gave a chuckle of anticipation. "I love surprises! Do you know what she's talking about, Mother?"

"I do not! I wish she'd say a little more."

"If you like surprises, Joan-Two, I think you're going to have one now," Rosamund said. "Turn round and look ahead. You're missing all the scenery."

As Joan whirled round in her seat, Janice leant forward, with a cry of surprise. The trees which lined the road had come to an end; the chauffeur drew up the car, in answer to a word from Rosamund.

A river valley was dominated by a great grey castle, towering above a red-roofed town and backed by wooded hills. The battlements, the big round keep with its flag flying, the arrow-slits for windows, the walls and turrets, all were there, as in a fairy-tale.

"How do you like my little house, Joan-Two?" Rosamund asked.

"You *don't* mean to say you live *there*?" Joan's shriek of surprise rang out.

Janice looked at Rosamund. "Where are we, please? And who are you?"

"I wanted you to see it first from this point. I still catch my breath when I come on it suddenly on this road. The other way shows you the park, but you don't have a good view of the Castle. It's rather overwhelming, isn't it? It's Kentisbury."

"And you are?"

"I married the Earl a year ago."

"What's a lady earl called?" Joan asked, wide-eyed. "I know you don't say earl-ess."

"Littlejan!" her mother exclaimed, with a glance at the rigid back of the chauffeur. "The Countess will think you've never been to school!"

"I've heard of countesses in history books," Joan looked at Rosamund doubtfully. "But I didn't know they were real."

"This one's real, and she's extremely hungry. We'll go on now, Burnett," to the man.

"It's a wonderful place," Janice murmured, gazing incredulously at the Castle.

"I'm rather scared," Joan whispered.

“That’s what I was afraid of,” the Countess confessed. “I thought if I announced myself as Lady Kentisbury, you might say you wouldn’t come. Do you see now what we have to do with our pennies? The Castle takes a lot of them to keep it going!”

“Golly, yes!” Joan agreed. “And I don’t suppose it’s your only house, is it?”

“Not the only one,” Rosamund admitted. “There’s rather a large one in London and a small place in Scotland, to begin with. This is where we cross the river,” as the car rolled over the bridge. “Doesn’t the Castle tower overhead?”

“We’re right underneath,” Joan’s voice had more than a touch of awe. “How do we go in?”

“You’ll see the gate in a moment. There! It’s rather fine, isn’t it? And the inner gate is complete with moat and drawbridge and portcullis!”

“It all fits into the fairy-tale.” Joan gazed at the fat round towers of stone, crowned with little pointed steeples, between which they were passing, to climb by a winding drive to the Castle on its height.

For some minutes she was awed into silence. The car crossed the drawbridge and passed under the ominous hanging teeth of the portcullis. It set them down in a green quadrangle in the centre of the Castle, where the lawn was marked out in two tennis-courts; and by an enormous stone entrance Rosamund led the way indoors. Then Joan had a confused picture of huge rooms and long corridors, of statues and paintings, and at last of a sunny bedroom, where she found herself alone with her mother.

“It won’t take me ten minutes to change, and lunch is ready,” Rosamund said, as she left them. “I’m sure you’d like a wash. I’ll come back for you presently.”

“Oh, don’t change, please! You look so nice!” Joan found her voice in a hurry.

Rosamund shook her head at her. “I thought you’d gone dumb, Joan-Two. If I have visitors I can’t lunch in breeches. I’ll soon come back.”

She disappeared, and Joan and Janice looked at one another.

“Mother! *It is* a fairy-tale, and we’re right inside it!” Joan cried.

“It feels rather like it, I admit,” Janice laughed. “I certainly never dreamt this morning that lunch-time would find us in Kentisbury Castle!”

“I am so glad Aunt Joan had that baby this morning!” Joan sighed happily.

CHAPTER IV

ROSAMUND AT HOME

“You’re unusually quiet, Joan-Two!” Rosamund teased. “Still overawed by my little house?”

She had come to fetch them, wearing a pretty blue frock. Her eyes were blue, and her hair, coiled on her neck, was yellow. She wore a chain of blue glass beads at her throat, and showing these to Janice, she said with a laugh, “My wedding-gift from the twins! They chose them themselves, at Woolworth’s; it was quite their own idea.”

“With their own money?” Joan asked.

“Oh, of course! It was a real gift. Everybody was giving me presents, so they wouldn’t be left out. When you see them you can tell them I wore their beads for lunch.”

“Is Joan’s new baby really to be called Jim?” Janice asked. “I said he ought to be, to fit the rest of the family.”

“Jansy and John and Jennifer; now Jim has come too,” Rosamund agreed. “But there’s more in it than that. The fathers of Joan and Joy were twins, called John and Jim Shirley. As Joan had John already, called really for his own father, Jack Raymond, they decided the next boy should be Jim, to keep the family names.”

“That’s rather jolly. And Joy’s baby is David?”

“After the orchestra in New York,” Rosamund said, laughing. “Sir Ivor is directing the David Orchestra for three years.”

“But why did she adopt you? Mother doesn’t know. Won’t you tell us?” Joan pleaded.

“It was more than good of her,” Rosamund spoke with grave deep feeling. “She was Joy Shirley then, and only twenty-one. Joan had just married and gone away. I was fifteen and was left as a boarder at their old school in Wycombe, but my home had been in the north and the change didn’t suit me. I was tired and listless all the time and I kept having headaches; I still remember how rotten I felt. My parents had gone to India, but my mother was an old girl of the Wycombe school, and she wanted me to go there. The Head, Miss Macey, wrote to Joy and asked her to have me to live with her in the country for a while; it sounds a big thing to ask, but they were great friends and Miss Macey knew that Joy would be lonely without Joan. As it happened, Joy had just decided to be very good to Maidlin, who had been left an orphan and an heiress, and who badly needed

somebody to stand by her. Something of the same sort had happened to Joy; she had inherited a big property when she was only fifteen. She sympathised with Maidlin, who was fourteen and felt lost and bewildered; so she gave her a home at the Hall, and she agreed to take me too. Perhaps it was easier for her to have two than one! Maid and I were chums almost from the first, and I really think Joy soon came to like having us there, for when the aunt, who was responsible for me—my mother's sister—died, Joy didn't send me back to school, but said I must stay at the Hall to be company for Maidlin. I soon forgot that it wasn't my home as much as it was Maidie's, and for the rest of my school life I lived there with them. After that it was still my home, though I was abroad a good deal. My mother came to Switzerland for treatment and died there, and I made friends while I was with her and used to go to stay with them. But I always came back to the Hall, and I was married from there."

"And when did the tea-shop and the cottage come in?" Joan asked eagerly.

"Between living abroad and being married. Presently I'm going to ask questions, Joan-Two!" Rosamund looked at Janice. "You know, you're exactly what I've always longed for—someone who knew Joy as a schoolgirl. I didn't know Joan really well; she had left home before I came to the Hall. But Joy was a grown-up—or was supposed to be! She had gorgeous spells when she seemed no older than Maid and me, and we all fooled about together like infants. We loved her best then, of course! I want to hear what she was like when she was fifteen."

"Sixteen," Janice said. "I saw them first on the day when Joan became the May Queen at school. She was crowned by Joy, and I thought I was seeing double. Didn't I hear in some letter of Joan's that you were Queen too?"

"Oh, rather! Joan came to my coronation and brought Jansy, who was a few months old. Maid was Queen too, but later on. I won't spoil your lunch by teasing you with questions about old times, but later on I shall have to hear all about Joy and Joan at school."

Joan-Two, listening breathlessly, did not notice what she was eating and forgot to be frightened of the waiting servants. "Oh, tell her about it now, Mother!" she cried.

"No, not now," the Countess said firmly. "You tell me things instead, Joan-Two! Did you go to school on your South Sea Island?"

"Only at first. I've been living in Sydney for two years, at boarding-school." Joan resigned herself to waiting.

As they rose from the table Rosamund said, "Now we'll go and see the children. They're in the garden; they were fed much earlier. My small boy

has a bottle at midday; it's good for him to grow used to it gradually."

Janice looked at her with raised brows. "Children? Have you twins, like Joy? I thought you'd only been married for a year?"

"Fifteen months. But my eldest boy is three years old," the Countess said calmly. "A stepbrother, you know. My father married again and then he died; Roddy was born two months later, and as his mother wanted to go back to India Roddy was given to me; I'm his guardian. I didn't expect at that time to marry and have a family of my own! He's a nice little uncle for Hugh; just three years older."

"How jolly for them both!" Janice exclaimed.

"But how odd to be an uncle when he's only three!" Joan cried.

"He'll be used to it by the time he knows anything about it. Some day he'll want to know why Hugh calls me Mother and he doesn't. But that's in the future. At present I have to admit he calls me Yozzie. That's the best he can do."

"Yozzie! How awful!" Joan laughed.

"Or Yoz." Rosamund led the way to the private gardens of the Castle. "The park is out there, acres of it, with hills and woods and deer, and a lake with swans and peacocks. But it's open to the public and there are masses of picnic parties round the lake all day long. These are our own gardens. Now look!"

She led them through an opening in a tall box hedge, neatly trimmed into a thick wall. Within was a square garden room, enclosed by dark hedges. One half was given up to a lawn, where on a rug a fair-haired baby lay sprawling and kicking in the sun. The other half of the sheltered spot, separated from the lawn by a broad bed of flowers, was an oval pool, and in this a sturdy boy was paddling, his tiny knickers tucked up, a toy boat in his hand. He launched it just as they appeared, and shouted and flung back his yellow curls in delight, as it sailed away from him.

"Roddy is to go into the Navy, if he likes the idea, so we're beginning early," the Countess said. "The pool is only a few inches deep; he loves it, and his boats. The flower-bed is to protect the lawn, so that no baby can roll off the grass into the water. We have only children's flowers growing here; red and white daisies, and pansies with big faces, and marigolds—bright colours that are easy for a baby to see. It's our Kindergarten, in the real sense of the word, or our Jardin des Enfants, or the Kiddies' Corner, according to your feelings at the moment."

"It's perfectly charming!" Janice exclaimed.

"Simply marvellous! It might have been made for a children's garden," Joan cried.

“It was made for a children’s garden; we’ve been planning and making it since the autumn. Over beyond the pool is the sandpit, where Roddy digs for hours. I copied that idea from Joy; the twins have a splendid sandpit, but they haven’t a pool. I haven’t introduced you to the boys! This big fellow is my brother, Roderick Geoffrey Kane; the small chap is Geoffrey-Hugh. All the boys in our family have Geoffrey in their names, and the girls have Rose. But we give them other names as well.”

“Geoffrey-Hugh must be a very important person! Was he born into a title? As heir to all this, I suppose he would be?” Janice asked.

“Will it all belong to him some day? He’s very little!” Joan marvelled.

“He’s Viscount Verriton, when we want to be polite. But we call him Hugh. If I have a little girl some day—and I hope I shall; I want her badly—I shall call her Rosabel Joy,” Rosamund said. “Rosabel is an old name among the family roses; but I shall want to give her Joy’s name too.”

“That’s a lovely name! I hope you’ll have her in time.”

Rosamund laughed. “In a year or two, perhaps! Hugh must grow up a little before he has a sister.”

“They’re beautiful boys,” Janice said.

“They’re exactly like you, both of them, Lady Kentisbury. Mother says that’s what I’m to call you; not Countess,” Joan sounded puzzled.

“That’s right, Joan-Two. The boys are alike, aren’t they? That’s the family coming out in them both. Now, Jandy Mac, I’m going indoors to listen to Maidlin’s concert. Would you rather come, or will you stay here and wander about?”

“Oh, may I stay and sail boats with Roddy? I don’t care about concerts!” Joan cried.

Rosamund shook her head at her. “It would be good for you to listen. It’s meant for people like you, not for grown-ups. Oh, very well! Stay and play with Roddy, by all means! He’ll be delighted. Nurse!” and she turned to one of the two girls in uniform who were watching the children. “This is Joan Fraser; she’ll stay with Roddy for an hour. What about you, Jandy Mac?”

“It’s a hard choice!” Janice sighed in mock dismay. “Your gardens are so tempting! But I’d like to hear that voice again.”

“The gardens will wait; the concert won’t. Come on! We’ve only just time. We’ll come out again later,” and Rosamund hurried her indoors, to a cosy boudoir and a large radio cabinet.

CHAPTER V

ROSAMUND'S PLAN

The celebrated Doctor of Music gave his little lecture to the listening schools and introduced his singer. Then Janice looked at the Countess in amazement, as the sweet contralto voice pealed out, in "Barbara Allen" and "Ca' the Yowes," and then in "The Frog and the Mouse," and "Go and tell Aunt Nancy," and "The Gentle Maiden."

"What a wonderful voice!" Janice murmured.

Rosamund nodded. "We're very proud of Maid. Sir Ivor Quellyn has helped her a great deal. Her voice has developed enormously in the last few years. She's to sing a couple of Italian nursery songs, to interest the children—yes, he's explaining that she is half Italian. They're delightful. Now, 'Soldier, won't you marry me?' to finish. That will please the twins; she sang it once as an encore in the Albert Hall, for their sake, and they listened in this room."

"Will they be listening to-day?"

"Oh, sure to be! They worship 'Aunty Maid.' That's the end! Now will you have more gardens, or would you like to see something of the Castle? It needs a week to do it thoroughly!"

"We're taking up all your afternoon," Janice exclaimed. "You've been more than kind, but don't you want to get rid of us now? You must have had some plan for us when you kidnapped us as you did!"

"I'll tell you my plan after we've had some tea. Come for a walk round the walls! That will show you the keep and give you a general idea of the Castle. We'll look down on the children and see that they're all right."

"But don't you want to do other things?"

"No, I don't. I'm glad to have you here. As I told you, I feel like the cat who's stealing the cream off the family milk. It's really most amusing that I should have you all to myself when they don't even know you're in England."

Janice laughed. "It's extraordinarily nice of you to feel like that!"

"Oh, but I've heard of Jandy Mac for years! I've heaps of questions to ask you."

"I haven't told you very much yet."

"There's plenty of time. The car will take you back to town in a couple of hours, or anywhere else you want to go. But I think you should stay here for a night or two. I'm sure Joan-Two would be thrilled to sleep in a castle."

“I know she would! But you said”—and Janice turned to her hostess as they climbed a narrow stair in the walls, leading to the battlements—“that there was somewhere else, and that you didn’t believe we’d stay with you! What did you mean? Where could we want to go? What could be better than this?”

“That’s very nice of you! If you’ll go on to the top, what you see may make you feel you’d like to stay with me. I’ll tell you about the other place after tea.”

Janice laughed ruefully. “You know how to keep secrets! Where will this lead us? Oh!” as they reached the battlements and stood looking down between stone pillars on the gardens spread below, and the park and lake beyond, and the great keep on the other side. “Oh, how marvellous! What an amazing place to live!”

“Yes, I’m not properly used to it yet. I was terrified at first; I nearly farked it. But it’s wonderful for the children to grow up here. They won’t be frightened of it! See their little garden down there? Joan-Two and Roddy are digging in the pit.”

“Littlejan will be thoroughly happy. She’s our only girl, but she has small brothers and she hasn’t seen enough of them, because of school. She loves little boys.”

“Good for her!” Rosamund led the way along the walls towards the keep.

After half an hour’s wandering, during which Janice looked down on the Castle buildings from all possible angles, Rosamund left her in the Kindergarten with Joan and Roddy, and went indoors to take her baby from his nurse.

Agatha, the younger nurse, led the visitors out by a private gate into the park, and they looked across the narrow lake, where the water was deepest green and very still. People were picnicking on the grass banks and feeding the swans and ducks, and peacocks were strolling about and showing their tails.

“Oh, Mother! Can’t we go down there?” Joan begged.

“Tea will be ready,” Agatha demurred. “My lady said in half an hour.”

“We mustn’t keep her waiting. Come, Joan; we must go back,” Janice said.

“This is the most fascinating place!” Joan sighed. “I’d like to stay here for a month!”

“And yet Lady Kentisbury insists that there’s somewhere else we shall want to go, when she tells us where it is. I can’t imagine what she means.”

“Hasn’t she told you yet?” Joan cried. “I did think you’d have found out by now!”

“I wasted my opportunities, evidently,” her mother said, laughing. “I understood her to say she’d like us to stay for a night or two, if we cared to do it.”

“Oh, Mother, do, do, do!” Joan shouted. “Then I could go in the park! Oh, Mother *dear!*”

“I like the idea myself, so you needn’t shriek like that, Littlejan. But I must hear this mysterious plan first.”

Joan rushed up to Rosamund as soon as she saw her. “Lady Kentisbury, let us stay with you! There couldn’t be any nicer place! Will you tell Mother your other plan, so that she can choose? She won’t say she’ll stay here till she knows.”

The tea table was spread under the trees in the garden, and basket chairs were placed for the guests.

“Tea first, Joan-Two! After tea I really will discuss plans with your mother. Where did Agatha take you? To the lake? I wish Tansy was here; she’d be the one to show you round. But she’s at school, of course. She’s nearly fifteen, and she has lived here since she was four. Her aunt is my housekeeper, and some day Tansy is going to take over her job.”

“Gosh! I’d like to be Tansy!”

“She’s very keen, and she’ll do it well. Tell me what you and Roddy did together!”

Rosamund kept the talk going until tea was over. But at last, with Joan’s eyes fixed hungrily on her, she drew her chair away from the table and turned to Janice.

“Jandy Mac! It seems very queer to me. You talk of Joy and Joan, and you’ve tried to see them both. Having failed, you have no other idea but to go back to town. What about Jen? Why not go to see her?”

Janice sat up. “Jenny-Wren! Now that *is* queer! It’s not that I’ve forgotten her; she was just as much a part of those old times as Joan and Joy. But—well, the truth is, I’ve completely failed to realise that Jen must have grown up. I haven’t been writing to her; when I wrote at all it was to Joan. There’s been a reference to Jen now and then; usually that Jenny-Wren had had another baby! But I’ve never quite believed it. To me, Jen is still a noisy, perfectly delightful tomboy of fourteen, with long black legs and long yellow plaits and very blue eyes and a very short tunic.”

Rosamund gave a shout of delight. “I knew it! I was sure you didn’t think of Jen as married and the mother of a large family!”

“Where does she live?” Janice pleaded. “Is it too far for us to go? Could I ring her up? *How* I’d love to see Jen again!”

“Oh, Mother! But I want to stay here!” Joan wailed.

"I knew Jen would cut me out," Rosamund said tragically. "That's why I've kept so quiet about her, and why I wouldn't let you tell me about the old days. I knew she'd come into all your stories and that you'd ask for her; and I was sure that as soon as you remembered her you'd go off and leave me."

"I don't want to go—not for anybody!" Joan said with emphasis.

"Tell me about Jen!" Janice begged. "How I loved her as a kiddy! Did you say she has a big family? She'll be a lovely mother!"

"The boys all have saints' names," Rosamund remarked. "But it's just an accident, and they're anything but saintly. It didn't occur to Jen that they were saints until she gave Michael his name; they're Andrew and Antony and Michael, but Antony is always called Tony."

Janice nodded, her eyes eager. "Not Ambrose?"

"Not yet," Rosamund said seriously. "Jen thinks Ambrose would be a little heavy for nowadays. She says if she has any more boys they'll have to be Christopher and Martin and Simon; but she only thought of it when she realised that all the rest were saints. She wants to have six boys, so that they can dance morris together."

"Six! Three's a good beginning! Hasn't she any girls?"

"Oh, yes! Rosemary comes in the middle of the saints; she's the third. The baby is six months old; she's Katharine."

"Jenny-Wren with five children!" Janice murmured. "I simply don't believe it!"

"She married when she was twenty. Her parents had died and she wanted her own home. She was engaged to Kenneth Marchwood, brother of Joy's first husband—the father of the twins. When Andrew was killed in Africa, Ken became Sir Kenneth and settled at home and married Jen."

"Then Jenny-Wren is now——?"

"Lady Marchwood, and she lives next door to Joy and the twins, at Marchwood Manor."

Janice gazed at her wide-eyed. "The big house with the pond, where we used to trespass? That's now Jen's home?"

"It is." Rosamund looked at Joan. "My dear Joan-Two, you don't understand. Jansy Raymond is staying with the Marchwood children; and John, too, of course. Now what about it?"

"Oh!" Joan sprang up. "I want to see Jansy! Oh, Mother, let's go!"

"Where did you suppose Jansy had gone?" Rosamund retorted. "You might have guessed she'd be with the Marchwoods, either at the Hall or the Manor. So now you want to go too? Didn't I say you would?"

"I didn't know Jansy would be there," Joan pleaded. "I've come home on purpose to see her. I want to ask her something, but it's a secret, so I can't tell you about it. Do you really mind if we go away?"

“I was prepared for it! Now, Jandy Mac, do you want to go off at once? Won’t you have one night with me, and tell me about Joy and Jen and Joan at school? Jen won’t disappear before to-morrow; I’ll ring up and ask if I may drive over for lunch and bring a friend, who is an old pal of hers and wants to see her again. I’d love to see Jen’s face, if we confront her with you suddenly! I’ve no engagement for to-morrow and I shall be alone again, as Geoffrey has to be in town. Will you fall in with my plan? It only means waiting a few hours longer before you see Jen.”

Janice flushed. “I’d like it immensely. We must wait till to-morrow, in any case; we couldn’t arrive to see her in the evening! It would look too much as if we took it for granted we could stay for the night.”

“She’ll make you stay, of course. But I agree that it would be rather late to pay a call after seven, and you couldn’t be there before. I’m sure you don’t want to go back to town! Stay with us, and let Joan-Two have a night in a castle; and to-morrow we’ll descend on Jen, having asked first if it’s all right for us to go.”

“One for me!” Janice sighed. “It was mad to drop in on Joan as we did, of course!”

“I wasn’t thinking of that. Jen’s a sport and she has all sorts of public engagements. She’s the Lady of the Manor and she does her duty; she goes to garden-parties and fêtes, and opens sales of work, and gives away prizes. She might be out to lunch, so we’ll ask before we go.”

“How good of her to do all that, when she has the children to look after!”

“As she says, she can afford to pay for school and nurses for the family, but she can’t pay for people to do her public duties. She’s invaluable to the whole countryside; everybody wants her, and she never refuses for her own convenience. She’s shown me what I shall have to live up to!” Rosamund owned ruefully. “I can’t be a slacker, with Jen’s shining example before me. Her motto seems to be that one must help, if one can. But people don’t tease me much yet. It’s recognised that I’m still newly married and that a husband and small son must be considered. Presently my time will come! I shall have to grow used to appearing on platforms, and receiving flowers and purses, and declaring things open, and laying foundation stones. Then you’ll fall in with my plans?”

Janice looked at her frankly. “There’s just one thing against it. We haven’t any clothes. We’ve brought no luggage, so we can’t change for dinner. It seems rude to you and your beautiful Castle.”

“I sympathise, and I’m really sorry to ask it of you,” Rosamund said earnestly. “*We* don’t care, of course, but you’d have felt more comfortable. I’m sorry we can’t send for your things, but the car wouldn’t be back till ten.

I apologise deeply for running off with you as I did. But if we don't change, you won't mind so much, will you? I only care for your sake, you know."

"That's delightful of you, and most convincing and kind. We'll try not to see the scornful eyes of your butler," Janice said. "After all, we're Colonials, so we may be supposed not to know how to behave properly! Perhaps you could drop a hint to the butler that we've come straight from a South Sea Island."

"Don't be rude to Colonials! They're always charming. I shall tell my maid that I met you in the morning and am keeping you for the night, but that, of course, you didn't go out early in the day complete with evening clothes, and so I shan't be changing to-night. Everybody will understand, and it will save me trouble. I'd like you to meet Geoffrey; he'll be overjoyed not to have to dress! Come and choose your bedroom," and Rosamund led them off in triumph. "We'll talk all evening about the old days!"

Joan, delighted but a trifle shy, begged to be allowed to sleep with her mother. "Your Castle is so huge. I'd like to feel I've Mother close to me, to hold on to."

Rosamund laughed and agreed to let her have her wish.

CHAPTER VI

A NIGHT IN A CASTLE

Lord Kentisbury greeted the guests with grave friendliness, when they went down for the informal dinner—not, to Joan’s relief, in the great banqueting-hall, but in a cosy little dining-room. He was twenty years older than his wife and showed in his worn face traces of his years of ill-health; but for the time, at least, he seemed well, though not strong. He listened with much amusement to the tale of Janice’s failures to find a friend who was able to entertain her.

“I’m glad Rosamund turned up to welcome you! You must have begun to feel unwanted in a strange land,” he said. “You must certainly not risk another disappointment. We will ring up Lady Marchwood and ask about to-morrow, and if she is not at liberty you must stay here.”

“We’ll talk to Jen to-morrow. At present we’re going to feed you,” Rosamund said firmly. “You’ve had a long day, and you have that luncheon in town to-morrow.”

“Rosamund takes care of me as she does of Geoffrey-Hugh,” the Earl smiled at the visitors.

It was plain to Janice, as she watched during the evening, that his world had its centre in Rosamund, and she guessed, from a few words said by the Countess and afterwards confirmed by other friends, that it was only his marriage that had given him new life and made him as well as he was. She saw, too, that Rosamund’s eyes followed him all the time, with a hint of secret anxiety in their blue depths.

“She’s afraid she may not have him for very long,” Janice thought.

“We won’t talk to Jen till the morning,” Rosamund said, as they left the table. “If we aren’t going to tell her who you are, it’s a shame to leave her wondering all night. We’ll send Joan-Two off to bed, and you shall tell me what Joy and Joan-One were like at sixteen.”

“I want to hear the stories too!” Joan protested.

“Hard lines!” said Lord Kentisbury. “I sympathise entirely. Couldn’t they sit on your bed to talk?”

“Geoffrey, how wicked of you!” Rosamund cried.

Joan danced with joy. “Oh, a marvellous idea! How topping of you to think of it! Oh, please, Lady Kentisbury! Please do!”

“Just for half an hour,” the Earl said hastily, his eyes full of amusement.

"I don't approve," Janice remarked. "But since it has been put into her head, I don't suppose she'll go to sleep."

"I couldn't! It's a lovely plan! Oh, please!"

Rosamund laughed. "I sympathise too, of course. Anybody would want to hear her mother's stories of old times! But Joan-Two has had a hectic day and she ought to rest. It was too bad of you to suggest it, Geoffrey. Just for a few minutes, then! We'll come when you're in bed, Littlejan; now hurry!"

Joan darted to the door, then stopped in dismay.

"I can't find my way. I know I'll be lost in your huge Castle."

She was conducted to her room and shown the nearest bathroom, and Rosamund and Janice went to the nurseries to look at sleeping Roderick and little Lord Verriton.

"Roddy was the heir until Hugh arrived," Rosamund said, as they bent over the baby's cot. "Not because he's my brother, of course! Geoffrey and I were related, though we aren't first cousins; Roddy was the next to have the title, until Geoffrey had a son."

"You're anxious about Lord Kentisbury, I'm afraid." Janice spoke with deep sympathy.

"It's the only cloud," Rosamund said soberly. "Everything else is so happy. He's not strong, though he's wonderfully better. At one time he was quite an invalid; it's amazing to see him going about and doing things normally. He will try to do too much, and I can't always make him be careful. I do my best, and he's usually very good, but sometimes it can't be helped. I don't like this trip to town to-morrow, when he's been out all to-day, but it really seemed necessary he should go."

"It's hard for you to be always anxious."

"I was prepared for that when I married. At first I thought it would mean nursing and giving him a few happier years than he'd ever known; he'd had rather a lonely time. When I was first engaged I didn't dare to hope we'd have a normal family life; but he improved enormously even before we were married. We've heaps to be thankful for; and we are very thankful. But I watch him all the time. Now come and sit on Joan-Two's bed!"

Janice told of exploration and disaster underground, in the tunnels below the Abbey ruins; of country-dancing on the lawn of the Hall; of the finding of the Monks' Path and the hermit's cave; of May Queens and coronations. When presently she insisted that Joan must be left to sleep, Rosamund led her downstairs, saying quietly, when the bedroom door was closed, "You've been tactful and kind, and of course you couldn't say more before the child, but what about the other side of Joy? Well, don't tell me! We all love her in spite of it, and we won't discuss her. But you needn't tell me you spent parts of two summers at the Hall and yet didn't see Joy's difficult side."

Janice knit her brows. "I saw very little of it. She had just inherited her house and she was radiantly happy and full of excitement. Occasionally she was hasty and spoke on impulse, but there was nothing serious. Has she been so difficult since she grew up?"

"No, but she has a side that flares out and hurts people. We've all felt it, and yet we love her. I'm glad you've no hard memories of her."

"I loved them all. But Joan came first, and—yes, Jenny-Wren came second. I'm longing to see her again."

"I'm longing to see her when she sees you! Come and look at some of our family treasures! We shall be tempted to ring her up, if we talk about her; and it wouldn't be kind." And Rosamund led the way by long corridors to the great hall and the library and picture-gallery, switching on many lights as she went.

Joan was still awake when her mother came up to bed. "I'm too thrilled to sleep! Fancy being in a castle all night! This is the loveliest place, Mother!"

"And the kindest people, Littlejan. Remember that they didn't even know us this morning."

"It doesn't seem possible. I feel I've known them for ages."

"I've always found people were very good to me. It was just the same last time; Joan and Joy welcomed me as if I'd been an old friend. I wish we could do something for them all!" Janice remarked.

"They've got everything they could possibly want, it seems to me."

"I know. All the giving has to be on their side. If a chance came and there was something we could do, how glad I should be!" Janice said.

Breakfast was spread out of doors in bright sunshine, in an angle of the grey stone walls. Joan cried out in delight at the sight. "Oh, I do like this!"

"It's a sheltered spot. The parapet keeps off the wind," Rosamund explained, "and we have the sun and all the view. You can look down on the town and the bridge, and there's a glimpse of the sea."

Janice leaned on the wall and gazed out over the river valley to the woods. "Delightful! And so original; a most unusual morning-room. It feels like going back into the Middle Ages."

"There ought to be pages and varlets—whatever they were—and men-at-arms, with bows and arrows," Joan said.

"Now, after a mediæval breakfast, come and be modern, and telephone to Jenny-Wren!" Rosamund invited Janice to follow her. "Joan-Two, if you go straight down that stair you'll find the garden. Roddy's in the sandpit again."

"Oh, cheers!" and Joan raced down the turret steps.

“You mustn’t speak, for Jen might know your voice,” Rosamund said, when she had asked to be put through to the Manor. “But if you stand there you’ll hear what she says.—I want Lady Marchwood herself, please. Oh, Jen! Rosamund speaking. If I run over in the car, will you give me a spot of lunch to-day?”

“Sure! Just a spot. Won’t Geoffrey give you any?” There was laughter in the voice that replied.

“He has to lunch in town. I want to see you.”

“Oh, please do come! Come early, and bring Roddy and Lord Verriton with you. Baby—I mean Katharine—is fond of Geoffrey-Hugh. I mean them to grow up good friends.”

“Matchmaking already?” Rosamund mocked. “I shan’t bring him; serves you right. I say, Jen! I’ve a friend staying with me who knew you at school, when you were quite an infant. I’ve been hearing all sorts of stories about your young days. She’s pining to see you again. May I bring her along?”

“Who?” Jen cried. “Not Rena?”

“No. Somebody else; it’s to be a surprise.”

“Which of our old girls has been away as long as that? Not Marguerite, from America?”

“No; you’ll never guess. I may bring her, then?”

“Oh, rather! If you don’t, I shall come flying to find out. Come as early as you can, and bring anybody you like.”

“Good! No public duties to-day?”

“No public works all this week. I’m going to see Joan and Jimmy soon.”

Rosamund laughed across at Janice. “I went to ask for Joan yesterday, but I didn’t see her. I made such an ass of myself! I insisted on riding, though every one said it was too far. And it was, and I had to sit by the roadside while Ferguson phoned for the car to take me home. I felt like a gipsy or a tramp.”

“The Countess in the gutter! I’m glad you had the sense not to ride home.”

“I’d promised Geoffrey. He’s much relieved that I kept my word.”

“I should think so! You won’t ride to-day, I hope? It’s too far, Ros.”

“I shall be well-behaved and come by car. I must consider my visitor.”

“Yes, of course. Won’t you tell me who——?”

“No,” Rosamund said firmly. “How are the children? Nursery all O.K.?”

“Oh, quite! Come soon, then, and put an end to my misery!” and Jen rang off.

“How pleased she’ll be!” Rosamund turned away with Janice. “And I shall certainly lose you. She’ll keep you, once she gets hold of you!”

“It’s marvellous to have heard Jen’s voice again!” Janice said. “She sounded just like herself.”

CHAPTER VII

JANDY MAC AND DAUGHTER

To Joan's delight Rosamund gave up a couple of hours to showing her guests something of the Castle. She led them through the State Apartments and allowed them to climb to the top of the keep; then, after coffee in the Children's Garden, watching Roddy and Hugh, the car was sent for and they set out.

"We'll drive through the park, so that you'll see that side of the place too," the Countess said. "You've looked down on it from the walls, but you'd like a closer view. Watch for the deer, Joan-Two! They're beautiful creatures, and there will be young ones now."

The sight of the baby deer with their mothers, of the beechwoods near the High Gate, and the distant view of the turrets of the Castle above the trees, put the finishing touch to Joan's joy.

"What a marvellous place to live! I'll never forget having seen it! Don't you love every inch of it?"

"I think I do, now," Rosamund assented. "At first I felt it was too big and overwhelming. But last autumn when Maidlin stayed with me she said I had a lovely home; and I realised, when she said it, that it was beginning to feel like home to me. Now, of course, with Geoffrey-Hugh here, it really seems like a home!"

They raced through miles of sunlit country, through Sussex and Surrey and across the Thames, and so at last to the borders of Oxfordshire, and found once more round green hills and great beechwoods, like those they had left at Kentisbury.

A white gate came in sight, giving entrance to a gravelled drive that led away among trees. Leaning on the gate, and throwing it wide at their approach, was a tall person dressed in vivid blue, with uncovered yellow curls waving about her head.

"Lady Marchwood!" Rosamund glanced at Janice.

"It *is* Jenny-Wren! Yards taller than she used to be—and she's bobbed her hair and it's gone all curly; but it's Jen herself," Janice cried eagerly.

"She looks just terribly nice," Joan murmured.

The car drew up inside the gate, and Jen darted to the door. "Glad to see you, Rosamunda! Now who is it? What have you dug up out of the past?"

"I don't believe she knows me," Janice began to laugh.

A shout rang out. "*Jandy Mac!* I didn't believe it till she laughed! Jandy Mac come to see us again! And—and she's brought"—Jen gazed joyfully at Joan—"she's brought a daughter! Jandy Mac and daughter! It's too good to be true!"

She was tugging at the door. Rosamund opened it, and Jen sprang in, seeming to fill the whole of the big car. "Tell me! When did you come? Why didn't you write? What's the daughter's name? She's much more like you, as I remember you, than you are yourself; but you are Jandy, and just as pretty as ever, although you're grown-up and proper! Am I grown-up and proper too?"

"No, not one scrap!" Janice managed to interrupt the stream of questions. "I don't believe you're a day older than when I saw you last."

"I was fourteen; that's fifteen years ago. Jandy Mac, you must be over thirty! Gosh, isn't it queer?" Jen cried. "All I can say is, you don't look it. Do you remember wearing a school gymmy, when you were eighteen, and we said you looked about eleven? How long are you going to stay? You'll stay with me, won't you? Why have you had her, Ros?" and she whirled round to Rosamund. "You never knew her! It isn't fair! Why is she staying with you? Why didn't she come to us?"

"She has come to you, Jenny-Wren," Rosamund spoke soothingly. "She tried to go to Joan and found that was no good; she rang up Joy and that was no use; happily I found her before she'd gone back to town in disgust."

Jen looked at Janice. "You've chosen a jolly bad time to turn up unexpectedly, haven't you? But what about me? Had you forgotten me?"

"I didn't know where you lived," Janice apologised. "I'd heard you were married, but I didn't quite believe it, and what's more I don't believe it now. You don't look the least like the mother of a family."

"Five, I have," Jen boasted. "I'll let you see some of them presently. How many have you? Is this the lot, or is she just a sample?"

Janice laughed. "We've left two boys at home. Joan is the eldest, of course."

"Joan! You really called your first after our Joan? And she called Jansy after you; how lovely of you both! How old are you, Joan Fraser? It's funny to see a little Joan!"

Joan grew scarlet and looked at her mother. "I'm thirteen. Can I see Jansy, please?"

"Soon, but not yet. I'll tell you about her presently. Now what can we do about this? We can't drive to the house with me tramping on your feet—oh, thanks, Ros! That's better!"

Rosamund had let down the small seat facing her. "Perch on that, Jenny-Wren. If it was any distance, I'd have Joan-Two in here, and put you in

front; you're rather large for such a little seat. But as it isn't far, perhaps you'll manage not to fall on top of us."

"What did you call her?" Jen asked, as the car moved on.

"Joan-Two—Joan the Second. We tied ourselves up in knots, trying to keep the Joans distinct, and I had to do something about it."

"Oh, good! I shall call her Joan-Two too. Two Joans would muddle us all, though it's nice to know it's her name," Jen said. "Do you mind, Joan Fraser?"

Joan laughed back at her. "I'd rather be called Joan-Two than Joan Fraser all the time."

"Right! Very wise of you! Now, Jandy Mac, how did this happen? I didn't know you were in England. Did you turn up at Joan's place without giving her any warning? She'd have told me if she'd been expecting you."

"We meant to give her a surprise," Janice admitted. "We'd begun to think we had been silly before we reached the house."

"And instead, Joan gave you a surprise! I suppose you didn't see young Jim?"

"Oh, no! We only spoke to the maid at the door."

"I was there, talking to Jack Raymond," Rosamund explained. "Jandy Mac decided to ring up the Abbey and ask if she could see Joy, from the phone-box round the corner. I heard young Joan speak about the Hall and the Abbey and the twins, and she didn't do it in a whisper, so I challenged them and asked if I could be any help. I whirled them off to Kentisbury, to show them Geoffrey-Hugh, and it was evening before I mentioned you. Jandy Mac fell on my neck in rapture, at the thought of seeing Jenny-Wren again, but I wouldn't let her come till this morning."

Jen looked reproachfully at Janice. "Why didn't you come rushing to me, as soon as you heard about Joan and Joy?"

"Because I didn't know where you lived. I simply hadn't realised that you had settled down next door to Joy. If you had written to me occasionally——" Janice began, intent on getting the reproach in before it was hurled at herself.

"If you'd written to *me*!" Jen retorted. "You always wrote to Joan. I've had other things to do. I've a much bigger family than you have, and I've been married years less than you. I've the biggest family of any of us."

"And you're jolly proud of yourself," Rosamund mocked. "We all know you've been frightfully clever!"

"Here we are," Jen said, as the white wide-spread house, surrounded by lawns and roses, came into view. "Of course, it will seem like a cottage, if you've spent a night in Rosamund's Castle! But it's quite a nice little Manor House, in its way."

“We kept losing ourselves in the Castle,” Joan was hanging over the back of her seat, as usual. “But it was thrilling to sleep there.”

“I hope you’ve brought all your baggage,” Jen said earnestly, as the car drew up. “For I won’t let you go away now that I’ve found you. I’ll hop out first; then you’ll be able to move. Just that one tiny case? Where’s all the rest? In town? Oh, well, we’ll send for everything you have. I’m going to keep you now.”

“I knew I shouldn’t stand a chance, once Jen captured you,” Rosamund remarked. “But if you quarrel with her, Jandy Mac, just come back to me. We’ll always be glad to see you, and you know we’ve plenty of room!”

CHAPTER VIII

THE FRIENDLY HOUSE

“Are you beginning to feel welcomed?” Jen looked anxiously at Janice. “It makes me shudder to think of someone coming all the way from a South Sea Island and finding nobody wanted her. You must have felt simply terrible! Were you going straight back to Australia?”

Janice laughed. “We were going off to Scotland. I was going to write to Joan from there and ask if we might come back when she was ready for visitors. It was our own fault entirely.”

“Oh, absolutely!” Jen said briskly. “You deserved it. I’m afraid it was a blow, but you asked for it. All the same, I’m sorry it happened, and I hope you’ll soon begin to feel there really is somebody who has time to be glad to see you.”

“Lady Kentisbury made us feel that at once. We had a thoroughly happy night in her Castle.”

“Simply marvellous!” Joan added, putting in her word as usual.

“Ros, I’ll never stop thanking you for rescuing the stranded travellers, but I’ll never forgive you for keeping them all to yourself!” Jen threatened. “Why didn’t you bring them straight to us?”

“Because I was hungry and I wanted to go home,” Rosamund explained, with laughing eyes.

“Hungry! You could have come here to lunch! You wanted to show off your Castle and your boy.”

“Kentisbury was much nearer. We’d have been famished if we’d waited to come here; and you might not have been in.”

“As a matter of fact I wasn’t,” Jen admitted. “I had a Hospital Committee meeting and I went to lunch with the chairman afterwards. But you could have sent Jandy Mac here in the afternoon! You’ve been talking over old times, when you weren’t there, without any of us who *were* there!”

“I told her I felt like the cat stealing the cream off the family milk,” Rosamund agreed.

“I’m sure she welcomed you as nicely as she could,” Jen looked at Janice. “But I’m frightfully jealous, all the same. *I* ought to have had you in *my* house, for your first night!”

“That’s nice of you, Jenny-Wren,” Janice laughed. “But she was really beautifully kind, so won’t you forgive her?”

“Perhaps, if you stay with me for a long, long while. Come away in! We needn’t stand on the doorstep to argue with Rosamund.”

“I want to see those troops of children,” Janice began.

“It’s not a quiet house,” Jen confessed. “Do you mind? With boys of seven and eight, and several little ones, there has to be a good deal of noise.”

“I like noise. I’m used to it,” Janice assured her.

“Andrew and Tony go to school,” Jen explained. “It really seemed time for them to start, and when John and Jansy turned up we decided to send them all together. So we pack the car full of children and send them off at half-past eight and fetch them again in the evening. But this is half-term, and the whole school gang, all four, have been sent off in the car for a long-promised trip. They’ll be home again in a couple of days. You can see the nursery section at once. Babies or lunch first—which?”

“Babies,” Janice said promptly.

“Good for you! Come up to the nursery, then.”

“But I wanted to see Jansy!” Joan mourned. “I’ve come all the way from Australia on purpose. There’s something I’m in a hurry to ask her.”

“You’ll see her and the boys in a day or two. Here’s the remnant of my family, Jandy Mac!”

The big sunny nursery held a dark-haired girl who was almost five years old, and a baby boy of two, who was as fair as his mother. A capable-looking nurse was bending over a cradle by the window.

“They almost live in the garden, but they’ve come in for their meal,” Jen explained. “This is Rosemary, and the laddie is Michael. Baby is called Katharine.”

Janice went to look at the six-months’-old baby. “Michael is like you, but the girls aren’t,” she remarked. “Where do you find these small dark people?”

“Jen’s daughters are always little brown gipsies,” said Rosamund.

“Always! You might say both; I’ve only two! The girls are little Marchwoods, Jandy Mac; they take after their father’s family. Kenneth himself is fair, though his eyes are brown, but the family as a whole is dark, as you can see from the old portraits in the corridor. Rosemary and Katharine are true Marchwoods, and lucky for them; the family’s quite a handsome one! The boys are all fair, like Ken and me, so they’re a queer-looking crowd, when they’re together.”

Janice looked at Rosemary’s short dark hair and big brown eyes and at the dark little head in the cradle, and then at Michael’s yellow curls.

“They’re beautiful kiddies, dark or fair, Jen,” she said. “I don’t wonder you’re proud!”

Jen laughed. "I used to be sorry for this old house, when it was shut up for years. I wished it could have a big family, mostly boys, playing in the garden. It's great to think that I've helped to give it the family! You'll see more of them later on; Rosemary Jane's a little shy, but she'll be used to you quite soon. Now come to lunch!"

"Rosemary Jane?"

"Jane is for Joan, and for me, and for Jehane, who lived at the Abbey four hundred years ago. Baby's whole name is Katharine Joy."

"I've been telling her that if ever I have a girl she'll be Rosabel Joy," Rosamund said. "We all feel the same about Joy."

"That seems so odd to me," Janice exclaimed. "I always felt things centred round Joan."

"But I called my first girl for Joan!" Jen protested.

"Joan had left home before I knew any of them," Rosamund added. "To Maidlin and me, Joy has meant everything, for years and years."

"I'm sorry I can't produce a husband," Jen turned to Janice, as she led them to the dining-room. "Kenneth's away for a day or two. I have an old house on the Yorkshire moors, and there's a small farm attached to it; it's called the Grange, which means a farm, you know. There were some points to be decided and Ken knows all about farming, so I sent him off yesterday to see to the business. Andrew and Tony love the moors, and Jansy and John have been promised the trip for a long while, so Ken packed the lot of them into the big car and took them all off my hands."

"Four wild imps in one car! It's a job for Kenneth," Rosamund mocked.

"Oh, but Andrew's there!" Jen laughed back at her. "You know Andrew! He's as steady as a rock. He won't allow any fooling about. They'll be home in a day or two, Jandy Mac. You will believe that I have a husband, won't you?"

"Having seen part of the family, I'll believe it," Janice agreed. "Tell me one thing! Your little Katharine—is she called after Kitty Marchwood, whose old locket and purse you found in the Abbey, among the highwayman's hoarded goods?"

Jen turned to her, bright-eyed. "Of course, you were there! You saw the locket and purse marked K. M. And I invented Kitty Marchwood, as their owner. We found her story later on; didn't we tell you about it in our letters?"

"I believe I did hear something, but it was a long time ago and so many things have happened since then," Janice pleaded.

Jen nodded. "Kitty was real; I was right about her; but she was Katharine Marchwood. I put the old things away and forgot them. Then one day I came across them, and I said to Ken, 'Your initials! Pity we didn't call Rosemary

Katharine!’ So when Girl Number II. turned up we called her after the locket, and some day I shall give them to her. Rosemary will have the other old things we found at the same time; the blue ring and the beads.”

“I always envied Joan and Joy their blue rings,” Janice said. “I couldn’t say so at the time, of course; the Abbey ring had to be given back to Joan. But I was very fond of it and I really felt the parting with it.”

“You could have had sapphires for your engagement ring.”

“Oh, but I love my ruby! I shall steal some of the Countess’s sapphires; she has heaps,” Janice said, laughing. “I’m so glad to hear about your little Kitty Marchwood! It’s very satisfying that she should come to you at last.”

When lunch was over, Janice and Joan were shown their bedroom and the London hotel was rung up and requested to forward the rest of their luggage. “You’ll be staying here for some time,” Jen said, in a tone of authority. “You can go to Scotland to see the relations later on. Joy will be home from New York next month. You’ll want to see her and David.”

“I felt I’d been adopted—not kidnapped, as Lady Kentisbury insists on calling it!—yesterday, when we were carried off to the Castle,” Janice said. “I feel the same to-day. Is adoption still your strong point, Jenny-Wren? It used to be, I remember.”

“Oh, that’s the Abbey!” Rosamund said quickly. “Its influence is over us all. It was sanctuary in the old days, and the same spirit takes hold of anybody who lives there.”

Jen turned startled eyes upon her. “Ros! I never heard you speak of it before. It’s true, of course; Joan and I and Joy have always felt it—the need to welcome any one, for the sake of the Abbey. But I didn’t know you felt it too. We’ve never talked about it to you.”

“It was my home for seven years!”

“Yes, but I didn’t know you had ever thought definitely of the Abbey as sanctuary—not as a conscious idea.”

“Has Maidlin never spoken of it? How like Maid!” Rosamund exclaimed. “It was her idea, when I went back to the Hall on my way home from my honeymoon. We talked about how welcoming the Abbey had been—to us, and to other people; and Maid said, could it be the spirit of the Abbey, of the sanctuary, still being kept alive by us? It seemed a beautiful idea, and I told her she must carry on, ‘bear the torch,’ as we’d all had to go away. She really hasn’t said anything to you?”

“Maid doesn’t talk when she feels most deeply. But I’ve often thought she was quietly carrying on the tradition. I’m so glad you and she discovered it for yourselves!” Jen commented.

“I said to myself at the time that if I could take the same feeling to my home, it would be worth doing, even though the home was a huge,

overwhelming Castle—as it seemed then,” Rosamund added. “I’d like to carry on the Abbey tradition at Kentisbury.”

“You were doing it when you welcomed us so generously,” Janice remarked.

“Oh, but I wanted you! That doesn’t count! I ought to be going home, Jen.”

“Not yet. We’ll sit in the garden, and Joan-Two shall play with Rosemary and Mike, and you’ll have an early cup of tea. After that I’ll let you go.”

Rosamund laughed. “You’re the soul of hospitality, Jenny-Wren! Why not send for Maid and the twins to join the party?”

“No, I think not,” Jen considered the matter. “Jandy Mac will be dizzy with meeting new people, and she’ll mix up all the offspring and think Roddy belongs to me and Rosemary is a sister of the twins. We’ll make her feel at home with the Manor tribe before we take her to the Hall.”

“*I’m* not muddled about the kids!” Joan had been listening to the conversation. “I know which they all belong to!”

“I have them quite distinct so far,” Janice said, laughing, as they set up deck-chairs on the lawn, below sloping green banks. “Lord Verriton and Roddy are at the Castle, and Rosemary and Michael and Katharine are yours.”

“The muddle will begin when Jansy and John and my lads and Joy’s twins are all jumping round you,” Jen warned her.

The nurse spread a rug and brought Baby Katharine to lie kicking bare-legged in the sun. Rosemary made up her mind that Joan was to be trusted, and came to ask for a game of hide and seek in the bushes, Michael’s little hand held firmly in hers.

The maid brought tea, and Janice, Rosamund and Jen sat and talked of old times.

“This is the jolliest place!” Janice said happily. “I don’t think of it as the Manor. I call it The Friendly House.”

“How lovely of you!” Jen exclaimed. “You’re quite sure you’re feeling really welcomed and at home?”

“Perfectly welcomed and thoroughly at home,” Janice assured her.

“Then we’ll let Ros go back to her Castle. She knows you’ll be all right in my hands.”

“I never had a moment’s doubt of it,” Rosamund laughed.

CHAPTER IX

TRAGEDY COMES TO THE MANOR

Jen persisted in her decision not to introduce Maidlin and the twins till the next day. "It's Maid's Camp Fire night; she'll be busy. To-morrow you'll want to see the Abbey, so we'll go along and you shall meet her and the twins. Did you hear her sing yesterday? Lovely, wasn't it? I was sure Rosamund would listen; she never misses any broadcast of Maidlin's and she goes to her concerts whenever she can. They're very close pals; Maid spends a lot of time at Kentisbury. Before Geoffrey-Hugh was born she was there for weeks, keeping Ros company. They have rather a wonderful friendship, and Rosamund's marriage hasn't spoiled it. Each seems to have something to give the other."

"That's as it should be. It's delightful for them both," Janice agreed.

"Is this what you did last night?" Jen demanded, when they had sat talking over old memories all evening.

"Much the same. But of course I couldn't share experiences with Lady Kentisbury; we could only exchange yarns. I told her about you in the Abbey tunnels, and she told me about your quiet little wedding when the twins were a week old."

"Poor Joy! That was the day the news of their father's death was confirmed and Kenneth told me I was not Mrs. Marchwood, as I'd hoped to be. Joy was lonely for seven years. It's wonderful to see her happy again."

"How do the twins like having a stepfather?"

"They adore him, especially as he has given them a little brother; half a little brother, as Margaret insists on calling him!"

"We'll go to the Abbey presently," Jen said next morning. "I know you want to show it to your Joan. But I must have a word with cook first. There's the telephone; will you amuse yourself with the newspaper, Jandy Mac?"

She went to answer the phone, and Janice took up the paper. "Yes? This is the Manor. Yes, Jen speaking. Oh, you extravagant people!" Jen cried gaily. "It's the Grange, Jandy Mac, near Sheffield. Yes? Oh, Mary, is it you? How are you all? *What?*"

At the changed note in her voice Janice looked up sharply. Then she flung down the paper and ran to Jen's side. Jen, white and shaking, looked at her piteously. "Hold on to me, Jandy! There's bad news—an accident. Now, Mary, tell me. Yes, there's someone here with me. I promise not to faint. Is it the children?"

Janice, standing with her arm round her, could hear the strange little voice in the distance.

“Jen, dear, it’s Sir Kenneth. He’s rather badly hurt. It was the car.”

“Is he dead, Mary?” Jen’s voice was peremptory and very cold. “Are you breaking it to me gently?”

“No, certainly not. The doctor speaks hopefully of him. But we’d like to have you here.”

“I’ll come to-day—at once. Can you tell me more? The children weren’t with him?”

“No, thank God!” The words were full of fervent gratitude, and Jen and Janice echoed them. “He was alone in the car, just starting out an hour ago. A small child in the village ran right under his wheels; he had to pull up too suddenly, and the car swerved and went over into a deep ditch. He couldn’t do anything else; there was no carelessness, except on the part of the baby.”

“No, being Kenneth, he couldn’t,” Jen sobbed. “How bad is it, Mary? You’re *sure* he isn’t killed?”

“Dear, no! I wouldn’t dare to tell you a lie. He’s unconscious, and there may be internal injury, and I’m afraid his arm is fractured. All things that should mend with time, but we want you here.”

“Of course,” Jen said brokenly. “Don’t mind me, Mary; I’m all right, really. It’s just the thought of Ken—but I won’t think—I mustn’t. Thank you for breaking it to me, dear. I’m sure it was hard for you. I’ll come at once. I’ll ring up on the journey, and you’ll tell me how he is. Take care of him for me!” Her voice shook for a moment, but she hurried on. “And—Mary! Tell Andrew and Tony I’ll be there to-night. Are they heartbroken?”

“They’re frightened, of course, but Andrew is being a brick and keeps assuring the others his father will be all right.”

Jen gave a sobbing laugh. “Andrew’s always a tower of strength! I’m glad he’s there. Tell them I’m coming as fast as I can. Thank you, Mary. I say, Mary! Pray for Ken to-day!”

“And for you,” Mary’s response came instantly.

“Thanks, dear.” And Jen put down the receiver.

Then, with a broken sigh, she sank to the ground.

Janice had been prepared for it. She could not hold Jen, who was taller than herself, but she lowered her gently into a chair, and then sprang to the bell.

Before the startled maid appeared, Jen was sitting up, however, white to the lips but otherwise herself again.

“Sorry, Jandy, dear! Did you hear?”

“I heard it all. I’ll tell your people; don’t go over it again for anybody. How can I help?”

The maid exclaimed at sight of her mistress, and Janice went quickly to her in the doorway.

“She’s had a shock. Ask Nurse to come. Sir Kenneth has had a car accident and is badly hurt. Lady Marchwood will want to go to him at once.”

Nurse came running down with a glass in her hand. “Oh, my lady! This will help you.”

Jen drank obediently. “Thanks! But I’m all right now. Did Mrs. Fraser tell you? Now, Nurse, help me to plan. Jandy, I’ll have to forsake you. Nurse, I must go, and I must take baby. I can’t leave her so suddenly. You’d better come too; I must have somebody with me. Pack for her and yourself, as quickly as you can. Tell Edith to pack a case for me.”

“But the other children?” Nurse hesitated. “You won’t take them all?”

“No. There are too many there already. I’m more likely to send Jansy and the boys home. I don’t know!” Jen’s voice shook. “How can I leave Rosemary and Michael? Cook can’t attend to them, and the girls are so young.”

“Those girls can’t be trusted with the children,” Nurse said emphatically. “They’re all right in the house, but they don’t know the first thing about children.”

“I know.” Jen knit her hands together in distress. “I’d send them to the Hall, if Miss Devine was there, but she’s at the Grange. I can’t ask Maidlin to take two little ones, as well as the twins! She’d do it, but it wouldn’t be right. If I could find some capable person, who’d had experience! Jandy Mac!” She sprang up, her face eager. “You’ve had experience—you’ve had three of your own—you’re a capable person! You’ll take care of the house and the children for me, won’t you?”

Janice drew a long breath. “It’s a big responsibility, Jen, but I’ll do what I can. At a time like this there’s no choice. And I want to help.”

“Would you rather have Mrs. Fraser with you, if I stayed with the children?” Nurse began.

“I think you should go,” Janice said quickly. “The baby is used to you and you know what she needs.”

Jen considered the matter. “If you don’t mind taking over the house and family, that will be best, Jandy Mac. I ought to have Nurse, for baby’s sake. I think, perhaps, you’ve been sent on purpose to help me at this time. Now how are we to go? That’s the next question.”

“By car?” Janice questioned.

“Yes, but we have only a little run-about here. Ken”—her voice shook, but she hurried on—“took the big car, because of the children.”

“You could borrow the car from the Hall?” Nurse began.

“It’s in Wycombe, being repaired. There was something wrong and the man insisted on its being overhauled,” Jen said in despair, and sat staring at them hopelessly.

CHAPTER X

ROSAMUND SAVES THE SITUATION

Janice's mind went to the big comfortable saloon in which she had arrived the day before. She had no time to make the suggestion, however, for Jen had started up and seized the telephone.

"Kentisbury Castle? Put me through to Lady Kentisbury, please. Rosamund, Jen speaking. Ros, I want your biggest car for a day or two. Will you lend it to me?"

"Anything I have, Jenny-Wren. But why this sudden need? There's nothing wrong, is there?"

Jen broke down suddenly, and thrust the instrument towards Janice. "Tell her! I simply can't!" and she fled from the room.

"What's the matter, Jen?" Rosamund was demanding urgently.

"Lady Kentisbury—Janice Fraser speaking—Jen has had bad news. Sir Kenneth has been hurt in a car crash, and she wants to go to him."

"How bad is it?" Rosamund gave a gasp of dismay, but did not lose her head.

"We can hardly tell. They've just rung up," and Janice repeated the few details she had heard. "There's no car available, big enough for such a long journey. She must take the baby, and so she needs the nurse. If you could possibly help——"

"Tell her our biggest car will be along as soon as possible—soon after eleven, I hope. What about the other children, if Nurse goes with her?"

"She's going to trust them to me. I'm terrified of the responsibility, but I must do what I can."

There was a moment's pause. Then Rosamund said, "Could I speak to Jen herself? Ask her to come; tell her I know all about it and I want to make a suggestion."

Jen took the receiver from Janice. "Thanks, Jandy Mac. I'm all right now. Sorry I broke down. Ros? I'm sorry I ran away. It was too much for me, for a moment. Has Jandy told you?"

"Yes. Jen, dear, why don't you send Rosemary and Mike to me? They'd be all right here, and we'd love to have them."

"Oh—Ros!" Jen choked. "Ros, would you? It would be a thousand times better than leaving them here, without Nurse, and it was terribly hard on Jandy. She's a brick and she'd have done it beautifully, but I hated having to ask her. It's no joke to take care of somebody else's two and five-year-olds!"

"I have nurses on the spot, and I'll wire for another, if we need more help. Jen, I shall send a procession of cars. The first will be for your use for as long as you like, with Burnett to drive you. You can rely on him absolutely. The second will bring Mike and Rosemary here; poor mites, they'll be frightened, but they'll soon cheer up. Roddy will be charmed to have playmates! They'll suit him exactly."

"Ros, I've no words to thank you!" Jen said unsteadily. "But I can't let my family invade your house in that way!"

"Bosh! Tosh! I'm frightfully hurt that you didn't merely ring up and say you were sending them. I'd have been really proud, if you'd taken it for granted. You couldn't plant them on Maid, as Mary isn't at home, of course. I should have thought I was the obvious one to have them. I'm sure I parked Roddy with you often enough! I'll expect them, then. You'll send Jandy Mac and Joan-Two, as well, of course!"

Jen looked at Janice. "She's having the children at the Castle, and she'd like you to go back, too. Will you go, or would you rather stay here, or go to the Hall? I haven't said how sorry I am to be deserting you, but you know I can't help it."

"May I speak to her, if you've finished?"

"Ros, are you still there? Jandy Mac will take over. I must go; I've a lot to do. Ros, dear, a million thanks for your kindness! You've saved the situation."

"I'm glad to be able to help. My good wishes will be with you, Jen dearest. Let me have news when you can. Is that Jandy Mac? You will come, won't you?"

"Lady Kentisbury, it's more than kind of you, but Joan and I could go back to town quite well. We can't foist ourselves on the people at the Hall, as we haven't met them."

"You *could* go to the Hall! As old friends of Joy's and Jen's, you'd be made welcome at any time and especially in a crisis such as this. But they're strangers to you; wouldn't it be pleasanter for you to come back here?"

"Oh, much jollier!" Janice said promptly. "But why should you be troubled with us? The children are different; as they're so small they'll be merely an addition to your nursery. But Joan and I would be guests, and Lord Kentisbury likes to have you to himself, I'm sure. We'd be in the way."

"I wouldn't like to have to say bosh and tosh to you, Mrs. Fraser," Rosamund retorted, "but I feel like it. We want you to come. *I* want you! You and I are much older friends of Jen's than my husband is; he'll be sympathetic and sorry, but he can't feel for her as we do. And I'm burdened by the responsibility of having her children—though I hope you won't tell her so! Rosemary is given to bouts of croup and I'd be terrified if she had

one when her parents weren't there. I want you to hold my hand if anything goes wrong; my nurses would do all that was needed, but they wouldn't be companions. Please come! Joan-Two can be a real help with the children, if she cares to; and you'll be a help to *me*."

"I don't quite believe all that, but you put it so convincingly that we'll certainly come," Janice said gratefully. "And please don't say Mrs. Fraser! I've enjoyed being Jandy Mac again so much!"

"Run along and pack that little bag," Rosamund commanded. "I suppose the rest of your stuff hasn't arrived yet? No, there hasn't been time. We'll send for it when it's delivered at the Manor."

Janice packed her few possessions while she broke the news to Joan.

"Back to the Castle?" Joan gave a skip of delight. "Oh, marvellous! And we're to take Mike and Rosemary with us? I'll be nurse for them and Roddy and take care of them all, shall I? I never dared to hope I'd see the Castle again to-day!"

"That's all very well," her mother said, "but don't forget why we're going. Suppose you hear presently that Rosemary and Michael and the rest have no father?"

Joan sobered suddenly. "It's not as bad as that, is it?"

"We don't know. It's bad, or they wouldn't have asked Lady Marchwood to go so far, in such a hurry."

The telephone rang again, and Janice, with fear in her heart, opened the bedroom door.

"Is it more bad news?" Joan asked, awed and anxious.

"I don't know yet. I must stand by Lady Marchwood, just in case."

"Jandy Mac!" Jen's voice called in urgent appeal.

"What is it, Jen, dear?" Janice hurried out.

"Answer the phone for me—oh, please! I simply daren't. I can't bear it again!"

Jen was in the corridor, leaning against the wall, white and shaking. "If—if Kenneth——!" she whispered.

Janice raced past her. "Jen, pull yourself together! It may not be about him. Perhaps it's the Castle again."

She caught up the receiver. "Who is it? I'm speaking for Lady Marchwood."

The voice which had spoken from Yorkshire came again. "Please tell her there's better news. Sir Kenneth has spoken to us. It's a real improvement."

"Jen!" Janice cried. "He's better. Don't break down now!—Can you tell me any more? Who is speaking? She'll ask me."

"Mary Devine. I hoped I'd catch Jen before she started. Sir Kenneth woke and the nurse saw he wanted to speak, so she called me. He said, 'Tell

Jen I'm sorry. The kid was like Rosemary.' Then he fell asleep, and the doctor is satisfied. Jen will have an easier journey now. But we'd like her to come."

"I'm quite sure nobody could stop her! We're just waiting for a car; Lady Kentisbury is lending her big one, and she's taking the children to the Castle."

"Oh, good!" Mary cried. "That's like Rosamund!"

"Yes, she's more than kind. Thank you so much! I'll go and tell Jen."

"I wonder who she is?" Mary, in Yorkshire, said to herself. "That last time she forgot to say 'Lady Marchwood'! Perhaps she's coming with her in the car; she said 'we.' But I couldn't keep her from Jen, just to answer my questions."

"Jenny-Wren!" Janice raced upstairs. "He's really better, dear. He's spoken to them, and the doctor is pleased." And she repeated Kenneth's words.

Jen had sunk down on a couch. "I'm not going to pieces, Jandy Mac; I'm all right. If the baby reminded Ken of Rosemary, that would be enough! He'd be killed himself rather than risk hurting her. But of course he didn't mean that. If it had been a black baby it would have been just the same; Ken couldn't risk hitting a child. Jandy, was I an awful coward not to go to the phone myself? The last time was such a shock! I went all like jelly inside when I heard the bell again."

"You were quite right, Jen, dear." Janice put her arm round her. "I explained; it was somebody called Mary."

"Mary Dorothy Devine. Give your Joan her books to read; Rosamund has them all. Mary's staying at the Grange, but she lives with Maid at the Hall. Have you packed, Jandy Mac?"

"I'd just finished, when the phone went. Can I help you or Nurse?"

"No, the maids will do it all. It's good for me to be busy. Oh, how thankful I am to Mary! I didn't know how I'd bear the journey! If he's improving, surely——!"

"I'm sure he'll be all right," Janice exclaimed. "But he'll want you badly. You must be there."

"Oh, I must go, but I shan't feel quite so shaky now, thanks to Mary." Jen raised her head and spoke more steadily. "Jandy Mac, you're my visitor, and I'm turning you out of the house and rushing away and leaving you. I thought of one thing I could do for you, just before the phone went——"

"Jen, *dear!* Don't trouble about us!" Janice cried.

"But I want you to do this. I'll give you the key of the Abbey gate—I have a key, you know; Joan gave it to me herself. Take your Joan and show her the Abbey. The car won't be here for more than an hour. You can't go

away without having been into the Abbey! You'd like to show it to your girl, and I know she wants to see it."

"We can wait for all that!" Janice protested.

"Why should you? I'd like to feel you had seen it." Jen rose and went to her room. "Here's the key. You run along and make friends with it again! And—Jandy Mac! If you see anybody at the house, tell them what has happened and that I'm going away." Her voice shook for a moment. "I haven't rung up Maidlin; Ros will tell her—they often talk at night. I just can't go over it all again, even for Maid. But I don't expect you'll see any one. They were going to the village this morning, and I think they'll have started. Maid will know who you are, if she does see you. I told her about you last night, and we planned that you'd go there to-day."

"You're sure I couldn't be any help?" Janice hesitated. "I'm longing to see the Abbey again, of course."

"Quite sure. I've heaps of help, and as soon as the car comes I shall hurl Nurse and baby in and leap in myself and we'll be gone. The other car can wait till you're ready, and my girls will look after Rosemary and Mike till you come. Poor babes! I do hate leaving them! You must comfort them for me. Go along, Jandy Mac! I shall feel much better if you've had even one hour in the Abbey!"

CHAPTER XI

MAIDLIN HEARS THE NEWS

Following Jen's directions Janice and Joan took a path through the orchard and came out near a small lake, with an island which held one big oak tree.

"I'd like to climb that tree!" Joan said. "Look, there's an old punt! Oh, Mother, couldn't I go to the island?"

"No time just now," her mother said firmly. "I remember that island in the old days. This is our road, Littlejan."

"You do know the way!" Joan said admiringly, when they had passed through a small gate, crossed a lane, and entered a shrubbery by another wicket-gate.

"It makes me feel eighteen again, to be going through this garden. I expect to meet Joan and Joy, at sixteen, with their red hair hanging in long plaits. The house is just——"

"Can I help you? Are you looking for somebody?" A clear contralto voice accosted them.

They turned quickly, and while her mother replied Joan's eyes were busy. The speaker was a slim girl, with black hair rolled up behind and big black eyes, wearing a woolly suit of lemon yellow. She had come by a path which met their broader track and her approach had been hidden by the laurel bushes.

"We were going to the Abbey," Janice explained. "Lady Marchwood lent us her key and told us to come. She thought everybody would be out. Do you mind our crossing your lawn? I know Joy wouldn't object."

The girl broke into a smile, which changed her rather grave face entirely. "If you feel you can call her Joy, that's enough introduction. You can surely walk across her lawn! Are you the old friends who have turned up? I've heard of you from both Jen and Rosamund, by phone."

"I'm known as Jandy Mac, though my name is Fraser now. This is my Joan. You must be the singer we heard yesterday."

"I was playing with Roddy, but Mother liked your songs fearfully much," Joan said. "Look! I'm taking care of the Abbey key!" and she swung it in her hand.

"Don't lose it! I'm Maidlin." The singer looked at Janice again. "Why didn't Jen come with you? She hasn't rung me up this morning."

"Oh, but—oh, you don't know what's happened!" Joan cried.

Janice turned to her quickly. "Go and look for the Abbey gate, Littlejan! I've told you the way; see if you can find it for yourself."

Joan looked from her to Maidlin. Then went along the path, swinging the key and looking grave.

"What did she mean?" Maidlin asked anxiously. "And why did you send her away?"

"Maidlin—may I leave out the 'Miss'?"

"Oh, please do! I should feel so silly! You're a very old friend of the house, aren't you? Is anything the matter? Please tell me quickly!"

"Jen has had bad news, by phone, this morning. Her husband has had an accident in his car." Janice spoke quickly, thinking it the kindest way.

"Oh, poor Jen!" Maidlin gasped. "Is it serious?"

"I'm afraid so, but we had a second message half an hour ago, to say there was some improvement in his condition," and Janice repeated Kenneth's words for Jen. "She's going at once, of course. She hadn't time even to talk to you, and she thought you would be out, you know."

"The children hadn't finished their lessons. That's why we're late," Maidlin said brokenly. "I give the twins lessons in the morning. We ought to have been out by now, but Margaret played about and wouldn't work—and then I was sent for, to speak to the gardener. What about Jansy and the boys?" The distress in her face deepened.

"They're all right. Sir Kenneth was alone in the car." Janice told what she could of the accident and explained the plans Jen had made.

Maidlin knit her brows. "Couldn't we be any use? Must Rosamund do it all? We'd like to help, and we're so near."

"Jen felt you had your hands full with the twins, and that it wouldn't be fair to send Rosemary and Michael to you as well."

"I'd be nervous of having them," Maidlin admitted. "Rosemary has never been strong. Yes, I'd have been frightened, though I'd have done it if Jen had asked me."

"There are trained nurses at Kentisbury Castle," Janice suggested.

"Yes, Jen's right to send the children there. But I wish we could have done something; I don't like being left out! Couldn't you come to us? You've had one night with Rosamund already. You ought to come to Joy's house!"

Janice looked down at her troubled face with appreciation and gratitude. "That's really very kind! But you didn't know us, and you were only a voice to me—though a voice that gave me great joy, I do assure you! I couldn't dump myself on you."

"Not on a voice," Maidlin assented, a smile glimmering in the dark depths of her eyes. "It doesn't sound at all pleasant or welcoming! It would

be difficult to feel at home with a voice! But I'm not still only a voice, am I?"

"You're a kind and welcoming friend!"

"That's what I'd like to be. Won't you come and stay with us?"

"You make it difficult for me to refuse! But I must go to Kentisbury; I've promised Jen to take care of her children in the car."

"Poor babes! They'll be worried at being sent away. Yes, I see that. I shall talk to Rosamund and say I want my share of you. You could tell me about Joy when she was at school, couldn't you?" Maidlin's face blazed in sudden vivid eagerness. "She was grown-up—twenty-one—when I first knew her. Oh, will you tell me what she was like?"

"Lady Kentisbury asked the same thing. I'll tell you anything I can—some day," Janice promised. "May I say how much we enjoyed your singing yesterday?"

"There wasn't much of it; just those few nursery songs." Maidlin smiled her thanks. "But I like to feel I'm singing to children. I look past the microphone and see our twins."

"Aren't you nervous of the mike? I'm sure I should be."

"I was at first," Maidlin owned. "Now I manage to forget it. But it feels odd to know there's an audience that you can't see, who will know all about it if you cough or drop something."

"I'm sure it does! Appalling, I should think!"

"I don't quite believe it, even now; I mean, that anybody outside the studio will hear me. But when I come home, the twins and Jen tell me all about it, and Ros rings up, and sometimes Joy hears me in New York. That seems quite impossible, of course! But she can always tell me just what happened, so I have to believe it, in a sort of way. I nearly collapsed the first time I had a cable from America, saying, 'Well done, Maid!' It seemed marvellous beyond words."

"I should have had a fit," Janice agreed.

"Do you mind if I don't come with you to the Abbey? Now that I know what's happened I must go to Jen," Maidlin said gravely. "I won't hinder her, if she's busy; but there may be something I could do."

"I offered to help, but she said her maids would do it all."

"I'm sure you'd have done anything, if there was anything to do. Probably I'll only be in time to say good-bye and give her good wishes. But I'd rather do that in person than by phone. You know your way, don't you? You didn't expect to meet me."

"I knew my way fifteen years ago."

"Nothing's changed, except the people in the house." Maidlin smiled up at her. "The twins must be rather like Joy and Joan about twenty years ago."

You must see them presently; they're doing sums in the house—at least, I left them doing their sums! But they'll have to wait for me. I must go to Jen. I'm so glad we met, and I hope I'll see you again soon."

She nodded, and hurried towards the Manor gate.

"I hope so, too," Janice said to herself, as she turned to follow Joan to the Abbey.

CHAPTER XII

JOAN MEETS THE TWINS

“Just *look* at that girl!” A green-clad twin with a mop of red curls turned from the window, her face ablaze with indignation. “Twin, on *our* lawn!”

Her sister leapt to her side, her note-book forgotten. “A strange girl! She’s going to the Abbey! Come on, Margaret! We’ll ask her what she means by it!”

“My sums aren’t done,” Margaret announced gleefully, hurling her books aside. “Will Aunty Maid be cross?”

“Can’t have strange girls dancing about on our lawn, right under our noses,” Elizabeth said firmly. “We must find out where she’s come from. We know where she’s going all right!”

There was no doubt about that. The dark-haired girl who had come skipping from the shrubbery path had darted across the lawn to a similar path on the other side.

“Mother said there was a little opening in the bushes and it led to the gate—and there it is!” she thought exultantly. “And here’s the key!”—it was swinging in her hand. “I shall go in and look at the old place all on my own! I hope that person talks to Mother for quite ten minutes!”

“Hi! What are you doing here?” A wrathful voice hailed her.

“Where did you get that key?” demanded another.

Joan swung round, the entrance to the Abbey path behind her. Two red-haired children of nine raced up, hot and indignant and full of curiosity. They wore short green smocks and were hatless and barelegged, with sandals on their feet.

“And who are you, anyway?” they shouted in unison, and stood confronting her, rather startled to find her so much older than themselves.

Joan, with the superiority of thirteen, gazed at them and swung the key in their faces. “I’m going into the Abbey. It’s all right; you needn’t be so much upset. I’ve had leave to go and I’ve been given the key.”

“It’s our Abbey,” one twin began.

“Our Aunt Joan’s Abbey, Margaret.” The elder twin’s tone held a reproof. “Who gave you the key? And what’s your name?” she asked, regarding the stranger doubtfully.

“My name’s Joan. I’m called after your Aunt Joan, and your cousin Jansy is called after my Mother. She lived here, years ago.”

“Your mother did? I’m quite sure she didn’t!” the more hasty twin exploded. “Our mother has lived here always.”

“Nearly always,” Elizabeth amended. “Before that it was her old grandfather’s house. How could your mother have lived here?”

“Well, she did. Her name’s Janice.”

“Jansy’s name is Janice.” Elizabeth looked at Joan cautiously. “Where is your mother? Didn’t she come with you? Where have you come from?”

“Australia, on purpose to see Jansy, and you, and this old Abbey place.”

“Australia! Gosh!” said the twins together.

Joan seized her chance. “Mother’s coming, but we met somebody, and Mother stopped to speak to her. I was carrying the key, so I scooted on ahead. I want to go into the Abbey on my own, before she comes. She’s going to show me round, but I want to have a look by myself first. Much more sport!”

“We’ll come too!” The twins spoke with one voice.

“Come on, then! I don’t suppose I can get rid of you now.”

“No, you can’t,” Margaret said promptly. “It’s such a good excuse. We were doing our lessons. I hate sums!”

“Must see what you do,” Elizabeth agreed. “You might hurt yourself in the Abbey. We did, once, but it was in the middle of the night.”

“I did, twice,” Margaret shouted, running forward to the gate. “I fell into the well. If you’re going down there I shan’t come.”

“I’m going everywhere,” Joan assured them.

“I’ll open the gate. Give me the key.” Margaret held out her hand.

Unsuspecting, Joan gave it to her. In a moment Margaret was gone, darting up the path with a derisive shout.

“You little pig!” Joan dashed after her.

“This way!” Elizabeth cried. “She’ll go this way!”

Joan followed, and found herself back on the lawn. She looked for Margaret, who was nowhere in sight. She turned to Elizabeth, and found that she, too, had disappeared. The green frocks among the bushes were nowhere to be seen.

“Well, I’m bothered!” Joan said indignantly. “They’ve pinched that key! What little brutes!”

“We aren’t, really.” It was Elizabeth’s voice from somewhere close at hand. “I’ll bring it in a minute.” And sounds of argument followed.

Presently Elizabeth reappeared, the key in her hand. “Margaret’s sorry. I couldn’t take you to find her. She was in a hiding-place of ours; you wouldn’t ever have caught her. But she didn’t mean to pinch your key. Here it is. Let’s go into the Abbey, shall we?”

“Do you have to keep Margaret in order?” Joan asked, looking reproachful, as they went back to the gate.

“She can’t do it!” Margaret shouted, running ahead of them.

“Twin sometimes doesn’t think enough,” Elizabeth said sedately. “When I told her, she knew it wasn’t a right thing to do, to pretend to open the gate for you and then run away with the key.”

“It wasn’t quite sporting,” Joan agreed.

“I’m *not* an unsporting kid!” Margaret protested, her lip quivering suddenly. “Twin said I was.”

“I said you would be, if you didn’t give her back the key,” Elizabeth corrected her. “It’s all right now, isn’t it, Joan? You don’t really think she’s a little pig, do you?”

Joan laughed. “I won’t think it any more. She’s Margaret, is she? Then you’re Elizabeth.”

“That’s clever of you. Will you remember which we are?”

“She won’t remember. She’ll mix us, but we’re used to it,” Margaret shot through the gate as it opened. “This is the Abbot’s garden,” she said hurriedly. “Those windows are the refectory; they’re Perpen-dic-ular, and very fine. This tunnel is the tresaut and it leads to the cloister garth. These dents in the wall are aumbries, where the monks kept their tools and things. Isn’t it a funny word?”

She talked at express speed, anxious to remove the bad impression she had made. Joan understood and laughed, and made no further reference to pigs or keys.

“Who gave you this?” Elizabeth handed the key back to her. “Where did you come from?”

“I told you—Australia,” Joan teased.

“Truly?” Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “That’s a long way!”

“If you came from Australia, why didn’t you come in by the front gate?” Margaret demanded.

“That’s a very sensible question, when you think about it,” Elizabeth looked at her twin in surprised approval. “What were you doing in our garden? And where did you find the key?”

Joan surrendered. “Lady Marchwood gave it to Mother. We’ve been staying in her house.”

“Do you mean Aunty Jen, at the Manor?”

“Of course I do. Mother knew her when she was at school. I think the school was in your house for a little while, and that’s why Mother lived there.”

“Oh, yes, that would be it!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “We couldn’t think how your mother could have lived in our house. The school did come here

once.”

“We weren’t here then.” Margaret looked up at Joan.

“I don’t suppose you were,” Joan agreed, laughing.

“Must have been great sport! I wish the school would come again,” Elizabeth said wistfully. “We’re going to school soon. Jansy goes already, but she’s gone away with all the boys and Uncle Ken, in the car.”

Joan grew grave. “I say, somebody’ll have to tell you! The car’s had an accident, and Sir Kenneth Marchwood has been hurt. Your Aunt Jen’s going to him, to see how bad he is.”

The twins stared at her, with horror in their faces.

“Uncle Ken hurt? How do you know?”

“Here comes Mother,” Joan said thankfully, finding the situation suddenly too difficult for her.

Elizabeth turned and ran to the stranger who had appeared in the gateway. “She says—Joan says—Uncle Ken—in the car—oh, please tell us all about it!”

“I had to tell them, Mother. They spoke about him,” Joan explained. “Somebody had to tell them.”

Janice sat on the seat in the little garden, among the roses and pansies. “You big girls must be Joy’s twins. Don’t be frightened! We’re sure Uncle Ken will soon be better. I’ll tell you about him. But let me look at you first! Joan and Joy over again, that’s who you are!”

“I’m called Joy. It’s my name as well as Elizabeth, and Twin is Margaret Joan. Tell us, please!” Elizabeth pleaded. “Does Auntie Maid know?”

“Is Andrew hurt too?” An appalling idea occurred to Margaret and the question came in a shout. “Were they in the car? Is Tony hurt? Is John hurt?”

“What about Jansy?” Elizabeth’s lips were quivering.

“They weren’t in the car,” Janice reassured them hastily. “They’re quite safe. Perhaps they’ll come home in a day or two.”

“Oh, that’s all right!” Margaret gave a sigh of relief. “I thought the car had toppled over on to all the lot of them!”

“I’ve been talking to your Auntie Maid in the garden,” Janice explained. “She said you were doing your lessons,” and she looked at the twins inquiringly.

“Oh, well!” Margaret wriggled. “Couldn’t expect us to stick at sums when a new girl came galloping across our lawn!”

“We had to ask who she was and where she was going,” Elizabeth pointed out, very reasonably, as it seemed to her.

“I see.” Janice kept back a laugh. “But won’t Auntie Maid want you to finish your work?”

“Guess so,” Elizabeth admitted.

“She’ll find my sums lying on the floor,” Margaret said defiantly.

“Better go back and do them, while mother and I see the Abbey,” Joan grinned.

Margaret glared at her. “Perhaps you’d like to go into the house and do sums yourself?”

“Do you think we ought to go?” Elizabeth looked up at Janice anxiously, leaning against her knee.

“I think it will be hard on Aunty Maid to go back to her schoolroom presently and find no girls there. She’s gone to say good-bye to your Aunt Jen, but she’ll come back quite soon. I’m sure she’d like to see your sums finished properly.”

“Were we unsporting kids to run away?” Margaret looked worried. “Don’t want to be that.”

“That’s because of Andrew,” Elizabeth explained. “He said Margaret was an unsporting kid, and she was frightfully upset. She minds a lot what Andrew thinks.”

Margaret flushed. “Wouldn’t like Andrew to know we ran away.”

“Then suppose you run back and finish the sums, before Aunty Maid comes home,” Janice suggested, her lips twitching.

“We wanted to tell your Joan about the Abbey.”

“I can tell her. I knew the Abbey before you were born.”

“It wasn’t any different then. We’d like to tell her,” Margaret pleaded.

“Not in school time. It wouldn’t be playing the game,” Joan said promptly.

Margaret looked at her. “That’s the kind of thing Andrew says.”

“We’d better go and do your sums,” Elizabeth said sadly. “If you’d done them quickly we’d have been out in the village by now.”

“Then we wouldn’t have seen this new Joan!” Margaret flung at her. “Will you tell me what seven times nine are? I think I could finish that old sum if I could find out about those seven nines.”

“Why didn’t you ask me before? I’ll tell you this once, but you must try to remember, Twin. Come and do that sum; and we’d better tell Aunty Maid we’re sorry.”

With linked arms the twins went through the gate and down the path, leaving Joan and her mother looking at one another.

“Priceless kids!” Joan said.

“They didn’t wait for the whole story of the accident. But I told ‘Aunty Maid’ all I could. She’ll explain what happened, when she comes back from the Manor.”

“Is she the one who sings? What’s she like, Mother?”

“She had been called away from the schoolroom to speak to the gardener,” Janice explained. “I’ll tell you about her later, but I want to see the Abbey. We can’t stay long, so come and see as much as we have time for.”

CHAPTER XIII

ROSAMUND TO THE RESCUE

Wide-eyed, Joan followed her mother through the tunnel to the cloister garth, and from there to the chapter-house, day-room, and sacristy, and up winding stone steps to the refectory and the monks' dormitory.

"I say, Mother! You do know all about it!" she exclaimed.

Janice stood looking about the garth. "It's wonderful to be here again. It seems only yesterday that Joan showed me round for the first time. I expect to see her and Joy, as schoolgirls, appear at any moment."

"Were they really like the twins?"

"They were sixteen and the twins are nine. But except for that the twins are just Joan and Joy over again. Their hair is bobbed and my two had long plaits; that's the only difference. Come and see the lovely dining-hall, called the refectory, Littlejan!"

In the great upper room Janice stood before two paintings, hanging on the wall. "These are new to me."

"They look old, to *me*," Joan objected.

"I'm sure they're old. But they weren't here when I came before. Could they be pictures of the Abbey church, as it used to be?"

"They're a church all right, both outside and inside."

"I shall have to ask somebody where they came from. It's a marvellous building."

"I want to see the underground parts, and the tunnels, and the place where you crawled through the old chest and were buried alive," Joan was jumping with impatience. "Do you know where there's a well? Margaret said she fell into it."

"I hadn't heard about that, but I can find the well. We'll go first to see the gate-house; that's one way down into the tunnels. I must speak to the caretaker; she's the same woman who was here fifteen years ago, though she is growing too old for the job, Lady Marchwood said."

"I wonder if she'll know you again?"

There was no doubt of it. Mrs. Watson, using a stick to help her climb the ancient stair, had followed them up to the refectory—not to challenge them, for she knew they must be friends of the family, as they had come from the Hall, but to see if she could be of any help.

Her eyes went from Joan to her mother, as Janice waited for her to speak. She looked again at Joan, and then broke out in amazement, "Eh,

Miss Janice! It is Miss Janice, isn't it?"

"Good for you!" Joan shouted. "Everybody says I'm like Mother!"

"I'm Mrs. Fraser now, and this is my girl called Joan," Janice said, smiling. "It's nice to see you still here, Mrs. Watson."

"Just like you, she is, Miss Janice—Mrs. Fraser, I'm sorry, ma'am. 'Tis queer to see you with a big girl!"

"I've two little boys as well, but I've left them at home. Is this the Abbey church, Mrs. Watson?"

"Sure, Miss Janice. Those be the pictures Miss Jen found at the Manor."

"At the Manor? How odd! What were they doing there? But never mind; I'll hear about that later. I want Joan to see as much as possible of the Abbey, and we can't stay long. I hope we shall come back soon."

Janice hurriedly told of the trouble at the Manor, knowing that Ann Watson must hear of it from somebody, and then, leaving the old woman to follow more slowly, she led Joan out to the gate-house.

"Look at those cars!" Joan cried. "Two big ones—oh, Mother! They're stopping! Are they from the Castle?"

From the first car Rosamund called to them. "I've come myself to fetch you and the children, but I want to hurry home. Would you mind very much if I carried you off? You'll come back to finish the Abbey later on."

"Oh, but we haven't been down in the depths of the earth yet!" Joan cried.

"I'm sorry, Joan-Two. But the depths of the earth won't run away. It will be something to look forward to. Perhaps Maidlin will ask us to tea and we'll go into the Abbey and show you every corner. I'd like to see it again myself! But we can't stop now. Hop in! We mustn't keep Jen waiting."

"And we mustn't keep you waiting," Janice agreed, as they took their seats, Joan looking downcast but not venturing to say more.

"I'm really sorry to spoil your visit, Joan-Two," Rosamund apologised. "But I have an afternoon engagement and I mustn't be late for lunch. It's a nuisance, but I must hurry back."

"Joan understands that," Janice said quickly. "It was good of you to come yourself."

"Rosemary and Michael know me; they won't feel quite so much that they're being sent away among strangers. They can't really feel at home with you yet. I felt I must come for them; but I have to go out directly after lunch, so there's no time to lose," Rosamund explained.

"You're sure we won't be in your way? I had a word with Miss Maidlin and a very kind invitation——"

"I'm sure you had," Rosamund said. "But I asked you first. You shall go to Maid later on. You must feel you're being handed about from one to the

other of us and never allowed to rest anywhere.”

“That’s because you’re all so kind and hospitable. The easiest way would have been to send us back to our hotel, but nobody will hear of it.”

“I should think not! What would Joan say, or Joy, if they heard their dear Jandy Mac, plus daughter, had been allowed to go away? Hotels are not for friends of the family! Here’s the Manor. We’ll send Jen off, and then we’ll follow.”

Jen came running out. “Oh, Ros, you angel! The poor babes won’t mind going with you! How good of you to come!”

She was ready for the journey, in big coat and travelling hat, and a maid was carrying out suitcases.

“We’ll sort the luggage,” Rosamund said briskly. “That’s Jandy Mac’s, I know. In the second car, Peters”—to a young chauffeur. “This is your car, Jen; show Burnett which cases are yours. He’s going to drive you, and he’ll stay for a few days, in case he can be any help. You might want to send Jansy and the boys home. Make use of Burnett in any way. Is Nurse ready? I want to see you off, and then we’ll go too.”

“Can’t we give you anything after your drive—coffee, or tea?” Jen began.

“No, dear, not anything. Don’t think about us. Just you rush away to Kenneth. Everything will be all right. I’ve picked up Janice and Joan at the Abbey. In this car, Nurse; that’s right. I hope Katharine will be good!”

The baby crowed and jumped in the nurse’s arms. Rosamund, capable and full of authority, helped them into the car, saw that the luggage was safely stowed away, kissed Jen several times and hustled her in.

“You’ve just missed Maid,” Jen said, bravely keeping her self-control. “She’s been here. She wanted to wait to see me off, but I sent her back to the house. The twinnies were left alone, and you never know——”

“You never do!” Rosamund agreed, with emphasis. “I’ll phone Maid later; we haven’t time to go there now. Geoffrey and I have to go to Littleton this afternoon, so I want to hurry back.”

“It *was* good of you to come, Ros!” Jen said brokenly.

“Promise me faithfully that you won’t worry about Rosemary and Mike, now that they’re safely in my hands!”

“Oh, I promise—absolutely, Ros!”

“Good! Then off you go! The best of luck, Jen, dear! I shall ring up and ask for news. I hope you’ll find Kenneth’s begun to improve already.”

“Oh, he has!” Jen called, through the window, of the car. “Ask Jandy Mac! Bless you for all your help, Ros, dear!”

The car rolled away, and Rosamund turned to the maids in the doorway.

“Now fetch the other two, and we’ll go off at once.”

Little Michael gave a shout at sight of the car, but Rosemary, wearing a crimson coat and beret, looked round in a bewildered way. "Where's my Mummy?"

"Gone to talk to Daddy," Rosamund said cheerfully. "Wouldn't you like to come and have tea with Roddy? He's found a new boat to show you. Come along! Joan's in the car and she'll play with you."

"Mummy coming too?" Rosemary asked, with a pathetic quiver of her lips.

"Soon, perhaps. Jump into the car, Michael! That's a good boy! You want to paddle in the pool, with Roddy, don't you?"

"Paddle in pool—yes!" Michael shouted.

"Good business! I shall paddle too," Joan said, crushing down her disappointment bravely.

"Where's Nanny?" Rosemary was asking, puzzled, and conscious of something wrong.

"Taking care of baby. Katharine isn't big enough to paddle yet. Yes, you sit on Aunt Jandy's lap; that's right!"

Janice had tried to lift the troubled child to her knee, but Rosemary glanced at her and shrank away.

"Sit on your knee, Auntie Ros!"

"What a good thing you're here!" Janice murmured.

Rosamund accepted the suggestion of her small guest as the compliment it undoubtedly was. "All right, Rosemary. You'll sit on me and Mike will sit on Aunt Jandy, and Joan will sit in front. There! Now we're all cosy! Right, Peters!"

"I want Mummy!" Rosemary wailed, as the car swept through the gate and home was left behind.

Rosamund's arms went round her. "You'll have her again soon, dear, but she's had to go to Daddy. That's right; you have a nice little cry about it! I'm going to take care of you till Mummy comes back. It will be all right, Rosemary, darling!"

"Oh, I am so thankful you're here!" Janice said.

Rosemary sobbed and clung to her only friend. Rosamund hugged her and whispered comfort, and held out promises of Roddy and baby, the pool and the garden. Her eyes smiled across Rosemary's dark head at Janice. "Even if there's no time for lunch, I'm glad I came," she said.

CHAPTER XIV

JOAN FINDS THE PLAYROOM

“Isn’t it marvellous to be coming back so soon?” Joan sighed in deep content, as the grey turrets of the Castle appeared among the trees. “It’s like falling into fairyland again!”

Rosamund laughed. “Jolly of you to feel like that, Joan-Two! We’ll try to live up to it. Jandy Mac, what did Jen mean about Kenneth? Has there been another message?”

There had been no time to ask. The drive had been altogether occupied in comforting Rosemary and keeping Michael amused. Now, tired out in different ways, they had both grown drowsy.

Janice told of the later news from the Grange, and Rosamund’s face lit up in relief. “Oh, good! Jen will feel easier in her mind. I was afraid of the journey for her. It was thoughtful of Mary to catch her before she started. I *am* glad!”

“She’s very brave,” Janice thought over that morning’s happenings. “She thinks for other people even when she’s in great trouble herself.”

“Oh, yes!” Rosamund assented. “She can never forget to be kind.”

“But this has been a bad blow,” Janice added. “I’m glad she was able to go so quickly. Your help was just what she needed.”

“She’d do the same for me. I remember rushing to her, to demand the loan of a car, when I was in dire trouble.”

“What had happened?” Joan leaned over from the front seat, scenting a story.

“I’d had bad news from my father. That was long before I thought of being married. I’ve had my chance to repay the loan of that car at last! It was a big help to me. I must tell Jen; she’ll be amused that I haven’t forgotten—if Kenneth’s well enough for her to find anything amusing. Here we are, at home again!”

The head nurse was on the steps to welcome the children. Rosamund put Rosemary into her arms and carried Michael in herself. “Half asleep, poor babes! The girl is the difficult one, Nurse. She’s not strong; she had her appendix out fifteen months ago, poor infant—it was urgent, to save her life. She may be a bit nervy. If you have trouble I’ll come and soothe her, but I hope she’ll sleep, when she’s had something to eat. Her danger is croup, so keep an eye on her!”

“I’ll be careful of her, poor lamb!” Nurse promised. “And the boy, my lady?”

“Sturdy as a pony,” Rosamund laughed. “A year younger than Roddy. You’ll have no trouble with Michael. His only wish is to plunge into the pool.”

The tired children were carried out to the garden, to finish their sleep on rugs spread in the shade, in company with Roddy and Geoffrey-Hugh, while the big gong called the rest of the household to lunch.

“Back again, Littlejan!” Lord Kentisbury teased his younger guest. “So you can’t stay away from your enchanted Castle!”

“I don’t want to stay away, thank you. I’m most frightfully glad to be back.” Joan was still a little shy with him. “It’s just marvellous of you to have us again so soon.”

“Exactly how I feel!” her mother exclaimed.

“Even though we’re going to desert you directly after lunch,” Rosamund said. “Are you sure you’ll be able to amuse yourselves? Go where you like and do as you like! There’s plenty to see.”

“Oh, may we explore?” Joan cried. “I haven’t seen the whole of the Castle yet!”

“You have not, Littlejan, by a very long way,” her mother remarked.

“You ought to have Tansy to be your guide,” Rosamund glanced at her thoughtfully. “Yes, explore, by all means, but don’t touch things. You might do harm without meaning it.”

“Oh, I won’t! Thank you just terribly much!”

Together Janice and Joan wandered through the Castle, when the Earl and Countess had driven away. With a confused impression of great halls and long corridors, of statues and pictures, old armour and family relics, Janice at last dropped into a seat and said she could do no more.

“Go and see what you can find by yourself, Littlejan! We’ve had three strenuous days, and I want to rest.”

Her chosen place was on the battlements, sheltered by the wall of a round tower, and she looked down on the Children’s Garden and out to the river valley and the fields beyond.

“Rosemary and Michael seem to be playing with Roddy quite happily. Would you like to go to them?”

“Rosemary’s too little, isn’t she?” Joan protested. “And the boys are just babies.”

“They are rather young for you,” her mother assented. “They don’t need you; those charming nurses will play with them. You’d sooner wander about, wouldn’t you?”

“Much rather! If I never find you again, say thank you and good-bye to Lady Kentisbury for me!”

Janice laughed. “If the worst happens, find your way to the ground floor and somebody will rescue you. Or if you’re on the walls, stand and shriek for help. But don’t fall over! It’s quite a long way down.”

“I won’t!” Joan assured her fervently.

She wandered on alone, often wondering where she was. “It *is* enormous! I ought to have that girl they talk about—Tansy; it’s an odd name! She’d be jolly useful. Pity it isn’t school holidays! I seem to be going up one of the towers. There should be something to see from the top. Perhaps I’ll find I’m looking down on Mother! I’ll coo-ee to her.”

She was climbing a winding stone stair. It was not long, however, and she found herself in another short corridor. It had one door at the end, and, curious about this detached room, she tried the handle. The door opened, and she looked in.

Then, with a gasp of surprise, she slipped inside and closed the door behind her. “Is it the nursery? It’s not where Roddy was playing when we were here before; that was much lower down. And these things are for older people—books, and models, and tools. But I’m sure it’s a sort of playroom.”

It was certainly a playroom. The shelves held rows of story-books, which Joan longed to inspect; a cabinet was filled with figures of animals, at which she gazed wistfully; there was a tool-chest which would have delighted her small brothers; and there were beautiful models of boats and ships, very different from the simple little boats with which Roddy played in the pool. The room was a well-fitted den, for both boys and girls; but, quite definitely, it was meant for people at least ten years older than any of the children at present living in the Castle.

“How mysterious!” Joan murmured. “Is it ready for Roddy and Hugh when they grow up? Seems a waste to have all these things waiting for years and years! It’s a room for somebody as big as me; as old as I am, I mean!”

The more she looked the more convinced she became that the room had been in use and was not a preparation for Rosamund’s boys; the toys and the boxes of games were well kept, but they were not new; the books were shabby with use and had evidently been somebody’s favourites.

“Could they be Lady Kentisbury’s, when she was little? There are a lot of girls’ books; I’d love to read them! She didn’t live here, of course; she grew up at the Abbey, where the twins live. But she might have brought her books with her.”

Faithful to her promise, Joan touched nothing in the room, but her eyes were wistful as she gazed around.

“A lot of the things belonged to boys. They might be Lord Kentisbury’s, of course. Perhaps they’ve put all their old treasures together, to wait till Roddy and Hugh are ready for them. I shall ask at night.”

Regretfully, she turned away from the fascinating playroom.

“I wonder if the Tansy girl knows about it? It couldn’t be her room, could it? They say she’s lived here since she was four; but she wouldn’t have a place like that! She’s the housekeeper’s niece. And she wouldn’t go in for boats; those ships were made by somebody who knew all about them. It is a puzzle!”

She described the room to her mother, when a maid had summoned them to tea in the garden, but Janice could not help her.

“Perhaps some children lived here before the present Earl. He hasn’t been the earl for long, you know; less than two years.”

“Who was the earl before him? Had he any children?”

“I’ve no idea. Don’t ask Nurse or the maids, Littlejan. We won’t gossip about our host!”

“No, it wouldn’t do,” Joan agreed. “But I shall ask about that playroom this evening.”

CHAPTER XV

A LONELY PARADISE

“Oh! But how did it happen?” Janice cried, standing at her bedroom door.

“Our trunks!” Joan shouted. “Oh, cheers! I’ll be able to have another frock at last! I’m sick of this old thing!”

“You’ll wear a white frock for dinner to-night, my child,” said her mother. “How did they come?” and she turned to the maid, who was unstrapping suitcases.

“There was a phone-call from the Manor, madam, and Miss Lillico sent the small car to fetch your boxes. Shall I help you to unpack?” The girl rose from her knees.

“If you would; just a few things, at the moment! I want a frock for this evening.”

“Oh, good! We shall feel decent to-night!” Joan ran to help and to lift out her white dress.

“Luggage arrived?” Lord Kentisbury raised his eyebrows at sight of Joan’s best frock.

Rosamund, warned by her maid, had changed also, and Joan’s eyes gleamed with joy as they went in to dinner. “How utterly posh we are, aren’t we?” she murmured.

Rosamund laughed. “What have you found in your wanderings, Joan-Two?”

“A room full of books and boats and beasts, and heaps of other marvellous things! I didn’t touch, but I did want to—fearfully badly!”

“Oh, you’ve found the playroom! I’d forgotten about it.” Rosamund looked at her. “Joan-Two, will you do something, if I ask you?”

“Of course I will! But what can I possibly do, to please you, Lady Kentisbury?”

“I should hope she would!” said Janice.

“Don’t go to that playroom again, or ask me about it, until to-morrow night. If you still want to know, I’ll tell you anything you ask, at this time to-morrow.”

“But why shouldn’t I want to know?” Joan cried, her eyes wide. “You are mysterious! I shall want to know about it more than ever, if I’ve waited a whole day!”

"I'll bet you sixpence you don't ask a single question by this time to-morrow," said the Earl.

Joan's eyes widened still further. "I don't understand a scrap! But of course I'll wait until to-morrow. I wanted to read some of those books."

"I'll lend you books," Rosamund promised. "Mary Devine, who lives with the twins, writes books for girls, and I have a complete set. You'll go steadily through them if you once start. You shall have books without going to the playroom for them."

"Then they aren't your old story-books? I thought perhaps they were waiting for Roddy and Hugh and—what's her name going to be? The little girl you'd like to have?"

"Rosabel," Rosamund smiled. "No, those aren't my old books. Don't ask any more questions!"

She turned to Janice. "I haven't told you the worst yet. Geoffrey and I will have to leave you again to-morrow. Can you possibly forgive us? It's a terrible way to treat a guest, but this is something we really can't shirk. Besides, I want to go; I'd go anywhere to meet the Queen! It's a garden-party at the Palace. We shall have to be in town all day."

"A Royal garden-party?" Janice exclaimed. "Oh, of course, you have to go!"

"Buckingham Palace?" Joan gasped. "We went to see it. You're going to a garden-party *there*? And you'll see the Queen? How simply super-marvellous!"

Rosamund laughed. "I'd be sorry to miss it, but I'm sorry, too, to leave you again."

"There's just one—not condition, but request we'd like to make," Janice began.

"Oh, she'll let you see her frock," said the Earl.

"How did you guess?" Joan demanded. "That was it, wasn't it, Mother? How did he know?"

"It's rather a lovely blue," Rosamund said. "I want to wear my sapphires; they were my wedding-present from all the old friends—Joy and Jen and Joan. That's why the twins gave me blue beads! They'd seen my necklace, and the pendant to match that was Maidlin's gift; and they thought blue beads would be the proper thing to give me. I choose my dresses to go with the sapphires, or with a rather lovely set of family pearls that were also given me at my wedding. To-morrow the sapphires have the honour of going to see the Queen!"

They were rising from the table when a message was brought from the nursery. "The little girl is fretting, my lady. If you could spare a moment, it might quiet her."

"I'll come at once. You come, too, Jandy Mac. She knows you came from home with her."

Janice went, but was not needed. She sat beside the bed while Rosamund took Rosemary in her arms and talked soothingly.

"It's all right, dear. You want mummy—yes, Aunt Ros knows. But your daddy wanted her and she went to take care of him. She'll come soon; just go to sleep—not yet? Well, talk to me and Aunt Jandy, then. Look at our pretty frocks! Tell us about the garden. Did you paddle with Roddy and Michael? Mike's sound asleep; he's tired."

Rosemary was tired too, and presently she grew drowsy and at last fell asleep. Rosamund nodded to Janice and they crept away.

"I'll fetch some books for your Joan and then we can send her to bed," and Rosamund went to her sitting-room. "Then I shall ring up the Grange. Jen should have arrived by now. What a comfort the telephone is!"

She came presently to give the latest news. "All's well. Jen is there, and Kenneth knew her and spoke to her. He's improving steadily. Jen and baby aren't upset by the journey. The rest of the children are all right. I asked her to send them here, but she laughed at me and said, 'Four more? No, Ros, dear; not four more!' We could have taken them quite well."

"I wish Lady Marchwood had let them come!" Joan sighed, when her mother told her of the message. "Even Jansy's a lot younger than I am—she's ten and a half; but she'd be a great improvement on Rosemary!"

The thought returned to her next day. The Earl and Countess had driven off in state, after due inspection and approval of the sapphire-blue frock and hat. Janice, fascinated by the treasures of the Castle, gave herself up to exploration of the State Apartments, which were a museum in themselves. Joan, thoroughly bored after the first hour, escaped and wandered by the lake alone.

"It is fairyland—an enchanted place—as I said," she thought. "It's all too marvellous for words. But the people in it aren't right. They couldn't be kinder, of course; the Earl's a darling, and Lady Kentisbury is an angel and she's lovely to look at! And the babies are pets, but they *are* babies! There's nobody for me. That's the only thing left to wish for! Everybody's either too old or too young. I'm left out. If only there was somebody of my own age!"

It seemed strange to admit that she was lonely, in such perfect surroundings, with every luxury and every sort of beauty before her eyes; but it was the truth. On all their journeys her mother had been sufficient and she had not felt any lack; on the big liner there had been other schoolgirls and Joan had soon made friends. But here her mother was inevitably Lady Kentisbury's companion; the nurses were all that the children needed, and Joan had tired of their games quickly. She wanted something much more

grown-up, and yet not so entirely adult as the elder members of the household could give. Her mother's delight in the family heirlooms had brought the fact home to her. She did not want to pore over illuminated books, however priceless; or to gaze at ancient pictures and carvings.

"Gosh! How I want somebody to talk to!" sighed Joan. "I'm all on my own, and I'm tired of it. I could have played with those twins, if we'd stayed at the Manor."

There were plenty of people picnicking by the lake, and there were girls among them. Joan looked on wistfully, as they crowded round an ice-cream stall and came away carrying cornets and laughing.

"I mustn't talk to them. It wouldn't be the thing, when I'm staying at the Castle. I mustn't let Lady Kentisbury down, by chumming with the trippers in her park! But I could have a jolly good old game with that crowd, and how I'd love it!"

She sighed and went forlornly back to the gate which led into the private gardens.

"I'd better go and sail boats with Roddy or dig with Rosemary. I wish they were seven years older! By gum! But I'm lonely!" she groaned.

Then she stopped, and stared. In the gateway stood a girl. She wore a school tunic, and she was nearly fifteen. She was coming from the Castle, so she was no tripper. She had no coat or hat, and she looked very much at home.

Joan darted forward. "Who are you? Oh, who are you? Can you stay with me? You're just what I want, most desperately badly!"

"I rather thought I was," said the stranger. "That's why I've come. I'm Tansy Lillico."

CHAPTER XVI

THE SECRET RETREAT

“The Tansy girl!” Joan’s sudden understanding found vent in a shout. “I’ve heard about you! You live here, don’t you? But why aren’t you at school? I thought you’d gone away?”

“Lady Kentisbury phoned our Head last night, and asked her to send me home for a few days, to be company for you.”

“Gosh!” gasped Joan. “How did she know I was lonely? I never said a word!”

“She guessed you would be; she understands people frightfully well. There’s nobody here for you, is there?”

“Not a soul! I’ve only just discovered it; I didn’t know I was lonely till this afternoon. She guessed? But how simply marvellous of her!”

“She’s like that. You don’t know her very well yet, do you?”

“I know she’s a dear and most terribly kind. But I didn’t know she’d understand about me.”

“She sends for me if she has a job for me to do.” There was a touch of proud satisfaction in Tansy’s voice. “Sometimes there are ways I can help her, even now, and she always lets me come.”

Joan looked at her enviously. “I expect you’re glad. You didn’t mind leaving school, did you?”

“I’m only messing about,” Tansy said frankly. “It’s not a good enough place for me now. I’m going to another school in the autumn.” Her eyes gleamed in anticipation. “It wasn’t worth while sending me anywhere else, and the new place wouldn’t have me till September. I wasn’t old enough—they’re all seniors, and I’m not quite fifteen yet. So I stayed on in London, but Lady Kentisbury knows it doesn’t matter if I miss a week now and then. How old are you?”

“Fourteen next Christmas.” Joan’s eyes were taking in Tansy’s vivid colouring—black hair that made her own dark curls look brown—bright black eyes—red cheeks. “I say, you’re jolly pretty, aren’t you?” she began.

“Were you going anywhere?” Tansy brushed the compliment aside.

“No, I’d been. I went round the lake. I wanted to talk to the tripper crowd and I knew I mustn’t, so I thought I’d better come into the garden.”

“I’ll show you where to go.” Tansy closed the gate and led the way, not back to the lake, but along through the trees and down by a narrow path which Joan had not seen.

“Where are we going? I’d never have found this for myself!” she said in admiration.

“In here—look! We can talk; and we can see the lake and the people. I often watch from here.”

It was a shallow cave, high on the hillside, among trees where the general public were not allowed to wander.

“Make yourself quite at home,” Tansy said. “This is my place, until Geoffrey-Hugh and Roddy are old enough. Then it will be theirs. I shall be grown-up and at college by that time.”

“It’s a jolly secret retreat,” Joan exclaimed. “We can look right down on the lake!”

“Secret retreat! That’s a good name for it. That’s just what it is, and what it always has been.”

Joan glanced at her. “Have you been here often? In the cave, I mean? I know you live at the Castle.”

“We used to play here a lot. You found our playroom, didn’t you?”

Joan had thrown herself on the ground inside the cave, but now she sat up hastily. “I wondered if it was your room!”

“Not mine; ours,” said Tansy.

Joan stared at her. “I don’t understand! But Lady Kentisbury told me not to ask questions about that room. She said she’d tell me to-night.”

“She told me to tell you about it. That’s why you weren’t to ask questions.”

“Oh!” Joan’s face lit up in sudden understanding. “Is that what they meant? They said I wouldn’t want to know when to-night came. Lord Kentisbury made a bet that I wouldn’t ask one single question.”

“Because I’d be here and I’d have told you,” Tansy explained. “It’s all right; you’re to ask me anything you want to know. My Lady spoke to me on the phone, when she’d talked to the Head, and she said I was to answer all your questions.”

“She is a sport!” Joan cried. “Well, then, why did you say ‘ours’? Whose room was it, besides yours? There must have been boys, to use those tools and make the ships, and there were boys’ books on the shelves. It looked as if a crowd of people had used that room?”

“There were five of us.” Tansy’s black eyes were fixed on an islet in the lake below. “I’m the only one left.”

“Oh!” Joan gazed at her. “I say, don’t tell me, if you’d rather not! It sounds fairly awful.”

“Oh, they’re not all dead! But they’ve gone; they won’t live here any more. Don’t you really know?”

“I don’t know a thing! I’m aching to understand,” Joan exclaimed.

“There isn’t much to tell. The old earl was an invalid for years and the place was very quiet. He was eighty-six when he died, and his son, Lord Verriton, had died before him. So the new earl was Lord Verriton’s son, Geoff, and he was fifteen—about the age I am now,” Tansy said, in a surprised tone. “That’s frightfully odd to think of, for I looked up to him so much and thought him so grown-up and marvellous. He lived here, with his mother and sister; Rhoda was sixteen, and as I was only twelve she looked on me as quite a kid—and I was a kid, of course. The playroom was theirs, but I went there whenever I liked. Their cousins used to come to stay—Bill and Rosalie; Bill was as old as Rhoda, but Rosalie was nearer my age. We thought Bill would be the earl some day, if Geoff didn’t have a son; but that was before Roddy was born.”

“But what happened?” Joan stared at her blankly. “Why is it all changed? Where is—oh, did he die—the earl who was only fifteen?”

“He was two months over sixteen. He went out on his motor-bike at night; he’d been told not to go, but he loved it better than anything.” Tansy stopped abruptly.

“And there was an accident? He was killed?” Joan almost whispered. “And all this belonged to him? He was only sixteen? Oh, but how awful for all of you!”

“It was worst for Rhoda and Lady Verriton—his mother, you know. It’s no use talking about it; it was all over two years ago,” Tansy said sombrely. “There seemed nothing left. The new earl came, and then he married and brought My Lady here; but I couldn’t forget Geoff and Rhoda, and I wouldn’t let myself see how nice they were. I was horrible about it at first, and my aunt sent me away to school. Then I had to come home, so they sent me to the Dower House across the park, where my other aunt is in charge. Then I found out how marvellous Lady Kentisbury really was; she was just terribly kind to me, and I found that I’d do anything for her; and she promised that if I worked hard and was ready for the job, I should take Aunt Milly’s place when she wanted to retire.”

“Something to look forward to!” Joan exclaimed. “I’d like to be you!”

“Something to work for,” Tansy corrected her. “I never saw much point in working before, and so I was rather a slack kid. I hadn’t anything much in the way of plans for when I grew up. It’s changed everything, the whole world, to know what I’m going to do.”

“Marvellous for you!” Joan agreed wistfully. “I suppose the housekeeper in a place like the Castle bosses everybody?”

Tansy’s black eyes gleamed. “Something like that. Everybody but the Countess.”

“Oh, well, of course! And the Earl!”

Tansy grinned at her. "Aunt Milly's head of the house; My Lady gives orders, but Aunt Milly sees that people do them properly. I feel I could take her place extremely well."

Joan laughed. "You know the Castle inside out, don't you? Haven't you lived here always?"

"All that counts. My mother died when I was four and I hadn't a father; he'd gone before, so the aunts took charge of me. I love every corner of Kentisbury."

"Why have you such an odd name?"

"They called me Tansy—the aunts, one here and one at the Dower House. My name's Tanis, but they said that was silly for a baby and so they turned me into Tansy."

"You ought to be Tanis, now that you're growing up."

"Am I? I hadn't thought about it, but perhaps I am." Tansy considered the matter.

"You sound grown-up sometimes."

"It's difficult to make people change, once they're used to a name. Haven't you anything but Joan? It's terribly ordinary! We've four Joans at school."

"I suppose it is," Joan reflected in her turn. "I'm called after an old friend of Mother's, and her first girl is called Janice after Mother. I've no other real name."

"What is your 'little name'?" Tansy glanced at her. "I can see they don't call you Joan all the time."

"They did at school, of course. But Father calls me Littlejan, because I'm like Mother but smaller. Lady Kentisbury calls me Joan-Two, because she kept mixing me with Mother's friend, Joan Raymond. Father comes from Scotland," Joan went on, intent on telling all her family history at once. "Mother's people were Scots too; her name was Macdonald; but she was born in Australia. I haven't been to Scotland yet; we're going soon. We've come from Australia, where I've been to school—in Sydney, you know. But we live on a South Sea Island; Father's ship trades between the Islands and Sydney, and sometimes he goes to China or America."

"Gosh! How interesting! You must have seen a lot of places! I've never been anywhere but London and Kentisbury. Oh, well, if My Lady calls you Joan-Two, that's good enough for me, and it's a change from all the crowds of Joans at school."

"I don't mind. I say, I do like the way you say 'My Lady'! It's different from the way other people say it! It sounds as if you really meant it; as if it wasn't just a title. But I suppose 'Lady Kentisbury' would be too long to say, every time you spoke about her."

“I do mean it,” Tansy said vehemently. “I tell you, she changed the whole world for me, by giving me something to work for; and there were other things she did too. She’s simply marvellous, when you really know her, and I’d do anything whatever to please her. ‘My Lady’ is just exactly how I feel about her.”

“Jolly for her; and jolly for you,” Joan commented.

CHAPTER XVII

RESULTS OF TANSY

“Oh, My Lady, you were right!” Joan shouted, rushing up to greet Rosamund. “It was lovely of you to give me Tansy, and she *has* told me everything! I haven’t any questions to ask, and I’ve been in the playroom, and Tansy’s shown me all their things!”

“Cheers!” Rosamund said, laughing. “That will save me a lot of trouble! I could see questions sprouting out of you on every side. You won’t have any time for Rosemary and the boys now!”

“Oh, yes, I shall! It’s queer,” Joan pondered the matter. “I didn’t want to play with them while there was nobody else. But now that I’ve Tansy to do things with, I don’t mind playing with the babies sometimes. I wonder why that is?”

“Tansy likes playing with them, too,” Rosamund agreed. “Well, Jandy Mac, are you feeling rested? Are you grateful to Tansy for taking Joan-Two off your hands?”

“It’s a fine idea,” Janice said with enthusiasm. “Joan can talk about nobody but Tansy now. How did your party go?”

“Oh, splendidly! We’ll tell you about it during dinner. Are you going to honour us, Joan-Two, or do you want to desert us? You may have dinner with Tansy, if you’d prefer it.”

Joan wavered, then made up her mind. “I’ll have it with you, please. I’ll be with her all the rest of the time. You don’t want to get rid of me, do you? I’ll stay with Tansy, if you’d rather.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. No, I’m not trying to dispose of you,” Rosamund assured her. “But I know we aren’t as interesting as Tansy. We can’t compete with her!”

“Now you’re teasing,” Joan said reproachfully. “I want to hear about the Queen’s party as much as Mother does.”

That evening she watched with wondering eyes while Lord Kentisbury seated himself at a small table, marked in squares, and Tansy brought a box and began to place a wonderful set of chessmen in position. She sat down and the game began.

Amazed, Joan turned to Rosamund. “Does Tansy play with him? Does she play well enough?”

“Always, when she’s at home. Don’t interrupt them! We may watch at a safe distance, and I don’t suppose they’ll hear us if we talk, so we shan’t

interfere with them. He always demands a game from Tansy, as soon as she appears. She plays really well; she has beaten him more than once, to his great delight. It means she is worth playing with, you see.”

Janice and Joan did see, and they watched the game and the absorbed faces of the players with deep interest. In her intense concentration on the moves, Tansy was unconscious of their eyes upon her; but she heard, and flashed a look of appreciation across the room, when Joan exclaimed, “I’d like to look at those chessmen! They’re the most marvellous set I ever saw!”

“Tansy will show them to you afterwards. They’re a beautiful set, and they’ve had adventures. Ask her to tell you their story,” Rosamund said, and went to have her evening word with Jen and to tell that all was well with Rosemary and Michael.

“Kenneth is improving,” she told Janice, when she returned. “I asked Jen again to send the rest of the children here, but she hooted with laughter and said I mustn’t turn my Castle into a boarding-school.”

“I want to see Jansy,” Joan said.

“Oh, as to that, if you’ve seen the twins you’ve seen Jansy! She’s the image of them, and only eighteen months older,” Rosamund told her. “And Andrew and Tony are exactly like Michael, only in larger sizes.”

“Your game, Miss Lillico,” the Earl announced. “I congratulate you on several brilliant moves and some excellent play. What shall your reward be?”

Tansy’s black eyes gleamed. “Another game to-morrow night, and an extra week at home for every time I win.”

“Your play would improve enormously under that incentive, I’m sure; but what about school?”

“Oh—school!” Tansy shrugged her shoulders. “It doesn’t matter for this term.”

“Next term, when you’ve gone to Wood End, we shan’t be able to tear you away for a night, however much we need you,” Rosamund suggested.

“I’ll always come, however marvellous it is!” Tansy cried.

“We’ll try not to ask you. Show Joan-Two the chessmen and tell her about them,” Rosamund said. “Come and look at the lake by moonlight, Jandy Mac!”

“Do you have to sleep with your mother?” Tansy asked, as she put the silver and ebony pieces into their box, after Joan had examined each separate one.

Joan reddened. “No, it was my doing. I asked if I might be with her. You’ll scream, because you’re used to the Castle, but it seemed so huge, that first night, and I was just a scrap scared. I’d have felt lost if I’d been left alone. I’m not afraid now, of course.”

"I know; I won't laugh. It is crushing, and one feels like an ant or a mouse," Tansy agreed. "But don't you want a room to yourself now?"

Joan glanced at her. "I wouldn't mind. My things are all mixed up with Mother's, now that our trunks have come. We had only one wee case at first. But why, Tansy?"

"So that we could talk. If you're in her room——" Tansy paused.

Joan nodded. "Could we ask somebody? What about your aunt?"

"You'd have to tell your mother first."

"I couldn't just desert her, could I? I'll ask her now. You come and back me up!"

Janice was standing with Rosamund on the wall of the great round keep which crowned the Castle, looking out over the moonlit woods and river to the distant hills, when the girls came dashing up the stone steps to make their request.

"Mother! Oh, Mother, dear, would you mind if I didn't sleep with you any longer?" Joan cried, out of breath with the climb.

"My dear Littlejan! I should be delighted to get rid of you," Janice assured her. "But why?"

"Results of Tansy come thick and fast!" Rosamund mocked. "My dear Jandy Mac, they want to sit on one another's beds at night. They don't want to sit on yours. I'm sure you've done it yourself in your time. It's not so long since I sat on somebody's bed to brush my hair and gossip."

"Whose bed was it, Lady Kentisbury?" Joan coaxed her to tell.

"Maidlin's, of course. So you want a room to yourself, Joan-Two? A room close to Tansy's, I presume?"

"That would be just terribly nice," Joan admitted.

Rosamund laughed. "What about it, Tansy? Can we trust you not to go in for games in the night, and not to sit up too late?"

"We won't fool about, My Lady," Tansy promised.

"Remember you are a year or more older than Joan. You mustn't lead her astray," the Countess spoke with mock severity. "Very well, Joan-Two. I like my guests to be comfortable, and as your mother wants to be rid of you and you want to go, the sooner you make the change the better. Go and arrange it with Miss Lillico."

"Thanks, a thousand times!" Joan shouted, and ran off with Tansy, followed by the laughter of their elders.

"What does My Lady call your mother?" Tansy asked curiously, as she helped to carry Joan's belongings to the new room near her own.

Joan explained the nickname. "It's what she was called at school, when she was Janice Macdonald."

"I heard her call you Littlejan. I like it."

“Well, I don’t! It’s a baby name.”

“Geoff used to call me Black-and-Tansy.”

Joan glanced at her. “It suits you. You didn’t call him My Lord?”

“No. We were all pals together. We didn’t bother about that sort of thing.”

“Don’t you miss them all frightfully?”

Tansy’s face grew sombre. “What’s the use of talking? It won’t bring him back, and because he’s gone the others have gone too.”

“Where are they now?”

“Rhoda and Rosalie are travelling with Lady Verriton, Rhoda’s mother. Bill’s preparing to go into the Navy. Roger goes away to college, though he lives here in the town.”

“Who’s he? You didn’t tell me about him.”

“He was one of our crowd. His father’s the doctor down in Kentisbury. We’ve always been pals, but I was a little pig and I used to forget him when Geoff and the rest came here,” Tansy confessed. “My Lady made me see I hadn’t played the game. I used to want him again when they went away.”

“And now he’s the only one of the crowd left, besides you?”

“That’s it. But he’s seventeen, and he goes to college in London now. I see him in the hols. He’s a jolly good sort; and he’s the only one who was part of those old days. It seems to join him and me together. We can talk about Geoff and Rhoda and go over the things that happened.”

“It’s jolly for you to have somebody like that.”

“Yes, rather. I think a terrific lot of Roger,” Tansy said.

CHAPTER XVIII CAMPERS' COVE

"My hat! There's Mr. Jackson!" Tansy exclaimed. "What's he doing here?"

With Joan, she was crossing the courtyard next morning on their way to the garden gate.

"That man?" Joan asked, puzzled. "That's the chauffeur. Don't you know him?"

"But where's Mr. Burnett? Mr. Jackson used to be here; he was Geoff's chauffeur—Lady Verriton's, I mean, of course. When the new Lord Kentisbury came, he brought Mr. Burnett, who had driven him for years; and Mr. Jackson went to be with Lady Verriton. When she went away, to go round the world with Rhoda and Rosalie, he took another job for a year, to wait till she came back. I wonder what he's doing here?"

"I'm not sure, but I think I can guess," Joan said cautiously. "He drove them to town for the garden-party yesterday. Hasn't the other man gone to Yorkshire with the big car? I saw it; it is a whopper!" and she told of the trouble which had come upon the Manor and of the Countess's ready and practical help.

"I hadn't heard all that," Tansy admitted. "I was too busy talking to you last night. I usually know all that's going on. Of course, My Lady would send the big car, with Mr. Burnett to drive. We'd need somebody else here, so I suppose she sent for Mr. Jackson to come back. If he happened to be out of a job he'd be better than a stranger who didn't know the place. At least, she'd think so."

"Why shouldn't she think so?" Joan demanded. "It seems sensible to have the man who was here before! Don't you like him?"

"No." Tansy's tone was definite. "I never liked him. But I see that we had to have somebody; Jim Peters drives jolly well—he's the second chauffeur—but he isn't old enough to have charge of the garage and the men. He's all right as a driver, and Bob, who helps him, is almost as good; but there has to be somebody over them all. I hope Mr. Burnett will come back soon."

"Why don't you like Mr. Jackson?" Joan persisted.

"I don't know. Do you always know why you don't like people? He was a bully, for one thing; none of the men in the garage liked him—they used to have an awful time when he was boss. Everything was well kept and spick

and span and shining, but the men were always grouching about his hateful ways.”

“Why didn’t you tell Lord Geoff?”

“Oh, he knew! But he said Jackson did his job jolly well and the men must stick it. Geoff was like that. I thought Peters and Bob were a bit glum last night! Now I know why.”

“I heard Lady Kentisbury say she’d told Mr. Burnett to stay for a few days, in case the car would be useful. The Marchwood people’s car was damaged in the crash.”

Tansy nodded. “We’ll have to put up with Mr. Jackson. But nobody likes him. My Lady doesn’t know, of course, and I can’t say anything. If there was something really bad about him, I’d tell her at once; but I can’t go to her and say we don’t like having him here!”

“Rather not! She’d say you must put up with him.”

“No, I think she’d ask me why, and I couldn’t give her any good reason. Lord Kentisbury would say, as Geoff did, that he wanted discipline and order, and that if the work was well done he couldn’t interfere.”

“In a way, I suppose that’s true. You must have order in a place like this.”

“Yes, but I don’t trust Mr. Jackson.” Tansy knit her brows. “I can’t tell you why; I don’t know any definite thing he’s done. But I feel he’d put himself first, not his job, and not Kentisbury. He ought to be keenest of all to please My Lord and My Lady, and I don’t believe he is.”

“I don’t see what harm he could do here.”

“Neither do I,” Tansy admitted. “His job’s to drive the car.”

“Where are we going to-day?”

“Have you been in the park yet?”

“Not much. We’ve driven through with the Countess and I’ve been round by the lake. Do the trippers go everywhere?” Joan asked.

“They’re allowed to, but they don’t. They’re afraid of losing themselves in the wild parts.”

“Could they be lost?”

“Oh, I think they could! It’s huge, and if they had no sense of direction they might wander for hours. They wouldn’t know where the gates are; there are seven gates, but some of them need to be looked for.”

“I suppose you know it as well as you know the garden?” Joan asked enviously.

“Just about. I couldn’t lose myself. Care to explore? I’ll show you all the gates.”

“I’d love it! I’m jolly lucky to have you!”

“I’m lucky to have a holiday in June!” Tansy said. “It’s marvellous to be here when I ought to be swotting at algebra.”

Joan laughed.

“It’s because of me. You’ll have to be extra nice to me! Oh, Tansy, do show me the park, every corner of it!”

“I won’t promise to do that,” Tansy grinned. “But I’ll show you quite a lot. Come on! You know the gate by the lake; we needn’t go down there.”

“I know the gates we went through when we drove into the park.”

“The High Gate and the Castle Gate,” Tansy agreed. “You’d never find the Low Gate and the River Gate without help. The Town Gate leads into the main London road; the Valley Gate is over there, in the middle of the big river valley. There are only paths to some of them, not even cart-tracks. The road runs between the High Gate and the Castle. We’ll go that way, and then I’ll show you something.”

As they went by the broad drive they saw herds of deer among the trees, with babies among them. The stags, larger but—at this time of year—with only the beginnings of their great branching horns, were in separate groups, holding aloof from the nursery parties of mothers and children.

From the imposing High Gate, with its lodge and pepperpot towers, Tansy led the way by a green ribbon of turf which plunged downwards among the beechwoods.

“The River Gate,” she announced presently, as they came on a lonely lodge, with white hens feeding in the grass and white goats being milked in a shed.

“Gosh! Look at the goats!” Joan cried. “Is their milk nice?”

“They’ve only goats’ milk here. They don’t keep cows, and the milkman doesn’t call,” Tansy laughed.

“I guess he doesn’t! Isn’t there any road to it at all?”

“Not through the park. There’s a path along the river bank. That’s what I want you to see.”

Tansy called a greeting to the lodge-keeper and led Joan out through the gate.

“Oh! But what an odd place! Tents—is it a camp?”

“It’s Campers’ Cove; that’s its name. People are allowed to have tents on the river bank. It’s thick with them in August.”

The strip of grass between the white chalk cliffs and the river held a few white tents, scattered among the bushes. There were pebbly beaches where a couple of boats and a canoe or two were drawn up above the tide-line. A path wound away among the trees close to the water.

“It comes to a village in time,” Tansy said. “A very small car can get through, but mostly the campers walk or use bicycles.”

She led the way and Joan followed her, enthralled. The camping-site was covered with scattered hawthorn and bramble bushes and clumps of low trees, and these divided it into little green rooms or arbours, each with space for a bell tent and a place for a camp fire. The tents were few, at present, but there would obviously be many more during the holiday season.

“You should see it on the first of August!” Tansy laughed. “Just now it would be quite jolly to picnic here, but in the crowded times we keep as far away as we can.”

“But where do they do their shopping? How far is it to the village?”

“Quite a mile. They fetch eggs and goats’ milk from the lodge, and they bring tinned stuff with them and go to the shop for bread. The lodge sells cakes and cigarettes and oranges, and they don’t want dinner-parties!”

“What do they do, besides fetch their bread?” Joan asked.

“Oh, boat and fish and bathe, and wander in this part of the park, and climb about on those cliffs.”

Joan looked up at the chalky wall, where jackdaws were flying in and out of holes in the crags, screaming and calling. “Doesn’t look too good to me!”

“The sort of people who like camping love that sort of thing,” Tansy said. “Aren’t all the little nooks funny, each waiting for its tent? Now we’ll go along inside the wall to the next lodge, at the Valley Gate; it’s rather a scramble in places, but you won’t mind that.”

“Rather not! Couldn’t we go along the river bank?”

“The path stops quite soon. You must go through the park.”

Their track was plain at first, but was soon lost in rough grass and dead leaves. They kept near the wall, sometimes climbing stiff braes, till at last the Valley lodge came in sight, with the white cliffs of Campers’ Cove far behind them.

“We can’t go all round the park in one day.” Tansy flung herself on the turf to rest, a little way along a green road which climbed the hill. “We’ll go up here and over the top and down to the lake, and home that way. The Low Gate is down there, right away among those trees. We’ll find it another time. It takes you out to a road, close to the river, and this cart track goes down to meet the road. Here comes Bob! It must be Bob, of course.”

From among the trees by the Low Gate came a motor-cycle. It roared its way up the track and passed them, and the rider waved his hand as he went on and disappeared over the brow of the hill.

Tansy waved a greeting. “I like Bob. He’s a good chap. He’s the under-chauffeur, you know.”

“But—I say!” Joan sat up. “I thought nobody was allowed to ride a car or motor-cycle in the park, except the Earl and Countess?”

“Bob’s the only person; he’s allowed. It’s his special privilege. He once drove My Lady home, when she’d had an accident, and he did it so carefully that Lord Kentisbury wanted to give him a reward. So Bob asked to be allowed to ride his motor-bike in the park.”

“I see. How jolly proud he must be!”

“He loves rushing about and hooting. But he’s never a nuisance. We all like Bob,” Tansy said.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MYSTERIOUS CHAUFFEUR

Tansy crept into Joan's room late that night. "Are you awake? I want to talk."

Joan chuckled. "I knew you'd come. You're late to-night. Of course I'm awake! What have you been doing?"

"Talking to Bob. You remember Bob?"

"The boy with the bike in the park? Why on earth have you been talking to him at night?"

"I saw him this afternoon, looking awfully blue—no, awfully upset! Angry, you know. He wouldn't tell me what was wrong; I think he was afraid of being overheard. So I told him to meet me at nine o'clock, in the courtyard where the fountain is, and tell me what had happened. He lives over the garage, with Jim Peters and Mr. Jackson; Mr. Jackson's staying in Mr. Burnett's room, of course."

"And what was wrong with Bob?"

Tansy switched off the light and by the glow from her torch lit a candle on the table by the bed.

"That's better. Aunt Milly might come and interrupt us, if she saw the light." She crouched beside Joan and gazed at her. "It's awfully queer. And yet there's nothing I could tell Aunt Milly or My Lady. Tell me if you think it's odd, or if I'm going funny in the head!"

"I've seen no sign of it so far," Joan assured her. "Go on, Tans! What is it that's odd?"

"When Bob came back from his ride, he went to his room to change. Mr. Jackson was in their sitting-room and he was phoning; they have to be connected with the Castle by phone, of course, in case the car is wanted in a hurry. But I don't believe he was answering a call from the Castle. Whatever it was, he was mad when he found Bob there, and he turned on him and ordered him out of the room, and said most awful things to him, about spying and sneaking and eavesdropping. Poor Bob hadn't meant any harm; he was only looking for his cigarettes; and it's his room as much as Mr. Jackson's, anyway. He was terribly upset. He didn't know Mr. Jackson before—he's new to the garage work—and this was the first time he'd seen that side of him. He went away as quickly as he could, but he told Peters that he'd like to get even with the old man! He says Peters said it was old Jackson's way and he'd always been like that. But Bob was frightfully upset,

and he keeps saying that he meant no harm. Does it seem queer to you that Mr. Jackson should fly into such a rage just because he was interrupted at the phone?"

Joan lay and stared up at her, her eyes bright. "I should say that depends on what he was phoning about. If he has some guilty secret, he may have thought Bob had heard too much."

Tansy knit her brows. "Yes, but what secret could he have?"

"I don't suppose anybody knows everything he's been doing in the year since he was the chauffeur here," Joan suggested. "He may have been in bad company, or—or have married somebody and kept it dark! There might be lots of reasons why he'd want his message to be private."

"Then you don't think I'm batty to be suspicious?"

"My hat, no! It's most mysterious. He may be up to anything. Can't we get to the bottom of it?" Joan asked eagerly.

"Could I tell anybody?" Tansy hesitated. "It doesn't seem definite enough."

"You can't tell Lady Kentisbury that Bob's upset because Mr. Jackson rowed him! Did Bob hear anything? Anything at all, Tansy?"

Tansy frowned. "Just a word or two, but not enough to make sense. He was so mad with Mr. Jackson that he'd have told me anything he heard, though he doesn't go about repeating things as a rule, he says. He heard 'tent' and something about 'launch.' He doesn't know what tent or what was to be launched."

Joan sat up, in sudden excitement. "Tent! Could he mean one of the tents we saw to-day?"

"At Campers' Cove?" Tansy stared at her. "I hadn't thought of that."

"I shouldn't have thought of it if we hadn't seen those tents; but when you said 'tent,' the camping-place came into my head at once. Could he be going to launch a boat for somebody near those tents? The boat couldn't be hidden in the tent until it was to be launched, could it?" Joan pondered the mysterious words. "I say, Tans! What if Mr. Jackson's in league with a gang of burglars, and he's going to steal the Countess's jewels—the sapphires she wore for the garden-party, and the pearls she told us about—and hide them in a tent till his pals come along and launch a boat and clear off with the loot—don't you call it the swag?"

Tansy gazed at her. "They might bring a launch up to the cove, and then put things aboard and rush away down the river and out to sea."

"Could a boat that was big enough for the sea go up the river as far as that camping-place?"

"Easy. The tide runs up beyond that. They wouldn't need a big boat. A small quick launch could do it; they'd have a ship waiting, to take the jewels

to France or Belgium. But it's all rot, Joan! How could Mr. Jackson find the pearls? He never comes into the Castle; his job's in the garage or out with the cars."

"That's true. It was such a marvellous idea!" Joan sighed. "We were going to save the jewels, and the Countess would have been grateful to us for ever. Don't you think there could be anything in it, Tansy? Isn't there some way? Suppose old Jackson had a—confederate; isn't that the word? Somebody in the Castle who would help him? One of the maids might grab the pearls and pass them to him secretly."

"I don't believe it," Tansy said indignantly. "I know all the girls and not one of them would do it. You're forgetting that my Aunt Mildred is in charge of them; she engaged them and she's responsible for them."

"I didn't think of that. I'm awfully sorry," Joan apologised. "No, it couldn't be any of them. But wouldn't you adore it if we could find out what Jackson is up to and catch him at it?"

"We're not sure that he's up to anything serious," Tansy objected.

"Oh, I think we are! A chauffeur who does secret telephoning and talks about tents and launches is a mysterious sort of person."

"But mysterious doesn't always mean bad. Mr. Jackson may not be up to anything absolutely wicked," Tansy argued.

"He *may* not, of course." Joan's tone was sceptical. "But I should say we'd better keep an eye on him. There's nothing we can tell anybody yet, of course."

Tansy, looking troubled, said good-night and crept away to bed.

CHAPTER XX

THE SURPRISING MR. JACKSON

“Did you dream of pearls and sapphires, and mysterious arms in chauffeur’s livery reaching out to grab them?” Joan asked Tansy next morning.

“I didn’t dream anything. I say, do be careful what you say, to My Lady or your mother!” Tansy exclaimed. “You might make frightful trouble, and there may be nothing at all in it. Things look so queer at midnight; it seems different this morning. Mr. Jackson looks ordinary and innocent enough!”

Joan glanced at the man, who was crossing the courtyard. “He’s jolly smart in his uniform, but I like that nice Mr. Peters better. He drove us from the Manor.”

“Oh, we all like him, of course!”

“And we don’t like Mr. Jackson, however smart he is! What do we do here on Sundays? Go to church?”

Tansy nodded. “You’ll go with your mother and My Lord and My Lady. I shall go with Aunt Mildred.”

“I’d rather be with you.” Joan was not impressed by the more honourable place offered her.

“You can’t. You must sit with them.”

“I’ll be able to keep an eye on Mr. Jackson, anyway,” Joan retorted. “As he’s the head chauffeur, I suppose he’ll drive us!”

The chauffeur’s behaviour was in no way suspicious as he drove the party to the parish church, and Joan was a little disappointed, though she could not have said what she had expected him to do in the course of such a very innocent duty.

“He didn’t murder anybody or burgle anything this morning,” she reported to Tansy, as they sat on a green slope above the lake in the afternoon, looking down on the picnicking parties of trippers.

“Did you expect he would? Here come some riders,” and Tansy looked up the long green hollow on their right, at sound of hoofbeats on the turf. “It’s My Lady. Doesn’t she look marvellous on horseback? She’s only been riding for a few months, since Geoffrey-Hugh was born, but she’s jolly good at it.”

“Gosh! Look at Mother!” Joan’s shout rang out and she sprang to her feet. “Mother’s riding too! Where did she scrounge those breeches?”

Tansy laughed and dragged her down again. "I expect My Lady fitted her out. She has more than one riding-suit. Didn't you know she could ride? But how queer! For she can ride; she's not a beginner."

"Gosh!" Joan said again. "I am surprised! I never saw her on a horse before. I say, she looks jolly nice! Good straight back! She looks just as nice as Lady Kentisbury does!"

"Why didn't you know she could ride?"

"She's never done it when I've been there to see! We live on an island; it's not too little an island to have horses, but we've never gone in for them. I must ask Mother about this!"

"They've seen us," Tansy sprang up. "They're waving to us. Perhaps you could ask her now."

Joan went plunging down the slope and rushed up to Janice. "Mother! When did you learn to ride? I didn't know you could!"

Janice, in neat breeches and jacket and a soft hat on her dark wavy hair, laughed down at her. "Before you were born, Littlejan. Remember that I'm an Australian! Somebody I used to call Uncle Tony taught me, when I was about your age. I haven't ridden for years, but the temptation was too much for me."

"You ride well," Rosamund said. "And I'm glad to have a companion. My husband isn't strong enough, so I have to ride alone."

"Couldn't I learn?" Joan begged. "Couldn't you find any things that would fit me? You do look jolly, Mother!"

"I'm glad to have your approval," Janice said, laughing. "I knew I should give you a shock."

"Perhaps we'll let you try, Joan-Two," Rosamund said. "But we want to tell you what we've been planning. Did you know that Tuesday is small Rosemary's birthday? She'll be five years old."

"I didn't know," Joan looked up at her. "Rotten for the kid not to have her mother here!"

"That's what we feel. We must try to give her a good time and make the day seem different; make it important to her, so that she won't have time to fret. I'd forgotten Tuesday was the day," Rosamund admitted. "I knew her birthday came soon, but I hadn't realised it was this week. The chauffeur, Jackson, reminded me this morning; he had been talking to the nurses."

"Mr. Jackson!" Joan stared up at her. "But how fearfully odd! Why should a chauffeur bother about a baby girl's birthday?"

"Well, don't you think it was nice of him?" Rosamund asked, laughing. "He'd been talking to the girls, and he suggested that Peters should drive me on Tuesday—I have to be out, I'm afraid—and that he should take all the

children in the big car for a picnic in the park. Would you and Tansy like to go too?"

"Yes, please." Joan looked bewildered.

Rosamund smiled across at Janice. "Joan-Two is as much surprised as we were that Jackson should be so thoughtful. Remember you have an engagement for Tuesday, then, Joan-Two! Come along, Jandy Mac! We'll go carefully past the trippers and then we'll canter up the green road towards the High Gate."

They moved on, and Tansy and Joan looked at one another.

"As you said just now—'Gosh! I am surprised!'" Tansy quoted.

"It doesn't seem natural," Joan argued. "After what we said about Mr. Jackson the other night, he sounds too good to be true. Planning a birthday picnic for Rosemary! Tansy, it is odd!"

"It's odd, but it isn't exactly wicked. You can't say it proves he's a criminal," Tansy frowned.

"You want to go, don't you? We ought to see if he's up to anything."

"I don't see what he could do, when he's taking a crowd of babies for a picnic. But we'll go; oh, yes, we'd better go!" Tansy agreed.

"Just to make sure he hasn't pinched those jewels," Joan added. "He might try to meet somebody and pass them to him; the person who was to be at the tent and was going to launch the boat, you know."

"And Mr. Jackson would make the picnic an excuse for going into the park with the car," Tansy assented. "I don't believe there's anything in the idea; it's too mad, and I don't see how he could get hold of the things; but we'll keep a look-out, just in case. I wish we could know if he does any more mysterious ringing-up before Tuesday!"

"To tell his pals to meet him! Oh, Tansy, couldn't we find out? Couldn't Bob haunt the telephone, or something?"

"Bob has his jobs to do. We'll ask him to listen, but I'm afraid he won't be able to tell us much. And *we* can't haunt the garage and keep one ear on the phone," Tansy said regretfully. "I say, would you really like to ride? Perhaps they'll let us have the horses one day. I'm frightfully keen, but I don't often have the chance."

"Oh, can you ride?" Joan cried. "Oh, that's marvellous! They'll let us go out together! I am glad you're here! When did you learn? Is it difficult? Will you teach me?"

"Ferguson will take care of you. He taught My Lady, and years ago he taught Geoff and Rhoda, and then Rosalie; and he taught me. He came from Scotland on purpose to teach Geoff to ride. I learned years ago, but I don't get much practice. You can have my jodhpurs; they were Rhoda's first and

then I had them, but I grew out of them a year ago. My Lady gave me a suit of Rhoda's, that she won't be able to wear again; so we'll both be all right."

"Oh, bully!" Joan forgot the mystery of the chauffeur, in this thrilling prospect.

She remembered it later, however, and that night she went "visiting," to Tansy's room. "I'm going to sit on your bed for a change! Did you have a chance to ask Bob about Mr. Jackson?"

Tansy lay and gazed up at her. "Yes, I did. There's been more phoning. Bob couldn't hear what it was about, and he didn't dare to go into the room, after the last row. But he knows Mr. Jackson rang up somebody; it was a very short talk, just a few words, and then Bob heard the thing put down, and he skipped off, for fear Jackson would come out suddenly and see him and make another fuss."

"Whatever it is, it was arranged before and he just made sure about the day being all right," Joan suggested.

"Confirmed the plan and gave the exact time," Tansy agreed. "You sound as if you really believed it. I don't; not unless something else happens."

"I do believe it," Joan exclaimed. "I'm positive that man's up to something and that's why he planned the picnic and what he phones about. I don't know what the something is, if it isn't a plot to steal the jewels; but I'm sure Mr. Jackson didn't arrange the picnic just to please Rosemary! He never saw her till two days ago; it isn't sense."

"I know. But I can't see what he can be going to do. I know he couldn't get near My Lady's room, and I'm certain no one in the Castle would help him."

"It's a mystery," Joan admitted. "But there must be some reason for his sudden kindness to Rosemary! I'm going to that picnic, whatever happens."

"Oh, so am I, of course! But don't say anything to anybody, Joan! We'd look so frightfully silly! Everybody would be wild with us; they'd say we were trying to make trouble."

"I won't," Joan promised. "I won't hint at our suspicions to anybody. But I've had an idea. I'll tell you, if it works."

Tansy looked at her doubtfully. "What are you going to do? Tell me now!"

"No. If anything comes of it I'll tell you at once," and Joan crept away to bed, leaving Tansy a trifle anxious.

CHAPTER XXI

DEEPENING SUSPICIONS

Rosamund turned from the telephone, after her evening talk with Maidlin. "Jandy Mac, I've asked Maid and the twins to come to tea on Wednesday. I suggested to-morrow, but Maid has to run a country-dance party in the Village Hall that night and she'd rather not be out all day. You'd like to see them again, I know."

"Oh, very much!" Janice exclaimed. "I had only the merest glimpse of Joan and Joy Junior."

"The twins?" Rosamund laughed. "We generally call them Elizabeth and Margaret."

"They told us their full names. They're so very much like little Joans and Joys!"

"Won't they come to Rosemary's picnic?" Joan asked, looking up from Mary Devine's first school story.

"I think not. The picnic will be quite big enough with Rosemary and you and Tansy and the three small boys. And Tuesday is Maid's Women's Institute; she always tries to go, to represent Joy, and with Jen away too, I know she won't want to miss the meeting. My way is better, Joan-Two. Rosemary will have a picnic and a birthday party as well."

"There's something in that," Joan agreed.

"Your mother and I are going to drive into town to do some shopping to-morrow. Town is at the seaside; would you like to come with us, or will you stay with Tansy and have your first lesson from Ferguson?"

"Riding?" Joan cried. "Oh, you are good! There's not anything in the world I'd like so much as to go riding with Tansy! May we really?"

Rosamund looked at Janice. "May she? Ferguson is absolutely to be relied on, and he's a splendid teacher."

"Oh, Mother, be an angel, like My Lady is!" Joan begged.

"By all means," Janice said. "I shall be delighted, Littlejan; I won't stand in your way, since Lady Kentisbury is so kind."

"You don't mind if I don't come in the car with you?"

"Not in the slightest," her mother said, laughing.

"Oh, cheers! I must go and tell Tansy! She said she'd lend me her old riding-kit!" and Joan rushed away.

When the car was waiting at the great door in the courtyard next morning, Joan came leaping down the steps to show herself to her mother,

who was already seated but was waiting for Rosamund to come.

“Mother, do I look nice? Tansy’s jodhpurs fit me beautifully. Am I all right?” Joan turned round to display herself.

“Quite neat,” Janice responded. “That suit fits you. I hope you’ll enjoy the ride. You’ll be sore to-morrow.”

“I don’t mind. Tansy and I wondered if we’d ride to the picnic, but perhaps we’d better go in the car with the rest.”

“It would be more sensible. What’s the matter, Littlejan?”

“Oh—nothing!” Joan was gazing at the chauffeur, who stood by the car door. “I thought—never mind! I’m an ass. I say, Mr. Jackson, it was marvellous of you to say you’d take us all for a picnic!”

For one moment the chauffeur’s impassive face had shown a flicker of expression. Was it surprise?—consternation?—annoyance? “Doesn’t he want us to go?” Joan thought, her idea of the night before flashing into her mind. “Now is my chance to find out! I do hope My Lady won’t come for a minute or two! We are looking forward to the picnic,” she added.

Mr. Jackson’s eyes went to the door. His mistress was not yet to be seen.

“There won’t be room for so many in the car,” he spoke hurriedly. “With the nurses and all the children, two more as big as you and Tansy, Miss Joan _____”

“Oh, there’ll be heaps of room!” Joan said cheerfully. “The kiddies are so little; they can sit on our laps.”

“It’s too many,” Jackson objected. “And it will be dull for you, with only the babies to play with. You’d be better to go riding again.”

“She mustn’t overdo the riding at first,” Janice remarked, overhearing the last words but with no idea that anything lay behind.

“I expect I’ll be too tired and stiff to ride to-morrow. I shall be glad to sit in the car.” Joan watched the grim face keenly.

“It’s a big responsibility,” Mr. Jackson growled. “The nurses will take charge of the children, but if you two are there, getting up to mischief and leading them astray—I know Tansy, and there’s no saying what she’ll be up to—it’s not good enough. It’s too much for me to have all the lot of you on my hands.”

“Oh, we won’t give you any trouble!” Joan promised, her eyes full of excitement. “But if you’re worried,” she added, “why not take Bob with you? He could help you with the driving.”

The man gave her a furious look. “It’s not the driving I want help with, you little——!” he muttered, and then he drew himself up stiffly and saluted, as Rosamund came down the steps.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!” she said gaily. “The phone went and it was a message from Joan. She’s thrilled to the limit to hear about you, Jandy

Mac, and she's aching to see Joan-Two. I told her we call her Joan-Two, and she said it was very wise. We're to go to see her, and Jennifer and Jim, at the end of the week."

"Oh, splendid!" Janice exclaimed. "Soon I shall feel I've met all the clan at last!"

"How nice you look, Joan-Two! Don't ride too far, on your first day; but Ferguson will see to that. He can be stern, if he thinks you're going too far. He's a good teacher, but very strict. Good-bye! Jandy Mac, you and I are going to be trippers at the seaside. We'll have coffee and cakes and ices on a balcony I know of, looking out on the pier. When we go to see Joan, I shall take you to the cottage where I used to live and give raspberry teas—the Rose and Squirrel; and my little Aunt Elspeth shall wait on us. She's five years younger than I am. You'll like Aunt Elspeth! Good-bye again, Joan-Two!"

The car rolled off, and disappeared under the great gateway, where the portcullis hung with threatening teeth, and across the drawbridge.

Joan, with a whoop of excitement, dashed off to find Tansy.

"Tans! I must tell you, before we go out with Ferguson. Last night I had an idea; do you remember?"

Tansy, neat in riding-breeches and red jersey and cap, eyed her anxiously. "I know. You wouldn't tell me about it. What mad thing have you been up to?"

Joan dragged her into her bedroom. "Just a minute! The horses won't run away. My idea was this—to find out somehow whether Mr. Jackson minded our going to the picnic. I thought—if he really has any—any criminal intentions, he won't want us there. He may be able to boss the nurses, and the babies couldn't do anything; and anyway, the nurses couldn't leave the kiddies, so they couldn't do much, whatever happened. But you and I are different; we might give the alarm, or something. So I thought—if there really is anything going on, Mr. Jackson won't want us. I thought—I'll look out for a chance, and I'll say something about the picnic, when he's there, and then I'll watch his face; perhaps he doesn't think we're going with the babies. That was my idea."

Tansy nodded. "Jolly fine idea, too. We'd be badly in his way. Well?"

"I had the chance—just now—when I was saying good-bye to Mother. And he didn't want us, Tans! I'm certain of it. He hadn't thought we'd go; it was to be just a babies' picnic; we weren't meant to be there. I saw his face, and I'm absolutely sure he was horrified to hear we were going." Joan paused for breath.

Tansy's black eyes filled with determination. "In that case, we'll jolly well see that nothing stops us!"

“Oh, rather not! We’re going to be horribly in his way,” Joan chuckled. “I’m more sure than ever that he’s up to something, and that the picnic’s part of it. It’s not Rosemary’s picnic—it’s Mr. Jackson’s!”

“It was his idea, from the first,” Tansy said thoughtfully. “What did he say? Or was it only the way he looked?”

“Both,” Joan exulted. “He looked like thunder. Mother couldn’t see, for she was in the car; he was at the door, waiting for Lady Kentisbury. He couldn’t say much, for fear Mother would hear, but he tried to put me off going to the picnic. All sorts of excuses!—there wouldn’t be room for two more people as big as you and me; we’d be bored, with only the babies to play with; we’d better go riding again—and Mother butted in and said I mustn’t overdo the riding at first! Then he said it was too much responsibility, and we’d lead the kiddies into mischief—the pig! So I said he should take Bob to help him; I was positive he’d simply hate to have Bob there!”

Tansy laughed. “If there’s anything in our idea, he won’t have Bob anywhere about. How he must have loathed you!”

“He did! He said I was a little—and then Lady Kentisbury appeared, and he had to freeze into an image and help her into the car. I wish I’d heard the rest! I want to know what I am; a little what?”

“It was jolly good work,” Tansy said admiringly, “and a jolly fine idea. My suspicions are deepening steadily! We’ll go to that picnic, and we’ll keep our eyes open for anything that seems in any way odd. But you’d better come along now. Mr. Ferguson will think we’ve funked it, and he’ll take the horses back to the stables.”

“Oh, come on!” Joan cried, and dashed off down the great staircase again.

CHAPTER XXII

MR. JACKSON'S PICNIC

"You won't take the children outside the park, of course, Jackson," the Countess was giving the orders for the day.

Joan, unnoticed in a corner with her book, heard the man's respectful, "Certainly not, my lady."

"I'll remember that," she said to herself. "What did he mean about a tent?"

The head nurse appeared at the door. "May I speak to your ladyship? I'm not happy about little Rosemary, my lady."

Rosamund looked up in dismay. "Oh, Nurse—wait a moment, Jackson! This may alter our plans. What's the matter, Nurse?"

"Just a little cold. There was a touch of east in the wind yesterday, and it may have affected her. It's very slight; I should think nothing of it, if she hadn't the tendency to croup, of which you told me. But I'm doubtful about this picnic. She'd be safer indoors to-day."

"Gosh!" Joan said to herself, laying down her book and watching the chauffeur's face intently. "This isn't going to suit Mr. Jackson! Suppose the picnic's put off? There'll be some frantic telephoning to his mysterious pals! I wonder if Bob could keep an eye on the garage phone?"

"I agree with you, Nurse." Rosamund looked disturbed. "We can't run any risks with other people's children. Rosemary must stay in and keep warm. They can have the picnic some other day."

"The rest of the children could go, my lady," Jackson suggested. "Won't the others be disappointed?"

"He doesn't mean that picnic to be given up," Joan thought, watching carefully. "I'm positive he's arranged for something to happen—somewhere—to-day, and the picnic is to be part of it. Somebody's going to meet him in the park, and he'll be the one to choose the picnic spot to suit his own plans!"

"It seems a pity, when the outing was planned to celebrate Rosemary's birthday," Rosamund said. "Some other time would do just as well. She'll probably be all right in a day or two."

"But the twins are coming here to-morrow, and then we have to go to see Aunt Joan!" Joan exclaimed, her mind made up. "Oh, Lady Kentisbury, let us have the picnic! We're all looking forward to it! I'm sure Rosemary wouldn't mind!"

"I don't suppose she would," Rosamund said, laughing. "Would you be so dreadfully disappointed if we postponed the picnic, Joan-Two?"

"Most frightfully, and so would Tansy," Joan said, the more fervently because she was convinced she had seen a flicker of relief on Jackson's face.

"It would be a pity to change the plans and disappoint the other children, my lady," he ventured to urge.

"I don't suppose Michael and Roderick care whether they are in the garden or the park, and I'm sure Lord Verriton doesn't," Rosamund remarked.

"But Tansy and I do. We're fearfully keen," Joan pleaded.

"Oh, very well!" Rosamund laughed. "Have your picnic then, Joan-Two! But you'll have to help Agatha to look after the boys. I can't spare Nurse to go with you. If Rosemary has even a slight cold, she must be watched carefully to-day."

"We'll help. We'll keep an eye on the boys," Joan promised.

"Shall I keep Lord Verriton at home with me?" Nurse suggested. "He really won't appreciate the picnic, and it would be less responsibility for Agatha."

To Joan, keyed up to top pitch to watch Jackson and to try to understand, there was something mysterious, electric, in the air at that moment, "as if the world held its breath," she said afterwards. Nurse's innocent and very natural suggestion seemed somehow to be of immense importance. Who was it who was waiting so tensely for the Countess's reply? Could it be Jackson? What could it matter to him whether the baby went to the picnic or stayed at home?

"I believe it does matter," she thought, in that breathless second. "But why? If he has the picnic, what does it matter who's there? What difference could Geoffrey-Hugh make?"

"It seems a pity to break up the party," Jackson began.

"Oh, don't leave anybody behind!" Joan begged. "We can't help Rosemary being out of it; you don't want her to have croup. But all the rest of us must go!"

"I certainly don't want her to have croup!" Rosamund's tone was emphatic. "I think Geoffrey-Hugh should go with the rest, Nurse. I like him to be out, and you'll need to be indoors with Rosemary."

Was it fancy, Joan wondered, or did somebody begin to breathe again, as if a crisis had passed?

"Very well, my lady," Nurse said. "I'll have the three boys ready at two o'clock."

"Tansy and I will help to look after them."

“Thank you, Joan-Two. I know they’ll be safe in your hands,” the Countess said gravely.

“Why did you do it?” Tansy cried, when Joan repeated the conversation to her. “If the picnic had been postponed it might have spoiled Mr. Jackson’s plans—if he has any plans! If he’s told somebody to meet him in the park today, they’d have been fearfully dished if the picnic had been put off!”

“I know. But I want them to meet,” Joan explained. “I want to see what they do; and to stop them, if we can. We shall be at the picnic and we’ll see what happens. If it was put off, he might meet his pals secretly, at dead of night, and we’d never know.”

“I see that,” Tansy admitted. “What I don’t see is why he wants to meet anybody at all and what he’s going to do when he does meet them. I’m certain he hasn’t been near the jewels; I’ve been talking to the maids, though of course they didn’t know what I was after. Mr. Jackson hasn’t been inside the Castle, except to have his orders from My Lady.”

“Aren’t there other treasures besides the jewels? Mother said something about priceless things in the State parts of the Castle.”

“Oh, rather! There are old books that would bring in pots of money. But Mr. Jackson wouldn’t know which were the valuable ones. Of course, there are the chessmen,” Tansy exclaimed. “They’re worth a lot, and they’ve been stolen once already. But they’re safe in the playroom and he hasn’t been near them; you saw us using them last night. I can’t think of any other treasures that Mr. Jackson could possibly get hold of and take into the park!”

With Joan, she was leaning over the battlements, looking down on the Children’s Garden, all unconscious, as was Joan, that the greatest treasure of the Castle lay there in his carrying-cot and that Mr. Jackson had made certain he would be in the picnic party.

“It’s not Rosemary’s picnic any longer,” Joan observed.

“It never was her picnic, really. It’s Mr. Jackson’s picnic,” Tansy retorted. “He suggested it, and he hasn’t allowed anything to interfere with it. I’ve been wondering if we’ve been idiots not to say anything to My Lady.”

“I don’t see what we could say. It all sounds so mad. There may be nothing in it.”

“If I was sure there was anything in it, you bet I’d have gone to her long ago. I don’t see what we can do.”

“Except go to the picnic and keep our eyes open,” Joan remarked.

“Yes, of course. That’s why we’re going,” Tansy agreed.

As they were arranging the children in the car, in the early afternoon, with the basket of provisions strapped on behind and Lord Verriton held

carefully in Agatha's arms, Janice strolled down the big steps, neat and slim in her riding-breeches and pullover and soft hat.

"I'm going out with Ferguson. Perhaps we'll come and have a look at you," she said.

"Mother, you really do look smart!" Joan remarked.

Janice laughed. "As I said before, I'm glad to have your approval, Littlejan! Mind you take care of those precious children!"

"Oh, rather! There are too many of us about for anything to happen to them."

"It must be marvellous to have a jolly young mother like that!" Tansy said wistfully, as Janice turned to go towards Ferguson and the horses. "Nobody would believe she was your mother. I don't remember mine at all."

"It's hard lines," Joan agreed. "But Mother's rather special. I'm sure there isn't another quite like her anywhere in the world. There! She's up. She does look nice, doesn't she?"

"Terribly nice! I'm sure My Lady's green with envy. She'd far rather go riding than be driven to a rotten flower-show. But she can't do just as she likes. She won't let people down, and the Castle folk always go to this show."

"It's decent of her to dress up and be proper, if she'd rather not," Joan admitted.

"I'm sure she'd rather not. Here comes Mr. Jackson. I say, Joan!" and Tansy drew Joan into their corner to whisper. "He didn't hear what your mother said, about coming to have a look at us. Perhaps she'll see him meeting his pals. Shall we say anything about there being a chance of her turning up?"

"No, don't tell him," Joan advised. "He might spill us all into the moat."

"Oh, righto!" Tansy nodded. "Keep it dark, then. If she comes, it will be a nice surprise for him. Up on my lap, Roddy-boy; that's right! Joan will hold Michael. There we are, all packed in safely!"

"What's the boat for, Roddy?" Joan asked, laughing, for Roderick clutched his treasured boat in his hand. "You can't sail it in the park! There isn't any water. We aren't going to the lake, you know."

"Goin' to sail my boat," Roddy said firmly. "He said so," with a nod at the chauffeur's back.

"Oh, but that's silly!" Tansy scolded. "You can't sail boats on the grass."

"He did say it. And I shall," Roddy insisted.

"Mike goin' to paddle," said Michael.

"Michael Marchwood, you're not going to paddle!" Joan cried. "I'm afraid this picnic's going to be a gloomy disappointment!"

"What do they mean, Nurse?" Tansy asked.

“I’m sure I don’t know! Mr. Jackson’s been talking to them, while I was dressing baby. Perhaps they misunderstood him.”

“We’ll have to find some long grass for them to paddle in,” Joan suggested.

“Not while I’m there!” Tansy retorted. “I’ve seen snakes in the long grass. When we picnic, or if the boys run about, it’s going to be on the turf, where we can see what we’re treading and sitting on. No long grass for me!”

“Snakes! Golly! Do you have snakes in your park?” Joan cried.

“They don’t do any harm, but they scare you. The boys might be frightened.”

“We’ll keep to the open ground, as Tansy says,” Agatha said definitely. “I don’t want to see any snakes, even in the distance.”

“Joan and I will scout round and clear the camping-ground for you,” Tansy promised. “We ought to have had Bruce with us. He’d have nosed out anything.”

“Bruce? Who’s he?” Joan asked.

“Haven’t you seen him? The collie; he was Geoff’s last birthday present; he belongs to Rhoda now, but we’re keeping him for her till she comes back. He’s young and rather rough; he’s only two years old, and he doesn’t understand about babies, so he isn’t allowed to play with Roddy and Hugh. We ought to have taken him when we went out on Saturday into the park. I’ll let you see him, and we’ll give him a run another day. Where are we going, Mr. Jackson? Out on the hill by the Old Lodge?”

“You’ll see soon enough,” the chauffeur said, over his shoulder.

Tansy raised her eyebrows and looked at Joan.

“Doesn’t love us to-day. Didn’t want us to come,” she murmured.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAUNCH COMES

“Oh, I say!” Tansy sat up. “He can’t take the car down there!”

“Gosh! It’s where you took me on Saturday,” Joan cried, as the car left the drive and began to go warily across the turf, by a smooth green road among the trees. “It’s the way down to—to that place where the tents are!” She flashed a look of sudden excitement, understanding and questioning at Tansy.

“Won’t it be difficult coming up again, Mr. Jackson?” Tansy demanded. “I know you can go down, but is it worth it? What is there to go for?”

“Easy,” said Jackson. “I’ve taken her ladyship down and up again. There’s no difficulty.”

“But what’s the good?” Tansy insisted. “Why can’t we picnic at the top, where there’s something to see? We’ll be buried in trees down by the lodge.”

The chauffeur made no reply, but seemed to be intent on guiding the car down the turf slope.

Joan leaned across behind Michael and Roddy and whispered vehemently, “*Tent! Launch!* It has to be down here. He wants to go to a tent.”

“Oh!” Light dawned on Tansy, and she frowned. “I’d forgotten. But you said he promised we wouldn’t go outside the park.” Her lips barely moved as she murmured the words.

“He’ll tell us to get the tea ready, and then he’ll go for a walk, to meet his pals.” Joan’s whisper was equally cautious. “One of us must follow him and watch.”

Tansy’s eyes were troubled. “I don’t see what we can do. We have been idiots, after all. I wish there was somebody else here.”

“Perhaps Mother and Ferguson will turn up. I’m glad we didn’t say anything about her.”

Tansy nodded. She said no more, but watched the chauffeur intently.

The grey lodge came into sight, with its white hens dotted over the grass, just inside the gate. Roddy and Michael shouted with delight, and Joan laughed.

“They’ll want to chase the creatures. Where can we picnic here, Tansy? Won’t we be in the way? There’s not very much room.”

Tansy shook her head and bit her lip. “We can’t stop him,” she muttered, beginning to look anxious. “He can do what he likes. We can tell My Lady

afterwards, but that may not be much use. We've been utter asses. What's he up to now?"

The lodge-keeper had been milking a white goat in a shed, but at a call from Mr. Jackson he came running to the car. The chauffeur stepped out and went to meet him and said a few words. The man touched his forehead and went towards the gate. "A message from her ladyship. He's to go up to the High Lodge on an errand for her at once." Jackson took his seat again and slammed the door.

"He's opening the gate!" Joan exclaimed. "We're not going out, are we?"

The car slid through the gate, which clanged behind them, and the lodge-keeper went to set his goat loose and go off up the hill.

"Mr. Jackson, you promised the Countess that we wouldn't go outside the park!" Joan's voice rang out, half-accusing, half-frightened. "I was there! I heard you say it!"

"Just outside the gate won't matter," the man said smoothly. "The little boys will enjoy paddling in the river."

Of that there was no doubt at all. Michael and Roderick gave shrieks of joy at sight of the water, the deserted tents, the boats drawn up on the little beach.

"Goin' to sail my boat!" Roddy shouted.

"Goin' to paddle," Michael cried in triumph.

"He's put it into their heads." Agatha sat up and looked anxious. "I don't think her ladyship would like it; not in the river. Mr. Jackson, I'd prefer that the children stayed inside the gates."

Tansy looked at Joan. "Didn't you say——?"

"He promised they should," Joan said promptly.

"My Lady said the little boys could paddle for half an hour, if the girls watched them," the chauffeur explained. "We can have tea inside, if you'd rather."

"I don't believe it!" Joan cried. "She said, 'You won't take them outside, *of course*!' He wants to be out here, for reasons of his own!"

"Mr. Jackson, please take us into the park again," Agatha insisted.

Jackson gave Joan a black look. But the car was at the water's edge, and he was turning carefully, and hooting in what seemed an unnecessary manner, since Campers' Cove appeared to be entirely deserted.

"Oh, look! Look!" cried Tansy.

Round the bend of the river, from among overhanging trees, there sped a small white electric launch, swift and almost noiseless. A man stood at the wheel, and two more were at the door of the little cabin. It swept up with the tide, towards the planks which made a tiny jetty for the boats.

Michael and Roddy shouted with joy and waved their hands to the men. Agatha stared blankly, still unsuspecting of anything serious.

Suddenly Tansy saw their danger clearly; before she had only felt it vaguely. The closed gate—the lodge-keeper sent away—the deserted camp, used only at week-ends, and this was Tuesday—the swift launch and those three men—and Mr. Jackson. What could she and Joan hope to do? If the chauffeur really had any stolen goods to hand over to his pals—at the tents, in the launch, as the phone message had said—there was no one to prevent him.

“We can’t do anything, Joan,” she said. “Keep an eye on the boys. They mustn’t get in the way; they might be hurt.”

The three men sprang to the jetty and came running to the car. The chauffeur had left his seat and was ready for them.

Agatha’s arms went protectingly round her precious charge. “Mr. Jackson, what does this mean? Who are these men?” she faltered.

Jackson turned to her. “Get out!” he said, his tone rough with excitement. “Out of the car, all of you!”

“Don’t do it! Don’t get out!” Joan shrieked. “I don’t like these men!”

“We’re not going to move,” Tansy exclaimed, thrusting Roddy behind her into the corner. “You can do your business; we can’t stop you. But we aren’t going to get out.” Suddenly she wished passionately that Bruce, the collie, had been with them.

“Want to paddle,” Michael began. “Roddy goin’ to sail his boat.”

Roddy looked out from behind Tansy and gave a cry of terror. “Go ’way! Men go away! Don’t like men!”

Lord Verriton woke and began to cry. Agatha clutched him to her breast and stared at the intruders.

“Out with you!” This was not the courteous Mr. Jackson they had known, but a harsh stranger.

“No!” Agatha panted. “What do you mean by this? Go away!”

“Leave us alone!” Tansy shouted. “Oh—how dare you! How *dare* you!”

One man had seized Michael and dumped him on the grass. Another thrust her aside and picked up Roderick. The third had gripped the nurse by the arm. “Come now! Get out quickly, if you don’t want that child hurt!”

Joan stood petrified with astonishment, still in the car. “What do you mean? You don’t want the children!” she faltered.

The men laughed. “Now—you!” one of them turned to Jackson. “You’ve bungled this, bringing a whole pack of kids. Which is your young lord? We don’t want three small boys on our hands.”

Agatha, standing trembling beside the car, held the baby more closely to her. “What do you mean?” she gasped.

Tansy suddenly became a wild creature. “You beast! Oh, you beast!” she screamed, and hurled herself on Jackson from behind.

He was bending to catch Roderick, who had tripped and fallen as he was put down. Tansy’s onslaught was unexpected. Jackson stumbled and fell heavily. His head struck the mudguard of the car and he lay stunned on the grass.

“Gosh! That’s done it!” cried one of the strangers. “You little brute, what did you do that for?”

“He deserved it!” Tansy sobbed, startled by the result of her action. “If he’s killed, it serves him right.”

“Oh, Tans! Have you killed somebody?” Joan’s voice was full of awe. “I say, he does look bad!”

“He’ll be all right,” the leader of the men said roughly. “Now, see here, you two! Which of the children is the little lord? We’ll leave the others; we don’t want to hurt anybody. But we’ve come for Lord Verriton, the heir to that Castle. His dad and ma will give a lot to get him back, I guess. Quick! Which of the kids is he?”

“It’ll be the eldest boy,” said one of the others. “Eldest’s always the important one.”

“Might not. I’ve heard something about some visiting kids; he said so,” nodding towards the prostrate Jackson. “We don’t want to take ’em all. Look out! That girl’s going off!”

One of the men sprang to Agatha, who, in sudden realisation of the terrible truth, was swaying dangerously. Tansy leapt towards her and caught the baby, as her limp hands relaxed their hold. She fell into the arms of the stranger, who looked at his leader for orders.

“Put her on board. We’ll need her for the kid. Tie her up before she comes round. Get her out of this.”

Agatha was carried off, more than half fainting. “Tansy!” she moaned.

“It’s all right,” Tansy sobbed. “We’ll stand by. Joan! Hold on to Roddy.”

Roderick and Michael were wailing in terror. Joan sprang from the car, still half-dazed.

“Tansy, what do they want to do?”

“Only to run away with your little lord, my dear,” the man grinned. “Come now—quick! Which of the boys do I want?”

“Don’t tell him, Joan! Not if he kills you!” Tansy cried.

“I won’t,” Joan said steadily, and thrust Roddy and Michael behind her. “I’ll die sooner than tell.”

CHAPTER XXIV THE LAUNCH GOES

“You will, will you?” The man took her by the arm. “Now, my girl—sorry and all that! I’d rather not be rough. But you’ll have to learn to be reasonable.”

He gave her arm a twist. Joan screamed. “Oh, you beast! No, I won’t tell you!” With a wholly unexpected wriggle she was out of his hands and rushing towards the gate. “Help! Oh, help! Oh, somebody please come!”

One of the men leapt after her and caught her in his arms, stifling her shouts. She fought madly, and it was all he could do to hold her and keep her mouth covered.

“Gosh! What little wild-cats!” said the leader. “What an ass this fellow was to let them come! Knock her on the head, if she keeps it up, Sam; just a tap. We don’t want murder done.”

He turned to the other children. Tansy had said a word to Roddy, and he and Michael were trotting towards the tangle of bushes. “Run and hide!” Tansy had ordered. Handicapped by Geoffrey-Hugh in her arms, she knew she had no chance of escape.

The man laughed. “Come back, my chickens! Not that way to-day!” He strode after the small boys and gripped one with each hand.

Michael, a mere baby of two, stared up at him solemnly. “What you doin’?” he demanded. Roderick, furious at the heavy grasp on his shoulder, kicked and screamed and tried to bite.

Their captor looked at them keenly, but found no help in his problem. Each had fair curly hair, but they were not alike, for Michael’s eyes were brown, while Roddy’s were blue. No, they were not brothers; one, at least, must be a “visiting kid.”

Holding them firmly he demanded to know their names.

“Mike,” said the younger. “He’s Yoddy.”

This was no help. The man turned to his companion, who was still struggling with Joan.

“Put her down; but hold her fast. Now, my girl, do you want another taste of what you had before?”

Joan, tear-stained and trembling with rage, looked at Tansy, who still clutched the baby and prayed that help might come.

“Don’t tell them!” said Tansy’s eyes.

“It will be much worse this time, my dear. And you won’t get away again. You won’t play that trick twice. Come now! Tell me which is the boy I want. We’ll leave you the others, and we’ll go away at once. We won’t hurt him, you know.” His tone was soothing and persuasive.

“No!” Joan panted. “No! I shall die if you do it again, but I won’t tell you anything.”

“Get on with it, Sam. The little idiot’s asking for it.” The gentler tone had changed to a threat.

Tansy, white-lipped, laid Lord Verriton in a sheltered corner and sprang towards Sam, as Joan’s scream rang out again.

“No! No!” Joan shrieked. “I won’t! Oh, Mother—*oh!*” and then she collapsed and lay limp in their hands.

“Oh, you utter beasts!” Tansy blazed, hurling herself on the man. “Cowards! Brutes!”

The leader spoke hurriedly. “There’s been too much row. We shall have half the countryside here. Fetch those kids, Sam. We’ll have to take the lot. I’ll see to this wild-cat! Don’t forget the baby; he may be the one we’re after. The fellow said it was a baby with yellow hair, but that might be any of them.”

He had seized Tansy from behind, with arms whose strength rendered her helpless. Struggling and shouting, she was carried to the launch, where the third man, having finished with Agatha, was ready to deal with her. With hands tied behind her and a cloth covering her mouth, she was flung into the tiny cabin, where the nurse lay on the floor, gagged and bound, her eyes wild with terror.

The small boys and the baby were bundled on board. Sam looked at Joan and then at his leader.

“Leave her. We don’t want her any more. Oh, leave him where he is, too!”—as Sam pointed at the still prostrate Jackson. “He can’t give us away. He’s never had names that will be any use to him. The sooner we’re off the better. We’re overcrowded as it is. Quick, men!”

The engine was starting up. Roddy stopped his angry crying and eyed it in sudden interest.

“Yoddy goin’ in boat?”

“You are, my man,” his enemy laughed. “Suppose you settle down to enjoy yourself, and don’t let us have any more noise. You’re a lot the most sensible of the crowd!”

Michael’s eyes lit up in fascinated delight, as the launch slid away from the jetty, and he jumped about in excitement.

“Here—steady on!” Sam growled. “You’ll have us all in the river, young nipper!”

Geoffrey-Hugh began to wail and then to cry loudly. Sam and his companion looked uneasily at their leader.

“Can’t go past the bridge with that noise going on and these two imps jumping and shouting.”

“We’re a long way from the bridge yet,” their master said curtly. “Get up speed! We’re hardly moving.”

“Tide’s against us; won’t turn for half an hour. We’re getting the most we can out of her. We’ll run down with the tide presently.”

The leader muttered a wrathful word. Things were not going too well. That fool Jackson ought not to have brought such a crowd of children, and he should have arranged the picnic for a later hour, when the tide would have helped their flight. The spot had seemed deserted enough, as he had promised it would be, but one could not be sure. From some of the hills around the whole thing could have been seen. There was urgent need for haste, and the boat was only just making headway and no more. It was important that their going should be unnoticed, and his craft was filled with noisy excited children and a screaming baby.

He went to the tiny cabin and surveyed his captives, lying helpless on the floor.

“Feeling comfortable? No? Well, we’ll let you loose if you’ll keep these kids quiet. They seem determined to go overboard, and I warn you if they go into the river they’ll stay there. We shan’t wait to fish them out. What about it? You!”—to Agatha. “Will you swear to keep quiet yourself and look after the family?”

Agatha, wild-eyed, looked at Tansy. “Shall I?” asked her eyes.

The man took the gag from Tansy’s mouth. “Tell her to have some sense.”

Tansy gasped and choked. “You’d better do it. They’re beasts and it’s helping them to get away, but the boys must be taken care of,” she sobbed.

“A gleam of common sense!” their captor laughed. “Well, girl?” He uncovered Agatha’s mouth. “You’re the nurse, aren’t you? Will you take on your job again?”

Agatha nodded, unable to speak. “Give baby to me. I can quiet him,” she whispered presently.

“One moment,” the smooth voice was hard again. “Which of the three is Lord Verriton?”

Tansy and Agatha stared at him dumbly. He laughed, and they shivered at the sound.

“Why risk three lives? I only want the little heir. You saw what happened to the other girl; do you want the same? But I shan’t waste time on that. Now get this straight! Only one of those boys matters to me. We’re out in

the middle of the river. If you'll tell me which I want I'll put the other two ashore safely. If you won't, I shall drop the baby overboard and chance it. He's very young; he can't matter much!"

"Agatha, he wouldn't do it! He wouldn't dare!" Tansy panted.

"Care to risk it?" he mocked. "You can't move, you know. Sam, give me the baby!"

Agatha struggled to sit up. "Give him to me," she said brokenly. "He's Lord Verriton."

"He isn't!" Tansy cried.

"Oh, stow it, you little ass!" the man laughed. "Is that the truth, girl?" and he gripped Agatha by the shoulder till she cried out. "Why isn't one of the older ones more important? Why is it the baby?"

Tansy, knowing their helplessness, broke down and sobbed.

Agatha said unsteadily, "Michael is staying with us. Roderick is her ladyship's little brother. Lord Verriton is her son."

"And heir. I understand now. Right! Then we can clear the decks. You'll stay with us to look after your young lord; you'll be useful. Wild-cat, we'll get rid of you and the other two when we find a lonely enough spot. Now, my girl!"—to Agatha. "If we have any trouble with you, we'll put you ashore too, and the boy will be left to our tender mercies. If you want to take care of him, do what you're told and we'll let you go with him. Nobody's going to hurt you. There needn't have been any fuss if this girl and the other one hadn't fought like cats."

He took no more notice of Tansy, who, defeated and heartbroken, lay sobbing in a corner. Agatha was helped to sit up and was given a sip of brandy; then Lord Verriton was laid in her arms, and she hushed him to sleep.

CHAPTER XXV

JANICE RIDES

Janice rode at an easy pace towards the High Gate into the park. Ferguson's horse had a loose shoe, and he had stopped at the smithy in the village. She had decided to ride on, and see if she could find the children at their picnic, while she waited for him to come.

She had protested that she did not need him in attendance, but Rosamund had declared she would feel happier to know her guest was not riding alone. Janice had discovered that Ferguson's home in Scotland was near the loch she had visited when she stayed with her grandparents and where her aunts still lived. She was hoping to take Joan there shortly, so she had offered to carry messages from Ferguson to his friends, and they had much to say to one another.

"I wonder where the picnic party is?" she thought, and as the lodge-keeper came to open the heavy spiked gate she called to know if he had seen anything of the car, with Jackson and the nurse and children.

The man pointed to the green track which led down among the trees to the River Gate.

"Down there? I'd better not go all the way, or Ferguson won't find me," Janice decided, and rode on along the smooth turf road till she reached a spot from which she could look down on the lodge and the gate.

"But where are they? I don't see the car. What a pretty launch, lying off the beach! It wasn't there the other day, when we rode round this way."

Janice looked in puzzled surprise for the car. Then she put her horse to the hillside on her right, an easy green slope which would take her above the lower trees.

"I believe the car is there, but it's outside the gate. How very odd! I understood they were to stay in the park. What can Jackson be thinking about?"

From the hilltop she looked down on Campers' Cove—the closed tents dotted among the bushes, the launch, the strip of beach. There were people there—men and children. What was happening?

Janice stiffened into agonised attention. It was all over in a moment, while she sat rigid with horror and could not move.

A child's scream rang out, a scream of agony and terror. One man threw a small blue body to the ground; a little girl in a cotton frock. Another picked up a girl in a pink frock and carried her to the launch. The first man

caught two small boys by the hands and pulled them to the jetty, and they were lifted on board. Something white was brought from under the bushes; and then the launch was gone, moving out into the stream.

The empty car stood by the gate. A man's body lay prone beside it. The tiny beach was empty, except for that pathetic little blue heap that lay so still.

"Littlejan!" Janice gasped, and set her horse to the slope, but going carefully. A spill would ruin her hope of giving help.

"Kidnappers," she thought in a dazed way. "They've stolen the children. The pink girl was Tansy. Oh, Littlejan! What have they done to you?"

As she reached the track, she reined up her horse, white with a sudden agony of indecision.

"They must be stopped. The launch could be caught at the bridge. I must take the news. But—Littlejan! I can't leave her—oh, I can't!"

Every mother instinct in her pulled her towards that sad little blue heap on the pebbles. But the launch must be stopped—at the bridge. The alarm must be given.

Was there no one who could go? The lodge-keeper? But why go back? She was already well on the way to the Castle.

Where was Ferguson? Was there nobody else?

Hard common sense said the saving of the heir must come first. If Joan were dead, no one could help her. If she were merely faint or stunned, she would come round by herself.

Janice, white and shaking, turned from Campers' Cove and galloped madly towards the Castle.

"Littlejan, forgive me!" she almost sobbed. "I must stop that boat. But if you die, what shall I say to your father? Oh, my dear, forgive me!"

Bending low on her horse's neck, she rode as she had never thought she could do. All the way she saw nothing but Joan, lying limp on the beach. The bridge! The launch must be stopped at the bridge!

While she rode her eyes were busy, looking for help. But she met no one; the trippers were, as usual, gathered round the lake.

Here was the parting of the ways. The left-hand drive went straight to the Castle.

Janice turned to it; then changed her mind and swung her horse to the right.

The police station was what she wanted. She galloped out of the gates, which were standing open, and down the steep road into the town.

The constable in charge of the station looked up from his desk.

"Help! Police! I want the police!" a voice called from the street.

He sprang to the door. A trembling horse stood there, panting; a lady clung to his neck, gasping for breath.

She sat up and spoke unsteadily. "Lord Verriton has been kidnapped. Men with a launch, at the cove up the river, where the tents are. You must stop the launch at the bridge. Go quickly! And send somebody to the cove. My little girl is there—hurt—by the men——"

She swayed, and he sprang to catch her, shouting for help. When she had been carried in and laid on the floor, he ran to the telephone.

Janice sat up presently, looking dazed and shaken. "Where am I? What has happened? Oh!" at sight of a shy young policeman. "Oh, I remember! Have they gone to stop the launch? Were they in time? And has anybody gone to the cove? My little girl——"

Her voice shook, with sudden remembrance of Joan. "I must go to her! Please help me! I had to bring you news, but now I must go to Joan."

"You be easy, ma'am," the man pleaded. "We've sent a lad on a motor-bike. He'll be near there by now."

Janice sank back, exhausted. "Thank you! I'd have tried to go, but—oh, have they found the launch? Please tell me?"

"They're waiting at the bridge, and they've phoned to Littleton, to watch the harbour. A launch went past the bridge a few minutes before you came in," the man explained. "We don't know if she was the one we're after."

"Then I was too late," Janice sobbed. "They'll get away. Where will they take the children? They couldn't go far in that tiny boat!"

"Maybe there's a ship. They may be making for it, to take him to France or Belgium," the man spoke his thoughts aloud, without realising how distressing they would be to his guest.

Janice covered her face with her hands. "I came as quickly as I could. It will kill Lady Kentisbury. Don't tell her until you really must."

"The launch you saw—was she rather big, and black?" the man asked.

"No. White—very pretty—small and low." Janice sat up, brushing her hand across her eyes. "Was your boat black? Oh, then perhaps——!"

"She's not the one you saw." There was eagerness in the man's voice now. "We'll stop any white launch that tries to pass the bridge. You keep easy in your mind, ma'am."

He helped her to a more comfortable chair in a back sitting-room and brought her a cup of tea, and Janice drank thirstily and waited in dire suspense.

The moments passed, and the police superintendent and his assistant began to look worried. Their men were posted on the bridge and Littleton was on the look-out. There seemed nothing to do but wait.

“We’ll have to warn Lord Kentisbury,” the elder man growled. “I hoped we’d be able to say we’d found them, before he heard anything about it. Launch should be down by now; the tide’s been with her for some time. What can they be up to?”

“Had a breakdown, maybe,” the young constable suggested.

The super reached for the telephone and called up the police-box by the bridge, where a man was waiting for orders.

“Tell them to take a launch and go up river to look for this gang. A white boat, low and small and pretty, Mrs. Fraser says. May have broken down and be in difficulties.”

He hung up the receiver and groaned. “Don’t see what more we can do.”

Time passed, and still they waited. No news came, and the anxiety of the men deepened steadily. “Should have been here long ago. It must be a breakdown,” the super growled. “I hope they haven’t sunk the launch.”

Janice sat silent, though she listened to every word. She had no further ideas; everything was being done. They could only wait.

Very diffidently, the younger man made another suggestion at last. “If they suspected we’d had news and were waiting for them, they might desert the launch and go off by road. If they had a car waiting—sort of second string to their bow——”

The worried super glared at him. “A car? On those water meadows? You know the sort of country the river runs through, I suppose? Where’s the road for your car? It’s all footpaths.”

“Oh, please!” Janice, following the discussion from her corner, sat up eagerly. “I drove out with Lady Kentisbury this morning; she was taking some gift to a man who is lying ill at that old inn, up the river——”

“The Anchor?” asked the super sharply.

“No, the other one, farther up—The Princess Royal. We had a joke about the name, because—but that doesn’t matter. The inn’s down by the water, in a sheltered sort of creek, with a jetty, and boats. Up on the road, above the path that leads to it, there was a big car standing. We remarked on it, for there’s no house anywhere near, and we couldn’t see any tourists about. Lady Kentisbury said they must have gone into the park to picnic, by the Low Gate. Oh, do you think?”

“Dished, by gum!” the super sprang to his feet. “They got wind of you somehow—knew you’d gone for help—and they abandoned the launch and took to the car. They’re gone; they may be in Brighton by now, while we’ve been sitting waiting for the boat to come down the river.”

He seized the telephone and began to send out frantic calls to all the stations for miles around. Then, looking grim, he called up the office of the flower-show and asked that Lord Kentisbury should be sent for.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SECOND STRING

“This will do. Draw in to that beach, Sam.”

The man who had been standing over Agatha came to Tansy and set free her hands and feet. “Rub your ankles,” he commanded. “You’ve a long walk before you.”

Tansy looked wildly round. “You can’t put us out here! It’s miles from everywhere! The boys couldn’t walk so far!”

“Want to stay with us now?” he laughed. “I thought you wanted to get away. Very fond of us all of a sudden, eh?”

Tansy choked down her sobs. “You don’t understand,” she pleaded. “That’s a sort of island; the river goes round the other side. We won’t be able to get off till the tide goes down. Oh, please! Don’t be a beast! Put us out on the other bank, where the park is!”

“Not if I know it! It won’t hurt you to rest and wait for the tide. Come along, my man! You’re going for a nice walk in the fields!”

“Why not take all the kids with us?” growled the man called Sam. “We’d get three times as much.”

“Three times the risk,” the other retorted. “These are big enough to yell at the wrong moment. We can cover up the baby, but these are different. Don’t worry; we’ve got the heir. He’ll bring us in all we want. He’ll be a gold mine, once he’s safely stowed away. We can’t risk the whole business by dragging these two about with us. One of them’s only a visitor at the Castle, and the other’s My Lady’s brother, and that doesn’t count for anything.”

He lifted Roderick and dropped him gently on the pebbles. “Now the other one!”

“We shan’t get home before it’s dark,” Tansy sobbed. “And the boys have had no tea. Oh, you are a brute!”

He dragged a rucksack from under a seat and tossed it ashore. “I forgot your tea. We knew we’d have a hungry kid on board, and we didn’t want him howling for food. There’s not enough for three, for we didn’t expect a crowd, but you can go shares with the babies. And you can shout for help. Maybe you’ll be rescued. We’ll have to risk that.”

“There’s nobody for miles,” Tansy said brokenly. “You don’t understand. It’s the water meadows; there’s no road. Oh, please take us somewhere nearer home!”

“All the better for me,” he grinned. “You’ll be found all right. Don’t worry! Now if you bite and scratch again we’ll take you with us and leave the kids here alone, so I’d advise you to go quietly. There you are!”

Tansy said no more. With all the strength of her mind and heart, she was determined to get Roddy out of the hands of these men—Roddy, the next heir after Geoffrey-Hugh, a fact which their enemy had never realised. That the Countess’s baby stepbrother could also be a cousin of the Earl, and therefore next in the succession after her own children, was quite beyond his knowledge of the family history. Roddy must be saved, and she had a chance to do it. Geoffrey-Hugh was, at the moment, beyond her help.

The launch crept away and swept round the next bend of the winding river, helped by the tide, which had now turned and was running strongly out to sea.

Tansy, with a gleam in her eyes, waved her hand ironically, and the man leaning over the side saw and wondered what she meant.

“Glad to get away from us. She’s a lot more cheerful than she was on board,” he said to himself. “Didn’t like our company, evidently!”

Tansy, triumphant one moment and sick at heart the next, picked up the rucksack and led the small boys in among the bushes. An heir to Kentisbury was still in her hands. If the very worst happened and Geoffrey-Hugh was never found, matters were where they had been four months ago, before Hugh was born. There was still an heir to the Castle, though he was not Lord Verriton.

“That idiot-brute didn’t understand. How he’d be kicking himself if he knew!” she thought. “Roddy’s our second hope—what was it we had at school, about proverbs and sayings? ‘The second string to our bow’—that’s what he is! Roddy! Mike! Who’s hungry? We’ll have a picnic and see what’s in this nice bag. Find a jolly place to sit!”

The children, bewildered by the speed at which events were moving, had subsided, Michael into puzzled but philosophical silence, waiting to see what happened next, Roddy into a tired whimper. The abrupt end to their trip in the fascinating launch had stunned them and disappointed them bitterly.

Tansy took off her jersey and spread it on the ground. “You sit down and watch me open the bag.”

A glimmer of interest showed in Michael’s brown eyes. “What’s in bag? Mike hung’y.”

“So’s me,” Roddy cried. “Show me, Tansy!”

Devoutly hoping the provision for “one hungry kid” would be enough to satisfy two, Tansy explored the contents of the bag. It had been an afterthought on the part of their enemy, and a few packets of food had been thrown in hurriedly. Some bananas and buns, a big slab of chocolate, and a

packet of biscuits—she approved of these; but a paper bag of sickly sugar sweets made her frown, and after a moment's hesitation she hurled it into the river.

“Not too bad, except those ghastly pink and green things! Now, boys, we'll have a feast. Here's a bun for each of you, and you can have another when you're ready. Does Mike like bananas? I know Roddy does. Well then, bananas and biscuits after the buns, and chocolate to finish. How's that?”

“Jolly good.” Roddy grasped a bun in each hand.

Michael was already eating steadily. Tansy laid as much as she could spare in two heaps and put the rest back into the bag.

“There's no saying when they'll have anything more. We can't get off this bank for an hour or two, and then we've miles of little twisty paths to go. I think I can find the way, but it's years since we explored these meadows; Bill and Geoff took Rosalie and me, one holidays. It's odd how we can change,” she thought. “Not so long ago—last November—I said to Roger that I wished something would happen to Roddy, so that Bill would still be the heir. Now I'm going all out to get him home safely. But so much has happened since then. Oh, if only I could have saved Hugh as well!”

Roddy held out his hand for a banana, and she gave him some biscuits to eat with it.

Michael gazed at her in puzzled wonder, and, baby as he was, grappled with a problem that had not occurred to Roderick. He thrust his own banana towards her. “Tansy have some!”

Tansy gave a shaky laugh. “You little angel! But Tansy's not hungry, Mike. Thank you, dear, but Tansy doesn't want it. Eat it up, and have some chocolate.”

“Enough for one couldn't possibly do for three,” she said to herself. “He said ‘go shares,’ but how could I? I'm glad they were a bit generous for their one kid, but the boys will want it all before they get home. I'm sure they're less likely to catch cold, even at night, if they've had plenty to eat. But I must get them somewhere before night, whatever happens.”

She pushed her way through the bushes to look at the broad strip of water which cut them off from the footpath. The river divided into several channels, dry or marshy at low tide, but filled when the sea-water came up.

Tansy gazed at the swift current hopelessly. “We won't get across for an hour, at least, and even when we do we're miles from everywhere. If only we were on our own bank!” and she looked longingly at the safe green hills of the park, rising above the grey stone wall, where she knew every track and path.

She went back to the boys and said cheerfully, “When Roddy's had enough, and Mike's had enough, we'll be babes in the wood and go to sleep

in the sun. Then when we all wake up we'll go for a walk, and go home to the Castle."

"And Tansy had 'nough?" Michael asked anxiously.

"Yes, my lamb, Tansy's had 'nough. Where shall we go to bed?"

A sunny dry spot was chosen, and to her relief the tired boys fell asleep. She sat clasping her knees and watching them, her back resolutely turned on the bag of food. It was past tea-time and she had been through a good deal. That it would be wiser, in the end, to take something to eat, to keep up her own strength for the sake of the boys, did not occur to her.

"I'm jolly glad Rosemary isn't here too! I couldn't have managed three," she mused. "I don't really know how I'm going to lug two of them along. Mike will need to be carried; I wonder how heavy he is? And Roddy can't walk for miles. Gosh! This is a mess! I suppose it wouldn't be better to leave them asleep, as soon as I can splash through the river, and go racing for help? I could tell people about the launch and Geoffrey-Hugh too. But what's the good?" she said hopelessly. "They'll be past the bridge by now. They'll go out to sea and put him on a ship. I wouldn't be in time. Perhaps somebody will guess and stop them somewhere. But I couldn't leave these two," and she looked down at the sleeping boys. "If they woke and found themselves alone they'd have fits. And if they wandered about they'd fall into the river. Mike would try to paddle and Roddy would pretend he was sailing a boat. No, I must stay with them. But we shall get along jolly slowly, and goodness knows when we'll see Kentisbury again! I'll have to lug one of them and then put him down and go back for the other."

She pondered the prospect before her, gloomily conscious that it was not a bright one and that she was already very hungry. "If that beast of a man had left me on the bank all tied up, it wouldn't have been any more difficult to get home! These two tie me down altogether. I shall never get anywhere, with them to look after!"

Her thoughts were black with anger as they dwelt on the men in the launch. It would have comforted her if she could have seen what was happening at that moment on board.

The boat crept round another bend of the river, which wound like a snake through the meadows of the valley. They were getting near the bridge now; one more corner, and they would see the Castle and the long stretch of water that led to it.

The leader's eyes swept over the hills. Suddenly he stiffened.

On the ridge against the skyline was the form of a galloping horse, black against the light. Someone was riding, crouching low on its neck, racing madly towards the Castle.

Sam was staring at the distant figure too. He could almost hear the thunder of the hoofs. He looked at his master. "That anything to do with us?"

"Guess so. We've been seen. Make for the inn. It's our only chance," the leader said grimly. "Good thing we've the car waiting. I always like a second string to my bow!"

The launch ran into the corner beside The Princess Royal Inn. It was set adrift, and Agatha, bewildered and protesting, was bundled into the waiting car with her precious charge. One man took the wheel, and the other two crowded in beside her.

"Now, my girl, one sound, and both you and the child are for it."

Agatha's terrified eyes looked into the barrel of a small revolver. Dumb with fear she shrank back in her corner, clutching Geoffrey-Hugh and trying to cover him with her arms.

"That's right. You keep quiet like that, and be a good girl," the man advised, as the car shot forward.

The road ran straight to the bridge, skirting the park and the Castle walls. It did not enter the town, but turned off to the bridge, just beyond the big gates of the Castle. The car was unnoticed in the stream of traffic coming down the London road and making for the coast. It shot across the bridge, waved on by the policeman on point duty where the roads met.

"If our friend in blue only knew!" the man murmured, as they crossed the river.

"Which way?" asked Sam, at the wheel, as they came to the cross-roads. "This would take us to Littleton. We might make the ship yet."

"No. Too risky. They'll watch the port; we'd be nabbed. Straight on, but take quiet ways through the hills; you said you knew the country. Keep away from the towns. Don't lose your way! We'll have to find another road to the coast."

The car raced on and Kentisbury was left far behind.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE HOMECOMING

The Earl put down the receiver and turned from the telephone, his face grey and drawn. "Fetch my wife——"

"Are you ill, my lord?" the secretary asked anxiously.

"No. Yes. There's bad news. Send for her."

Rosamund was warned by a steward. "I'm afraid Lord Kentisbury is ill, my lady. He has had bad news by phone."

She went to him with a rush. "Geoffrey, what is it? My dear, don't look like that! I'll help. What has happened?"

He gave her a dazed stare. "The police rang up from home. The children—at the picnic——"

"Not the car?" Rosamund went very white. "Who is hurt? Tell me quickly!"

"Not the car; they aren't hurt. A launch came up the river with some men; the children were at the cove, by the tents. The boys——"

"Jackson promised not to go outside the park!"

"I don't know anything about Jackson. He must have been in this, or how did the men know?"

"Have they stolen Hugh? Kidnapped?"

"My dear, don't break down!" the Earl exclaimed. "I did, I know, but you're so strong——"

"I won't," Rosamund said more quietly. "If he's not hurt, I can bear it. It will be only a question of money. What happened?"

"They carried off all the boys, and Tansy and the nurse. Mrs. Fraser saw it from the hill and rode to give the alarm."

"Michael too? How shall I ever face Jen?" Rosamund moaned.

"The police waited at the bridge, but the launch didn't come down the river; they'd hoped to get hold of the men before they had to tell us. They sent a boat up to look for the launch, and found it adrift, and empty, near The Princess Royal. A big car that had been waiting near the inn was gone. It's obvious that the men either saw Mrs. Fraser riding to the town or guessed in some other way that the alarm had been given."

"Janice and I saw the car this morning. We remarked on it." Rosamund, white and shaking, sat down beside him. "Geoffrey, tell them to send for the car. We must go home."

He gave her a piteous look. At every point he relied on her strength and steady poise. But Rosamund was Geoffrey-Hugh's mother and she was reeling under the shock of the catastrophe.

He gave the order and returned to her. "My dear! They won't hurt the children. They want to make all they can out of them."

"I know," Rosamund sat up and spoke steadily. "I'm all right now; it was the shock. What about you? You had nobody to break it to you."

"I'm all right too." He smiled at her bravely. "It's a blow, but we'll see it through together. The children will be safe enough, you know; nobody would hurt them. That would ruin all their hopes. We'll have them back quite soon."

"Ring up the Kentisbury police and tell them to search the banks of the river," Rosamund exclaimed. "They might just possibly put the children ashore, if they took alarm and thought they were being chased."

"That's an idea!" Lord Kentisbury turned to the telephone again. "They'll do it," he said.

"Did you say they had taken Tansy and Agatha too?" Rosamund's voice shook. "They don't want Tansy. They may leave her behind, and she might be able to tell us something. Thank heaven, Rosemary's safe at home! Have they taken Michael? But that's absurd! It's only our boys who are of value to them."

"They might not know which was which," the Earl objected.

"But Jackson—if he was in with them—would tell them. Or they'd make Tansy or the girl explain. What about Joan?" Rosamund asked anxiously.

"Nothing about her. Here's the car."

Geoffrey helped her in, with a word of explanation to Jim Peters, who exclaimed at sight of the trouble in their faces.

Jim looked grim. "I bet it's that Jackson's doing," he muttered.

"What's that?" Lord Kentisbury asked sharply.

"Mr. Jackson, my lord. None of us like him. But there wasn't anything we could tell anybody. We never did like him when he was here before."

"He must have been in with them. How could we know? He had served Lady Verriton well; she told us she had always been satisfied with him. He seemed the natural one to send for, when Burnett was away." The Earl was thinking aloud. "Get us home quickly, Jim," he added. "We must be on the spot. That's the first thing."

"Yes, my lord," and Jim sprang into his seat.

"Geoffrey! My baby! Those men!" Once safely in the car and hidden from view, Rosamund broke down, as the full extent of the catastrophe overwhelmed her. "He's so little! Will they be careful? They won't be able

to feed him—he needs me. Oh, how can I bear it? I'm sorry," she gasped, remembering Peters.

Geoffrey took her in his arms. "Never mind Jim, my dear. He feels just the same. We all do; but it's worst for you. Let yourself go; you'll feel better for it."

"I meant to help you," she sobbed and clung to him. "I'm so sorry! I never thought I'd go to pieces, whatever happened. But this—will they take care of him? And Roddy—old enough to understand and be frightened. And Jen's Mike! It will kill me if anything happens to him. It was cruel to take them all!"

"Perhaps your idea was right and we shall find them, or some of them, at home before us." He tried to comfort her. "As for Hugh, they'll be very careful of him. It's to their own interest, you see. If the girl keeps her head and goes quietly, they'll take her to look after him. She knows what he needs."

"Oh, I hope she's there! She's a sensible girl. I can't bear to think of baby alone in their hands!"

"My dear—think!" he urged gently. "If there's one thing certain, it's that those men don't want an infant on their hands without a woman to look after him. He's extremely valuable to them, remember. Of course, they'll keep the girl. Or else they'll have some qualified woman to take charge of him."

Rosamund grew quieter. "Yes, of course. He'd be a terrible anxiety to them. They'll have a nurse, if they haven't kept Agatha. But even then, think of the danger, Geoffrey! The change in his food! It's certain to upset him. He's such a scrap!"

"We must hope for the best. They'll try very hard to do the right thing for him. We're nearly home, Rosamund."

Rosamund sat up hurriedly. "I shall be all right. I won't weep before the police superintendent. I won't let you down, Geoffrey."

"That's plucky! But don't try too hard and hurt yourself. As Hugh's mother, you're entitled to a few tears."

"I'll control them in public. There's the Castle! Perhaps we shall find good news waiting," Rosamund cried.

"At least, we'll hear all there is to know," the Earl agreed.

Janice was dismounting wearily as the car drew up at the big doorway. She had been urged to take a taxi, but had preferred to ride, and the super, admiring her pluck, had let her come as she wished.

Her heart gave a leap of foreboding as she heard the car, but she thrust aside her dread of the meeting and hurried to greet Rosamund.

"I did my best, but I was too late. Oh, how brave you are!"

Rosamund took her arm. "I'm a bit shaky still. Come and tell me your side of it! Geoffrey will be busy with the police. Now, Jandy, tell me what you saw!"

Janice made her sit in a big chair in the entrance hall, and herself sank down on a stool at her side. She told her story in a few words.

"I was alone on the hill. Ferguson's horse had a loose shoe and was being attended to in the village. I went to look for the children and was told at the High Gate that the car had gone down towards the river. It seemed odd, so I rode out on to the hill to look down on them. The car was there, outside the River Gate, and a small white launch was lying off the cove. I saw nothing of Jackson, but there were other men. I saw them carry Agatha and the boys to the launch; and Tansy too—I saw her pink frock."

She stopped abruptly, breathing hard.

Rosamund sat up, gazing at her keenly. "And your Joan?"

"I saw her. She was fighting with one of the men. I heard her scream—a rather dreadful scream, as if she was in pain. He flung her down on the stones and left her there. He ran to the launch and they went off. I started to go down to help Joan. Then I knew that it was more important to go for help; to stop the launch at the bridge. Your boy had to be saved, if there was any chance. So I rode back to the town. But they'd abandoned the launch. I was too late." Her voice broke, and she bent her head to hide her face.

Rosamund's arms went round her. "Oh, my dear! You left your little girl? You didn't go to see? Oh, Jandy Mac, how brave! I'll never forget!"

Janice shook with sobbing, burying her head in Rosamund's lap. "I couldn't spend time going down to her. It would have taken a long while to come up again, and there'd have been no chance of catching the launch. She couldn't be dead. But she was hurt. It—was difficult—not to go to her."

"It was magnificent," Rosamund said. "I had no idea you had done that for us. We'll never forget, Jandy Mac! We must send somebody at once. They'll bring Joan back to you. I hope she's not much hurt. Fighting the men, did you say? Plucky kid!"

"The police sent a man on a motor-bike," Janice explained. "I'm waiting—to see how she is."

Rosamund held her closely, her own trouble put aside for a moment, as she realised Jandy's agony of suspense. "Oh, my dear! Can't I help you?—What's that?"

"The motor-bike!" Janice sprang to her feet and ran to the door.

Rosamund was close behind. A triumphant young constable swung up to the steps in a proud curve, and from the side-car Joan waved her hand to her mother.

“Mother, I’m all right! He says you’ve been upset about me. It was rather awful, but nobody was killed. But we couldn’t save Lord Verriton.” Her eyes met Rosamund’s anxiously.

“You did your best, I know, Joan-Two. Come and tell us all about it, if your mother doesn’t eat you up altogether!”

CHAPTER XXVIII

JOAN TELLS HER STORY

Joan, enthroned in a big chair, told her story, helped by questions from her mother, from Rosamund, from the Earl.

“We wondered about Mr. Jackson. Tansy doesn’t like him; she says nobody does. But there was nothing definite that we could tell anybody. Bob heard him phone a message about ‘tent’ and ‘launch,’ and Jackson was mad when he thought Bob had heard, so we guessed it was a secret. I said he must be in league with some burglars, and perhaps he was going to steal your pearls and sapphires, but Tansy said that was silly and he couldn’t get hold of them, so we were in a complete fog about what it meant. Then he suggested the picnic, and we said we’d go and see if anything happened. It was his idea, you know; it was really his picnic, not Rosemary’s.”

She looked at the Countess, who agreed. “I didn’t suspect anything. It seemed a kind idea.”

“We thought it was too kind for old Jackson! We saw he didn’t want us at the picnic, and it made us all the more determined to go. We thought if he met anybody near the tents and gave them things he’d pinched, we’d be able to tell you. Then he went out through the gate, although he’d promised you to stay in the park; and he sent the lodge man away, up the hill to the High Gate, to do a message for you——”

“I sent no message to the lodge,” Rosamund exclaimed.

“A trick,” the Earl said grimly. “Jackson was found beside the car, unconscious, with a bad cut on his head. He’ll be in hospital presently; he’s being looked after. When he recovers he’ll find himself in serious trouble.”

“He wasn’t dead, then?” Joan cried. “Tansy knocked him down; she jumped on his back and he fell against the car.”

“You evidently put up a stiff fight, between you,” Lord Kentisbury commented. “Can you tell us what happened?”

“You discovered that it was the children, and not the jewels, the men were after, Littlejan?” Janice asked. “Weren’t you terribly frightened?”

“Frightfully, because we knew we couldn’t do anything,” Joan explained. “Three men came from the launch and began to carry the kids off. They wanted to know which was the little lord; that’s what they called him. Tansy had jumped on Jackson by that time, so he couldn’t tell them, and of course we wouldn’t. One of them grabbed me and twisted my arm. I yelled and wriggled away and dashed for the gate. He caught me and said he’d do

it again, if I didn't tell; they didn't want to take all the kiddies, only Lord Verriton. I said I'd die rather than tell, and Tansy kept shouting, 'Don't tell them!' She was hanging on to Geoffrey-Hugh, because Agatha had fainted and almost dropped him; and they'd lugged her away to the launch. So Tansy couldn't help. He—he did it again and it was much worse." She looked at Janice, her lips trembling.

"You plucky child!" the Earl exclaimed.

"Joan-Two, thank you! Oh, my dear, I am so sorry!" Rosamund cried. "Jandy Mac, I wouldn't have had this happen for anything!"

"I'm sure Littlejan did her best," Janice said unsteadily. "She wouldn't willingly betray Geoffrey-Hugh. But it must have been an ordeal, and they were all alone."

"What happened next, Joan-Two?" Rosamund begged for the end of the story.

"I don't think I told them." Joan looked up at her. "I'm not sure, but I think I only called them beasts and brutes. I know I yelled again, and then everything went swimmy and it was all dark, and I don't remember anything else till I woke up. Nobody was there but Jackson, and I rather thought he was dead. I didn't want to look at him; he was horrid and messy; so I went to the gate, and I was starting to climb the hill when that nice policeman came dashing down on his bike to find me. He'd picked up the lodge man, so he left him to see to Jackson and brought me home in his side-car. It was quite marvellous! We rushed through the park at a frightful speed."

"*You* were marvellous!" Rosamund said warmly. "I'm sure you didn't tell them, or they'd have left Michael behind. They'd take Roddy as well as Hugh, I'm afraid; he's only a little less valuable to them."

"If they understood that, but they might not," the Earl remarked. "It's obvious that Joan told them nothing, since they've taken all the children. Joan, I don't know how to say what I think of your courage. You—but there's the telephone. Perhaps there's news," and he hurried away.

Rosamund followed him, unable to sit still, and waited at the door, watching his face while he listened.

Janice put her arms round Joan and kissed her. "Good girl," she whispered. "My brave Littlejan!"

"Geoffrey, there *is* news! What is it?" Rosamund cried.

"The police boat has found Tansy, with Roddy and Michael. They're bringing them home as quickly as possible. All unhurt, but worn out. Tansy has apparently been carrying the boys in turn and is exhausted. They were tramping along the bank on the other side of the river."

"Oh—good!" Rosamund dropped into a seat, trembling in the reaction. "Michael's safe; I shall be able to face Jen! And Roddy—my first baby! Oh,

I am glad of that!”

“Your idea was a good one,” her husband said. “The police searched the banks and scoured the meadows. It would have taken the children hours to trudge home, and they couldn’t have found their way on those paths after dark.”

“How soon can they be here?”

“The police put in at The Anchor, to ring up and set our minds at rest. But there was no car, and the children couldn’t walk another step, so they’re bringing them down the river in the boat. Half an hour, I should say.”

“Then tea for everybody,” Rosamund said with decision. “We’re all needing it. Joan-Two, I think you should go to bed. You’ve had a bad time.”

“Rotten,” Joan agreed. “But I couldn’t go to bed till Tansy comes. Oh, please! I want to know what happened!”

“Very reasonable. You’ve every right to hear the story from Tansy herself,” Lord Kentisbury said. “Tea will revive you enough, I expect.”

“We didn’t have any tea,” Joan admitted. “I’m fearfully hungry!”

“What about Tansy and the boys?” Janice looked troubled.

“I should think they’d be dead!”

“We’ll feed them as soon as they arrive,” Rosamund said. “Beds and baths and food will be ready for them. Don’t try to move, Joan-Two; you’ll be very stiff. Sit still and let us wait on you. You’ve been a brave girl today.”

CHAPTER XXIX

TANSY'S STORY

A police procession carried in the wanderers. Roddy and Michael were handed over to the distracted head nurse, to be examined carefully, bathed and fed, and put to bed.

Tansy was laid on a couch and Joan crept up beside her. She was white and limp, but her eyes were full of life, as they sought the Countess's anxiously.

"My Lady, I tried, but I couldn't save Geoffrey-Hugh."

Rosamund sat beside her, feeding her with strong soup and bread. "I know you did your best, Tansy. Now we must leave it to the police. They'll find him soon. Can you tell us about it?"

"Did the police ask questions? Could you help them at all?" the Earl asked anxiously.

"I told them all I could. What about you?" Tansy looked at Joan. "I kept thinking about you and wondering if you were dead."

"A nice policeman brought me home. Mr. Jackson isn't killed, so they're taking him to the hospital, and when he's better I hope he'll be hanged," Joan said cheerfully.

"Not hanged, I think. But he'll go to prison," said Lord Kentisbury. "You two will have to give evidence, but we'll stand by you. It won't be a very great ordeal."

"I'll just love to give evidence that will make him be put in prison!" Joan vowed.

"I hope you'll catch the lot of them." Tansy looked at the Countess. "They took us all away because we wouldn't say which of the boys was Lord Verriton. Then they threatened to drop him overboard if we didn't tell, because they said he was the baby and he couldn't matter much to anybody."

"Oh, Tansy!" Rosamund groaned. "I hope you told them at once!"

"They wouldn't have done it, my dear," but the Earl looked disturbed.

"What brutes!" Janice cried.

"They *were* brutes!" Joan twitched her shoulders feelingly.

"I knew they wouldn't do it." Tansy's strength was returning. "I said so, but Agatha didn't believe me and she was scared. She cried out that they must give him to her, and that he was the heir. Then they said she could go with him to take care of him, if she kept quiet and gave no trouble, and they put us out on an island and we couldn't get off till the tide went down. They

gave us a bag of stuff—buns and chocolate and bananas—and I divided it between the boys, for I didn't know when I'd get them home; and they had a sleep, until we could wade across to the bank. I carried Roddy over as soon as it was safe, and then went back for Mike, and we started to walk. But it was a long way, and——”

“And you hadn't taken anything to eat, or had a sleep yourself?” Rosamund asked quietly.

“She wouldn't, of course!” Joan cried.

“No, I know she wouldn't. Loyal all through, aren't you, Tansy Lillico?”

“I couldn't,” Tansy reddened. “There wasn't enough for three, and the boys were hungry. And I couldn't go to sleep; anything might have happened.”

“In fact, you took charge and thought only of them,” Lord Kentisbury said. “We are deeply grateful to both you and Joan, my dears. You have done well for us to-day. Tell me one thing, Tansy! Didn't these men know that Roderick matters to us only second to Hugh?”

Tansy looked at him. “They hadn't the slightest idea, and I never breathed a word, of course. They didn't dream that Roddy mattered at all.”

“And went off, leaving you with the second heir to Kentisbury safely in your hands!”

“I'd like them to know!” Tansy said bitterly.

“And I'd like them to know that the alarm was given by the mother of the girl they bullied so brutally,” Rosamund added.

“They will know, if—when we catch them,” the Earl said. “I shall take care that they hear the whole story and understand all their mistakes.”

“Oh, good! I hope you will!” Joan cried.

“I'm afraid the alarm wasn't much use,” Janice groaned. “I did my best, but——”

“It would have been all the use in the world and would have saved our boy, but for their change of plans,” Rosamund exclaimed. “All right, Tansy! You shall hear that bit of the story presently. Jandy Mac, we'll never forget how you left your own girl to try to save our baby! It was sheer heroism! It must have been terribly hard. I don't think I could have done it.”

“She looked such a tragic little blue heap, lying on the stones.” Janice laughed unsteadily. “I saw her before my eyes, all the way through the park. I kept asking her to forgive me and wondering what her father would say.”

“But I'd have wanted you to go for help, if I'd known.” Joan caught her mother's hand and pressed her cheek upon it. “It was what I wanted most of all—to help Lord Verriton. You knew that, and Daddy would say it too. Poor Mother! It was ghastly for you!”

Janice looked at Rosamund. "We've done our best, but it's been no use. Your anxiety remains."

Rosamund's lips tightened. "Yes. After all, he is our baby. You've all helped so much; now you must help us to be brave. Jandy Mac, there's a thing you could do that would help me very much."

"I'm here to do it; you know that."

"When we came here first, and you were so frightfully kind, Mother said she wished we could do something for you," Joan observed.

"You've done it; you, and your mother, and Tansy. Jandy, the newspapers will have the story by to-morrow; you know what they are! We can't hope to hush it up; anything that happens to us is news! Will you ring up Jen this evening and tell her the story, before it becomes public? And assure her that Rosemary is better and Mike is safe."

"I'll do it gladly. It will save her a shock. She's had enough lately."

"Yes, she mustn't have the story first in print. And if you could tell Maidlin for me, that would help too. Ask her not to bring the twins to-morrow. We'll wait a few days. If—when we have Hugh back, we'll ask them to come." Her voice faltered, and she broke off hurriedly.

"I'll see to all that for you. You mustn't go through the whole story again," Janice exclaimed.

"I don't think I could bear it," Rosamund admitted. "You'll excuse me, I know, Jandy Mac. I'm tired out. Send those girls to bed; they've both done well, but they've had a bad time. Ask Nurse to look at Littlejan's shoulder; she'll massage it, and that will help. Thank you again, Tansy and Joan, for all you've done!"

CHAPTER XXX

LORD VERRITON COMES HOME

The telephone rang madly. It was early the next morning. Joan and Tansy and the children were sleeping off the effects of their adventure, but no one else in the Castle had been able to rest.

Rosamund, white and tense, had kept very quiet, watching her husband in keen anxiety, and with high courage showing no symptom of strain except in her tortured eyes. Geoffrey was nearly breaking down under his burden of distress and she was well aware of it. For his sake she controlled all sign of her own heartbreak and gave her strength to comforting him.

Janice saw, and wondered, and admired, but waited near at hand, though in the background, in case of a sudden collapse on the part of either.

The Earl answered the telephone. His face changed. "Rosamund! He's found! He's safe!"

"Oh, Geoffrey!" She ran into his arms. "Oh, how? Where? When will he be home?"

"They were bargaining for a motor-boat at Eastbourne. Their ship was off Littleton, at the mouth of the river here; they'd gone by lonely roads through the Downs and had lost their way and found themselves well on the road to London. Then they had a breakdown at some deserted spot among the hills and worked at it for half the night. The girl says she and Hugh were asleep for hours and the car was only just starting again when they woke. At Eastbourne the men told a story about wanting to join friends in a yacht, off the coast, and said their telegram giving notice of their arrival must have gone astray, as no launch was there to meet them. The owner of the motor-boat thought there was something odd about the business. He saw there was a girl with a baby in the car, but there was no luggage. It seemed queer, so he kept them waiting about, while he sent for petrol for his engine, and his pal fetched the police, who were on the look-out for any suspicious car with a baby on board. The men tried to bolt, but were stopped in time. You'll have Geoffrey-Hugh in an hour."

Rosamund swayed and almost fell. Janice ran to them and helped him to lay her on the couch.

"She'll be all right." She glanced up into his face. "She's been holding herself in, for your sake."

"I know," he said brokenly. "She always thinks for me. I'll bring some brandy."

“No, please.” Rosamund struggled to sit up. “I’m all right. I’ll have a drink of water; not anything else, please. All I want is Hugh.”

“You’ll have Hugh very soon now,” Janice comforted her. “In the meantime you’ll have some strong coffee. We could all do with it; don’t you think so?”—to the Earl.

“I do,” and he rang the bell. And to the butler, when he appeared, he added, “You may tell everybody that Lord Verriton is found, and is safe. He’ll be brought home very shortly.”

The great bell on the tower rang out in a joyful clamour as the police car swept up to the great door and Geoffrey-Hugh was laid in his mother’s arms. Then, at last, she allowed herself the tears she had kept back, as she clasped him and clung to her husband.

Agatha’s face was wan and white. “My Lady, I couldn’t help it. I did my best.”

“I know you did, child. It wasn’t your fault. You stuck to him bravely, and we’re grateful to you. Weren’t you badly frightened?”

“Yes.” Agatha shivered. “They had a pistol and they threatened us. But they didn’t touch him; they left him to me. I was afraid if I made a fuss they’d leave me behind and take him away.”

“I’m glad you stayed with him. Has he had anything to eat, poor lamb? He’s very sound asleep.” Rosamund looked anxiously at her son.

“They stopped at a little hotel in the country and asked the woman to make a bottle of milk for a young baby. They said they were taking him to his grandmother, as his mother had been taken ill and couldn’t nurse him, and there had been no time to get food ready. I was in the car with him and I thought it was best to keep quiet. I was sure you’d be searching for us.” Agatha looked at her mistress anxiously.

“Much the wisest plan,” Rosamund agreed, while the Earl discussed the rescue with the superintendent. “You acted very sensibly all through.”

“He never cried once after he had that bottle,” Agatha said. “I wondered if perhaps”—and she paused suggestively.

Rosamund gave a gasp of dismay. “You think they drugged him? Oh, Geoffrey, come here quickly!”

Lord Kentisbury heard Agatha’s story and looked at his sleeping son. Then he rang up the doctor.

“No harm in making sure. But don’t worry, my dear. If they gave him dope, it would be only a drop; they’d be terrified of overdoing it. He’ll be all right. Let him sleep it off.”

“You go to bed, Agatha. Nurse will see to him now. Thank you for sticking to him so bravely!” Rosamund said.

That night the Earl turned to his wife, when they were alone together.

“Jackson has recovered consciousness and I had a word with him at the hospital this afternoon, while you were resting.”

“You ought to have been resting too. I wasn’t the only one to have a bad night!”

“I wanted to know what the man had to say. He can’t tell us much; he’s convinced that the names under which he knows the kidnappers are assumed. He lost the job which was found for him and has been in difficulties. These men approached him, knowing he had been in service here, and asked for information about our heir. Then came our offer that he should come back in Burnett’s place for a short time, and it was the chance he wanted. He got in touch with the gang, and they arranged the business. He was to tell them which child was the one they were after; nobody reckoned on Tansy Lillico! She jumped on him and his head was cut open and he had concussion; and they were in a hole, for they didn’t want to take all the children. It was a dirty trick on their part to leave him behind, but they didn’t want him. He was merely their tool, and no doubt they felt he had messed up the affair by having so many children about; so they left him to his fate. They’re all in jail and they’ll get what they deserve. Now, Rosamunda, what can we do for these good friends who have helped us so bravely?”

Rosamund looked thoughtful. “You can’t offer Janice anything. It would seem like a reward. She’d be up in arms at once.”

“I feel that. But she was more than good.”

“Leave Jandy Mac to me! There’s something we can do that will mean more to her than any gift we could offer. You’ll hear about it later! It’s supposed to be little Joan’s secret, but Jandy told me all about it. I’d like Agatha to have something.”

“Yes, she did well. She might so easily have lost her head. What would she like?”

“A cheque,” Rosamund said, laughing. “She’s going to be married and she’s saving up for her house.”

“That’s easily done. What about the little girls? I shudder to think of young Joan, helpless in the hands of those brutes and yet refusing to betray our boy.”

“Yes, she was splendid. It needed real courage. I’d like to do something to please her too.”

“And Tansy was wonderful,” Geoffrey added. “She has quite redeemed her shady past! I’ve at last forgiven her for the fright you had last autumn. To think of her trudging home with two heavy boys, on those dangerous slippery paths——”

“Very hungry, while they were well fed,” Rosamund added. “What about it?” and she looked at him expectantly.

“Something to wear? Girls like pretty things. What about a string of small pearls? I don’t suppose either of them has ever possessed anything of the sort.”

“I’m quite sure Tansy hasn’t! But they don’t want jewellery. My dear man, don’t you know what would make them happier than anything else in the world?”

Lord Kentisbury laughed ruefully. “No, I don’t, but I can see that you do. I don’t understand small girls, evidently. I thought a necklace would be just right.”

“In five years, perhaps. They’d be thrilled, of course; but there’s something they’d like much better.”

And Rosamund told him what Tansy and Joan would like, better than anything else in the world.

He laughed and raised his eyebrows. “But what use would that be to little Joan? About Tansy I agree; you’re probably right. But isn’t Joan going back to Australia?”

“Perhaps not. That’s part of her secret. You go ahead; it will be all right.”

He raised his brows again. “I’ll see to it. I’m willing to admit you know best. Isn’t it a joy to hear that boy’s voice!”

Nurse had come to report that Lord Verriton was awake and seemed himself again, but that he was calling for his mother.

“His yells are the happiest sound I’ve heard for a day and a half! He certainly seems to be quite all right,” Rosamund said, laughing in happy relief. “Yes, Nurse, I’ll come to his lordship at once. He evidently isn’t willing to be kept waiting!”

CHAPTER XXXI

BLACK BOY AND CHESTNUT

“Joan! Come here and look!” Tansy called softly, leaning out of a high window and gazing down into the courtyard.

Three quiet days had helped everybody to rest. The doctor had seen the Countess and had forbidden any visitors, telephone conversations with friends, or social engagements for the rest of the week. Rosamund, feeling the reaction after the strain of that terrible night, had been content to lie in the garden, letting Janice give the daily bulletins to the Hall and to Jen in Yorkshire.

The news from the Grange continued to be good. Kenneth was improving steadily and the fear of serious internal injury had passed. His head and his broken arm would mend with time, and he was cheerful, glad to have Jen at his side. The children had been allowed to stay and were enjoying the moors, but were kept out of the way by Mary Devine, and when in the house were subdued into quietness by the masterful and capable Andrew.

Janice was glad to rest also, while she recovered from the consequences of her mad ride through the park. She felt bruised and shaken, and her mind still saw that little blue heap lying on the shingle. The peace and age of the ancient Castle, with its cool grey stone and green lawns, were very healing, and she felt the ugly memories gradually slipping away.

Roddy, Michael and Geoffrey-Hugh had taken no harm from their experiences, but Agatha still looked white and wan, though her eyes brightened when she remembered the Earl's words of thanks and planned how to use his gift in the best way for the little house of which she dreamed.

Joan had shown a dread of the park which disturbed the Countess, who knew from her own past experiences all about the results of shock and the need for fresh interests. Joan did not want to wander with Tansy, for fear they might “meet somebody.” Tansy was heavy-eyed and tired; her nightmare was of slippery paths and rushing water, heavy children and the night coming on. Rosamund would have sent her back to school, to give her new thoughts and keep her mind busy, if Joan had not been there, needing her company.

They spent a good deal of time by the lake, sitting on the bank or looking down from the cave. Tansy produced from the boat-house a slim yellow canoe, called *The Rhoda*, which she handled with real skill, and

paddled with Joan up and down the shallow lake, to the envy of the tripper children and the anger of the swans and ducks.

Joan ran to her side, when Tansy called her from the window. "What is it, Tans? Oh, I say, what gorgeous horses! Who's come to call?"

"I don't know. I've never seen them before. The chestnut's a pony; a real beauty."

"A perfect lamb. I'd like to hug him. Look at his marvellous tail!"

"I'd choose the black horse. He's a young one, but he'll grow. Gosh! How I'd love to have a horse of my own!" Tansy sighed.

"Lord Kentisbury wants to speak to you, Tansy. Yes, Joan too." Agatha had been sent to find them.

"Wants us? Who came on the horse and the red pony, Agatha?"

"I don't think anybody's come. Better not keep his lordship waiting."

The girls raced down the turret stair and found Lord Kentisbury awaiting them in the great doorway. The Countess and Janice were there also, Jandy looking puzzled, Rosamund expectant.

"I have a dose of medicine for you young ladies," the Earl began. "I haven't liked your looks for the last few days, since certain unfortunate happenings."

Tansy stared at him blankly, but Joan protested in indignation, "We're all right! *I'm* quite all right—just a bit tired; that's all."

"And not inclined to go into the park, for fear you'll meet the bogey-man."

"Oh, well! It wasn't nice," Joan argued. "I don't want to go near Campers' Cove again."

"Come out to the courtyard," said Lord Kentisbury. "Let me introduce you to Black Boy and Chestnut. Tansy Lillico, will you do us the honour of accepting Black Boy, with our thanks for your gallant care of our children? He's not too big for you, I think, and you'll grow and so will he."

"For me?" Tansy gasped. "For my own? That marvellous black beauty? Oh, you couldn't really mean it!"

"Go and make friends with him. He'll soon know you are his mistress. Now you won't need to ride my horses any more!" the Earl teased. "He'll wait for you here till the holidays, but when you go to Wood End School I suppose you'll want to take him with you."

"I'd like to hug you!" Tansy shouted. "But perhaps it will do if I kiss Black Boy instead!" And she dashed down the steps to the handsome young horse.

"Much more suitable!" Rosamund said, laughing.

"Joan-Two, if you were riding on that chestnut pony, would you still be afraid of the park?" the Earl asked, smiling down into Joan's wistful face.

“You don’t think we’re going to leave you out, do you? I don’t know what you’ll do with him when you go back to Australia, but I’m assured that in some odd way it will be all right. Chestnut is yours, if you’ll accept him, and I hope he’ll take away the unpleasant taste of last Tuesday’s picnic.”

“For me?” Joan echoed Tansy’s shout. “Oh, you couldn’t—oh, Mother!”

“Jandy Mac, you must let her have the pony!” Rosamund urged. “We want to show that we appreciate her courage and loyalty. Geoffrey was going to give them pearl necklets, but I suggested this. I was sure they’d prefer it.”

“Oh, much nicer!” Joan cried. “Oh, Mother, say I may have him! Look what an absolute angel he is!”

“It’s far too good of you,” Janice exclaimed. “I don’t suppose Littlejan will ever forgive me, if I make difficulties! But you shouldn’t have done it.”

“I never would!” Joan agreed in delight. “Oh, may I go and love him?”

“But what about Australia?” asked the Earl. “I insist on knowing how you can have Chestnut, if you’re going back to Sydney.”

Joan’s face blazed in sudden excitement. “Mother, shall we tell them? I didn’t mean to say anything till I saw Jansy Raymond, but they’ve been such perfect dears, Mother!”

“Tell them, then, Littlejan. It was your secret, not mine.”

Joan’s words tumbled out in a breathless stream. “Perhaps I’ll stay here and go to school—the school Jansy goes to, where they dance and have May Queens. Mother went there once for one term, and she knows the Head, and she’s always thought she’d like me to go to that school when I was old enough. Of course, I’ll have to live there all the time, but I’m used to that. It was the same in Sydney; there was the sea between me and Mother, and this will be just a little bit more sea, that’s all. It will be ghastly when I have to say good-bye to her, but I’ve had to do it before.”

“And you’re brave, Littlejan,” Janice added. “It will be bad for me, too. But you’ll love being at Miss Macey’s.”

“We thought perhaps sometimes I could go and stay with Jansy, in the holidays,” Joan added. “I believe Aunt Joan would ask me. Perhaps I could ride Chestnut then.” She looked at Rosamund.

“You’ll ride Chestnut here, I hope. Tansy will want to see you. Joan-Two, that’s a splendid plan! Of course you’ll go home with Jansy for the holidays, and you’ll go to the Abbey too; Joy and the twins will want you. But you must come here as well. Jandy Mac, if you really leave her behind, you must look on Kentisbury as a second home for her. You will do that, won’t you? There will always be a welcome here for Joan-Two.”

Janice Fraser’s face lit up. “That’s more than kind! It will make all the difference to her father and me to know that.”

“Joan and Joy and Jen will want her,” Rosamund said again. “I suppose they have first claim, as they knew you so long ago. But I feel that we have a claim on Joan-Two as well, after last Tuesday. You must let her come to us often. She shall have Chestnut, wherever she spends her holidays, but I hope she’ll spare a lot of time for us. Then she can ride with Tansy in the park.”

“Oh, I will! I’ll love to come! How simply marvellous!” cried Joan.

“Your holidays are arranged for, for the next three or four years, Littlejan,” said her mother. “But if you ever give any trouble, or get up to pranks with Tansy, I hope they’ll send you right back to school and take Chestnut away from you.”

“We can’t do that. Chestnut is Littlejan’s,” Rosamund said. “Chestnut and Black Boy! They make me think of country-dances I used to know. Chestnut is a country-dance, Joan-Two, and Black Boy is another. Now wouldn’t you like to go into the park again? Run away and change! Ferguson wants to see you on that pony; he chose both of them for us, and he knows what he’s doing.”

“He knew what we’d like! They’re just right! Tansy said upstairs that she’d love to have a black horse and I said the chestnut was a perfect lamb.” Joan called to Tansy and they rushed away to change.

CHAPTER XXXII

A KEEPSAKE FROM KENTISBURY

“Come up to my room, Jandy Mac!” Rosamund led the way to her workroom, where her big loom stood draped in a cover.

“I want to see you working at this,” Janice said.

“I made a lovely length of material before Hugh was born. It was for Joy, and she had it made up into an evening gown; she was so pleased about it! But lately I’ve been too keen on riding to care about working indoors. This is what I want to show you!”

From a small safe in the wall she took a box and unlocked it, and emptied the contents on to a white cloth on the table.

“Oh, but how pretty!” Janice cried. “Those are fascinating! May I play with them?”

Rosamund’s fingers groped in the heap of small jewels. “They’re not very valuable; just little ones that have been taken out of their old-fashioned settings. Geoffrey gave them to me and told me to have any that I fancied made up into ornaments, for myself or my friends. I ordered Maidlin to choose, and she picked out some little rubies. They made quite a pretty necklet. Now, Jandy Mac, if you had a ring made from old Kentisbury stones, wouldn’t it help to remind you that your girl was being looked after, when you’re on your South Sea Island and Joan is here in England?”

Janice looked at her, wide-eyed. “It would, of course. But you couldn’t _____”

“Why not? Of course I could! They’re meant for gifts to people we like! I agree with Geoffrey that doses of medicine are needed all round; I want you to forget how you had to choose between your Joan and my baby. Come, Jandy Mac! Choose your stones and show me the size of your rings, and we’ll have them made up for you.”

“You really mean it? I ought not to take them!”

“I say you ought. Are you still seeing a sad little blue heap lying on the beach?”

“Sometimes,” Janice confessed, reddening. “I try not to think about it.”

“When you see that ugly picture you’ll look at your Kentisbury ring and remember what you did for us. And you’ll remember that we’re taking care of Joan for you. Is it to be rubies?”

“No!” Janice exclaimed. “If I may really choose, may I have one or two sapphires, to remind me of you?”

“How nice of you! And I remember what you said at the Manor: that you had always envied Joan and Joy their sapphire rings. That’s a joyful idea! You shan’t envy them any more,” and Rosamund sat down and began to sort the jewels into colours.

“Oh, stop! What are you doing?” Janice cried.

Rosamund laughed up at her. “I’m not going to make you take all my sapphires! I may want to plan a necklace for Rosabel Joy some day; she’s sure to have blue eyes and yellow hair; she couldn’t possibly help it! I’m picking out different sizes. There! One big and six little ones. Now, Jandy Mac, there’s your blue ring with seven stones, just like Joan’s and Joy’s!”

Janice looked at her, her dark eyes eager. “I’d like it better than anything! But I don’t feel——”

“Don’t feel! Don’t think!” Rosamund said gaily. “We’ll send them to be made up to-morrow. I do want you to have a Kentisbury keepsake! I shall feel it binds you to us, like an engagement ring, and that some day you’ll come back from the South Seas to stay with us again.”

“I shall want to do that, without a ring to remind me,” Janice said happily. “‘Keepsake’ is a lovely word. I remember Joy used it about old Ambrose’s ring, when it was given to Jen. But what is your dose of medicine? You and Lord Kentisbury had an even worse time than we had.”

“Geoffrey-Hugh’s voice, when he calls for me,” Rosamund laughed. “After that night when the Castle was so silent, we rejoice every time we hear him yell. There!”—and she opened the door, “Listen! That’s our tonic! He’s the best keepsake Kentisbury could have. And every time I give thanks for him I think of you and Joan and Tansy. You did a very big thing for us, Jandy Mac.”

“I wish I could have done more,” Janice said. “I’d have liked to feel I had really saved your boy, instead of merely trying to do it.”

“But you did save him!” Rosamund gazed at her. “Don’t you realise that? Not by stopping the launch at the bridge, as you hoped, I know; but you most certainly saved Geoffrey-Hugh! It was because the men saw you riding so madly through the park that they knew the alarm would be given, and that made them change their plans. And that was why we caught them! But for you, poor little Hugh might have been on the ship and off to the Continent before we had heard anything about it. Don’t make any mistake! You saved our boy, and we’re quite aware of it. I needn’t say any more about our gratitude. You know what he means to us.”

“The heir to Kentisbury!” Janice said. “I’m glad you think I helped. I was feeling that I really hadn’t been much use.”

“You don’t understand, even now, what that child means to his father,” Rosamund spoke with deep feeling. “After all his years of illness, to have a

son of his own was a joy he'd never dreamed of. What Hugh means to me, for that reason, as well as for the ordinary ones, you can perhaps guess. Jandy Mac, if you'd gone down to help your girl, our boy would have been lost, and we know very well that we might never have seen him again. At his age he might easily have died from the effects of exposure and change of food. You left your Joan, not knowing whether she was alive or dead, and it's a thing we'll never forget. When you look at your Kentisbury keepsake, you must remember all the story that lies behind it."

Jandy's face was very bright. "I shall do that! It's a beautiful thought."

"When Joan-Two goes back to your island, in four or five years, and has to leave Chestnut behind, we'll pass the pony on to Roddy and Hugh, and she shall choose a keepsake too, a ring or a chain," Rosamund promised. "The stones were worn by Kentisbury ladies hundreds of years ago. Now they'll be used for friends who have done big things for us. Go and change, Jandy Mac, and we'll ride in the park with our two brave girls, and see how they handle Chestnut and Black Boy!"

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *Jandy Mac Comes Back* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]