

STRANGERS
AT THE
ABBEY

E. J.
Oxenham

THE ABBEY



SCHOOL SERIES

COLLINS

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STRANGERS AT
THE ABBEY

by
ELSIE J. OXENHAM



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CHAPTER ONE THE STRANGERS

“Joy, the queerest thing!” Joan put down her mother’s breakfast tray and stood gazing at her cousin.

Joy looked up from the letter she was reading. “What sort of thing? Come and have your brekker. What’s happened?”

Joan poured out a cup of coffee and sat down. “Mother’s had a letter, and she let me read it. It’s from somebody called Belle Reekie. Joy, I’ve got two new cousins.”

Joy stared at her. “You’ve got me, and don’t you forget it. I never heard of any other cousins.”

“Neither did I. But Belle Reekie seems to be one, and she has a little sister, so that makes two. Two cousins, and I’d never heard of them!”

Joy pushed away her plate. “Joan, what *is* all this about? We’ve known my family history, but you’ve never had any. It was just you and Auntie. Now you go and produce two cousins! What has Auntie been doing? Why has she concealed them all this time?”

“Poor Mother! She’s upset, but she told me how it happened. Her sister—she was very fond of her—married somebody in Scotland called Fred Reekie, who was rather well off, Mother thought. About eight years ago, when we were babes of ten, Mother was finding things difficult. Both our fathers had died, and she was taking care of you as well as me; it was while we still lived in London. She couldn’t see how to do all that she wanted to do for us.”

“And my dear grandfather wouldn’t help,” Joy put in. “I love him because he died and left me his house, but he wasn’t a bit nice while he was alive.”

“This happened some time before Mother could bring herself to write to Sir Antony. It was only when she was really desperate, because you were so poorly in town, that she appealed to him. But she thought she could ask her own people for help. So she wrote to her sister, and had a curt, horrid letter in reply, saying the sister was very ill and the brother-in-law didn’t feel called on to support any family but his own. That was followed by a printed notice of Mrs. Reekie’s death.”

“What a brute of a man! I suppose Auntie had nothing more to do with him?”

“Just that. Poor Mother was evidently dreadfully hurt, and she never wrote again. I’m afraid it went on hurting her for a long time; she had no one left but us, and we were too young to be properly understanding. She had to keep it to herself, and I’m sure it helped to make things worse for her at an already hard time.”

“I could throttle Fred Reekie,” Joy said bitterly. “Poor Auntie! And she’d lost her sister too.”

“That added to the trouble, of course. Now this letter is from the elder girl; there seem to be only two girls. Mother had an idea there was a boy as well, but Belle doesn’t mention him. Perhaps he died; we won’t speak of him to the girls, in case it’s a sore subject. Well, you see why I’ve never heard of my cousins before? Mother put them right at the back of her mind and never spoke of them to us.”

“I don’t blame her. What does the girl want?”

“To come here,” Joan said simply.

Joy raised her brows. “To see Auntie? Has the wretched father come to his senses?”

“Perhaps. I don’t know. But he’s dead.”

“Oh! Well, he won’t be much loss,” Joy said coldly. “He wasn’t a suitable relation, even by marriage, for nice people like you and Auntie. What about the girls? Do they want to heal the feud?”

“They don’t feel there has been any feud. Belle is going to America, and she doesn’t know what to do with the small sister, who is only fourteen, so she wants to bring her here to Mother.”

“To *live*, do you mean?” Joy cried.

“I’m afraid so. I think it will be too much for Mother, but what can we do?”

“Say it can’t be done,” Joy exclaimed. “Look here, Joan! I know you and Auntie; you’re saints, and you’ll take in this kid and let her upset all our lives. Of course it will be too much for Auntie! She hasn’t any strength to spare. My fault, I know, for terrifying her by having pneumonia on top of measles, and scaring her into a heart attack; she’s never been quite right since. She can’t stand anything extra now. I guess this is where I butt in, for her sake. It’s my house! If I won’t have this girl, that puts an end to the idea, and a jolly good thing for everybody. Tell Auntie from me that we’re not having any kids to live with us.”

Joan said nothing, but spread marmalade, her face thoughtful.

Joy shot a look at her. “Well? You don’t want the infant, do you?”

“It depends what she’s like. If she’s nice, it might be rather fun. But I’m afraid, on Mother’s account. And Mother wants to have her.”

“Oh, she can’t! She doesn’t really want her,” Joy wailed. No arguments about “my house” would be any use against Mrs. Shirley’s wishes, she knew.

“She does want her, Joy. These are her sister’s girls, and she was very fond of her sister. She wants to help them.”

Joy groaned. “But think, Joan! A kid of fourteen here all the time! I said I objected for Aunty’s sake, but I don’t want her for my own, either! If she comes, that’s the most I’ll agree to, and only to please Aunty. I won’t have anything to do with her. She’s your relation; you can look after her.”

“Spoken like a real ex-May-Queen!” Joan commented sarcastically.

“You’re an ex-Queen too, *and* her cousin. If you and Aunty choose to adopt her you can do the work and have the worry.”

“I expect that,” Joan agreed. “I shall try to save Mother all I can. It won’t be so bad, Joy. She’ll have to go to school; she’ll be out all day. No kid of fourteen is coming to live here to loaf about and do nothing.”

“Live here! Is it for always and always?” Joy groaned.

“Belle has an appointment in America; I don’t know what her job is. She’s Isabella, really, Mother says, but she signs herself just Belle. If she does well, she’ll send for Rykie to join her.”

“For *who*? What’s her weird name?”

“She calls the kid Rykie; her real name is Frederica. We must ask them about it.”

“Rykie? How does she spell it?”

“R-Y-K-I-E. At first I called it ‘Reekie,’ but that would make her name ‘Reekie Reekie,’ and that’s not very likely. It must rhyme with—let me see!”

“Spikey!” said Joy. “Crikey! What a name! Rykie Reekie!”

“It is odd,” Joan conceded. “Perhaps they couldn’t bear Freddy and they didn’t think of Freda, so they called her Reeka; then they didn’t like the sound of Reeka Reekie, so they turned her into Rykie.”

“I don’t see that Rykie Reekie’s any improvement! It’s a ghastly name. She’ll be a horrible nuisance,” Joy groaned. “Can’t you reason with Aunty?”

Joan looked grave. “I’m afraid not. I see Mother’s point of view. If she refused, she would feel she was letting her sister down, and she would be unhappy.”

“If these girls have plenty of money, couldn’t she—er—Rykie go to boarding-school?”

“Who says they have money? I don’t think they have. Belle says it’s vitally important she should go to America, for the sake of her career. I can’t imagine what the career can be, but evidently America is necessary to it.”

“But I thought the horrible Fred was well off?”

“He may not have been well off when he died.”

“True,” Joy agreed. “He may have been a gambler or a bookmaker, or even a burglar. He may not have left a fortune. Then the positions are reversed, and after his refusal to help Auntie, his girls now have to come to her. H’m!”

“And Mother can’t refuse,” Joan added.

“No, I see that. She wouldn’t be Auntie, if she could. Oh, what a mess! I wish the Reekies had never existed!”

“Unfortunately they do exist. We can’t be pigs, Joy. Think of all that has been given to us! We must help Belle, and we must be good to Rykie.”

She and Joy sat and looked at one another. They were very much alike, and had often been taken for twins; their fathers, John and Jim Shirley, had been twins, and the girls were like them, with the same brown eyes and the same rich, dark-red hair. But the likeness was not quite so apparent now, since, at eighteen, they had left school and had put up their hair—Joan wearing hers in big plaits round her head, while Joy had large coils over her ears. On occasion, however, Joy adopted Joan’s plaits, to tease strangers, and then the twin-like resemblance appeared again.

As Joan said, much had been given to them. At fifteen, Joy had inherited the beautiful Hall and its grounds from her grandfather, Sir Antony Abinger, who, resenting bitterly his only daughter’s runaway marriage with Jim Shirley, had refused to see her child.

Joyce had died, still unforgiven, and Sir Antony’s son had died before him, so only Joy had been left to inherit the Abinger lands. With Mrs. Shirley as her guardian, she had joyfully taken possession of the lovely old house, and was very proud and happy.

To Joan, one month the elder, had been left the beautiful Abbey ruins, in the grounds of the Hall, to her everlasting amazement and joy, “Because of her love for the Abbey and her thorough knowledge of it,” Sir Antony had said in his will. Joan’s pride in the Abbey was as great as Joy’s pride in her house, and both girls felt very definitely that much had indeed been given to them.

Joy sighed at last. “If you and Auntie really want to have this Rykie child, she’ll have to come, I suppose. But *I* don’t want her! If you think it would make an impression on Auntie’s kind heart, I’ll object violently.”

“It wouldn’t,” Joan said decidedly. “But perhaps Rykie won’t be too much in the way. She’ll go to school; I’ll see to that! And I’ll see that she does her prep at night. We shall only have to look after her at week-ends.”

Joy sighed again. “Oh, bother—bother—bother!”

CHAPTER TWO

HELP FOR JOAN

“There’s one thing I can do,” Joan said suddenly, as she and Joy sat thinking over the situation.

“What’s that? I didn’t think there was anything!”

“I shall ask for Jen to help me.”

“Jen!” Joy exclaimed. “That’s an idea! She’s older than this Rykie; she could deal with her. Jenny-Wren could cope with anybody! But she’s at school; what can she do?”

“She could come and live here and go to school with Rykie every day. They could cycle together; then we wouldn’t need to send them in the car. Rykie couldn’t ride so far alone, but she’d be all right with Jen. I shall go to see Miss Macey; she’ll understand, when I tell her the story.”

“Our dear Head will do a lot for you,” Joy commented. “Oh well! If you can kidnap Jen and hand young Rykie over to her, perhaps I shall be able to bear it.”

Their friendship with Jen Robins was of two years’ standing. Jen, now fifteen, had come to school at the time of Joan’s crowning as May-Queen; she had been fascinated by the ceremonies and the country-dancing, and had become an enthusiastic member of the Hamlet Club. When, a year later, Joan’s maid-of-honour had been chosen Queen, Joan had invited Jen to take her place, and the friendship had become still deeper and more real. Jen had spent much time with the Shirley girls, both for week-ends during term and longer periods in the holidays, when the illness of her father had kept her from going home to Yorkshire; she looked on Mrs. Shirley as an unofficial aunt, and she was always welcome at the Hall and loved every corner and every stone of the Abbey.

Jen was obviously the one to help to entertain Rykie Reekie, but she was a boarder at school, so her mother and the headmistress had to be consulted.

“I’ll write to Mrs. Robins to-day, and to Belle,” Joan said. “Then I’ll go down to school and ask Miss Macey if she’ll take Rykie and if she’ll let us have Jen.”

“We’ll have the car,” Joy suggested. “We’ll take Billy to drive, if you’d like it better, but you really would be quite safe with me. I’ve passed my tests and I’m considered a very good driver.”

“I’ll trust you. I know you don’t want to smash up the new car.”

“Oh, I don’t want to smash you either! You’d better get used to driving with me. I promise to be careful.”

The new car, larger than the tiny runabout which had been her first venture, was Joy’s greatest treasure, so Joan felt fairly safe, even though Joy insisted on forsaking Billy, who had driven the small car, and on being her own chauffeur. She drove carefully, knowing that any accident or recklessness would mean perpetual anxiety for Mrs. Shirley. Joy adored her aunt, who had been the only mother she could remember, and would make any effort or sacrifice to give her ease of mind.

“Are you coming in to see Miss Macey?” Joan asked, as they neared the town.

“I thought I’d run out to see Cicely and pick you up to take you home.”

“Give my love to Cicely, but don’t call for me. I’ll come back by train.”

“Had enough of me and the car?” Joy grinned.

“Not a bit. But I want to take Jen to lunch at the dairy. I told Mother I’d be out.”

“Oh, good! The kid will love that. Right! I’ll leave you to find your own way home.”

Jen, coming from her last class of the morning, gave the shriek of joy which was characteristic of her and rushed to fling herself on Joan.

“Joan! You’ve come to see us! How lovely of you! It’s marvellous to have you here!”

She was fifteen now, tall and long-legged, with a very short blue tunic and flying green girdle, blue-eyed and with long yellow plaits on each side of her face.

“I believe you’ve grown, Jenny-Wren. You look taller every time I see you,” Joan scolded. “You’re going to be a regular lamp-post.”

“Maypole,” Jen pleaded. “I can’t help it. I don’t do it on purpose. Is everybody quite well, Joan? Aunty Shirley and the cats? Joy’s always all right!”

“Everyone’s very fit; the cats are full of life. I’ve come for something more than just to see you, my dear.”

“Oh, Joan, what? Tell me quickly!”

“To take you out to lunch at the dairy. I want to talk to you.”

“Oh, cheers! You are an angel! I’ll fetch my coat and change my shoes. I love a dairy lunch!” and she was gone, racing to the cloakroom.

Joan laughed and waited for her, greeting various girls as they appeared. “Hallo, Beetle!—Beatrice, I mean! Congratulations, Nesta! You’ll be a good Queen. Jen has been sure you would be chosen.”

Nesta, one of Jen’s classmates, coloured in pleasure. “It’s lovely of the girls to want me. I’ll try, Joan. Beetle’s going to be a jolly maid.”

“Beetle has had practice.” Joan smiled. “She’s been quite a good maid for me, when Jen was busy with cricket.”

Beetle, a short round person with a good-natured expression, grinned up at her. “You’ve trained me as a maid. I’ll do my best for Nesta. She’s going to look lovely in her silver train.”

The crowning of the May-Queen was due to take place two days later, for this was the beginning of the summer term. Joan had not seen the new robe yet, but she had heard its details from Jen.

“Silver honesty pennies on a purple border to a silver train; Jen told me. It will look most effective, Nesta. It’s a good choice; Nesta-Honesty will be a jolly Queen, I’m sure.”

“You’re not asking Nesta and Beetle as well, are you?” Jen came flying back, wearing her coat and cap. “You little pigs haven’t been butting in, have you?”

“I haven’t asked them,” Joan said quickly. “Don’t worry! This is a private lunch, just for you and me.”

“Oh, are you taking Jen out to lunch?” Beetle asked wistfully. “Can’t we come too, Joan?”

“Come on! We aren’t wanted.” Nesta took her future maid-of-honour by the arm and drew her away. “You know what Jen’s like about Joan!”

“Sorry, Beetle! But I really do want to talk to Jen,” Joan called after them.

Nesta nodded over her shoulder. “Of course. She’s your maid; you must consult her about things. Come along, Bee!”

“Was I a stingy pig, Joan?” Jen pleaded, as they crossed the playground. “I really did want you to myself. I don’t see a lot of you now. I couldn’t bear to share you with Nesta and Beetle!”

“I don’t call that being a stingy pig,” Joan assured her. “I’d invited you; I hadn’t asked them. Cheer up, Jenny-Wren! You’re going to see a lot of me presently. I hope it won’t be more than you want!”

“It couldn’t be. Joan, what do you mean?” Jen stood and gazed at her.

“I can’t tell you till we’re safely in the dairy. We may be interrupted here.”

“Come on!” Jen gave a shout. “Those kids are coming to ask if you think Nesta will be a good Queen. Run, Joan!”

Joan caught her hand and they raced to the gate and out into the road.

“Saved!” Jen cried dramatically. “I saw they were going to mob you!”

Joan checked the wild rush. “Walk decently!” she commanded. “I can’t go galloping through the streets like a wild infant.”

Jen grinned. “Is Joy coming too? Did she drive you in? How’s the new car?”

“Very comfortable and runs beautifully. Joy’s gone to see Cicely; I’m going home by train. Here we are! Which is your favourite corner?”

“This one! Do you remember how you jawed me a year ago, about being sporting and helping with cricket, and we sat in this very spot?”

“I never jawed you! What a horrible expression! I never even lectured you,” Joan protested. “I was most sympathetic and kind.”

“Yes, you were, but it came to the same thing. I had to go and play cricket and let Beetle be your maid. That won’t happen again, you know. I’ve bullied Kath till her bowling’s quite decent enough for any team.”

“I’m glad. I missed you a lot last summer. But I can’t quite believe Kathleen is as good as you were.”

“Not as good, perhaps,” Jen said candidly. “But she gets wickets and that’s what matters. I couldn’t go on giving up all my summers and losing my dancing. Kath’s had to work; I’ve seen that she did! Now she’s panting to be the team’s chief bowler, so they don’t need me any more. If Kath breaks her arm or has measles, the Head says they may fall back on me; I’m a sort of unofficial reserve. But I’m not playing regularly, so I can be your maid properly, Joan.”

“That’s a good thing, for I want your help,” Joan said, as she turned to the waitress to give her order.

CHAPTER THREE

JEN ACCEPTS

“Joan! You want *me*? But what can I do?” Jen gave a shout.

“Gently!” Joan scolded. “We don’t want to be turned out into the street. If you’re going to yell like that, I’ll be afraid to tell you what I mean.”

“I’ll whisper,” Jen promised fervently. “I’ll just murmur gently. What do you want me to do? Is it really something for you?”

“I want you to come and live with me,” Joan said, her eyes full of amusement. “Now murmur gently about that, if you can!”

“To live! Do you mean at the Hall?” Jen gasped. “Oh, Joan, don’t tease! Tell me some more! You couldn’t mean that?”

“Oh, but I could. We’re afraid we’re in for a difficult time, and we want you to come and help us.”

Jen sat and stared at her. “I don’t understand,” she said at last. “Either I’m mad or you are. I hope it isn’t you. It might be me, of course.”

“Oh, Jen!” Joan laughed. “Listen, then!” and she told of the letter from Scotland, of the newly-found cousins, and of Belle’s demand that the little sister should find a home at the Hall.

“But what cheek!” Jen cried. “It isn’t Aunty Shirley’s house! What does Joy say?”

“That she doesn’t want the kid. But Joy always gives in to anything Mother wants, and Mother does want her, so she’ll have to come.”

“You don’t want her either, do you?”

“I think it may be too much for Mother. We shall all have to protect her and keep Rykie off her hands. And that’s where you come in, my dear.”

“Oh!” Jen gave another startled gasp. “You think if I stayed at the Hall I could help you with the kid?”

“Exactly. Miss Macey will let you come if your mother agrees, and if you turn up at school punctually every morning. I’ve written to Mrs. Robins.”

“Mother will say yes; she loves me to be with you. I say, what sport! For the whole term?”

“I should think so. Rykie must come to school, of course. I thought you could cycle together; I wouldn’t like her to do it alone.”

“How old is she?” Jen looked thoughtful. “And what’s her name? You called her something weird.”

“She’s fourteen. Her name’s Frederica, after her father. But her sister calls her Rykie.”

Jen’s eyes widened. “How odd! And what’s her second name?”

“Reekie. Her father was Frederick Reekie.”

“Rykie Reekie! Gosh, what a name!”

“We think perhaps she was called Reeka at home, but at school the girls laughed at ‘Reeka Reekie,’ so she turned it into Rykie.”

Jen broke into a wide grin. “I bet they called her Shrieker and she couldn’t stand it.”

Joan laughed. “Perhaps. They couldn’t turn Rykie into Shrieker. Well, Jen, what about it? Will you come to live at the Hall and take Rykie off our hands as much as you can, and especially keep her from worrying Mother?”

“I’ll be nursemaid to half a dozen kids, for the sake of living with you!” Jen promised largely. “It won’t be so bad for you, Joan. We’ll have to start early and we won’t be back till after five, and then there will be prep. I’ll take her out for picnics on Saturdays; lucky it’s the summer term! How long will she stay?”

“We’ve no idea. She’ll have no other home in this country. But she may want to join her sister in America, in time.”

“It’s jolly hard lines on you all.” Jen considered the situation. “The Hall is so nice and quiet and peaceful, and you’ve kept it like that for Auntie Shirley’s sake. To have an unknown kid dumped on you, without any chance to say no, is a bit thick.”

“That’s how Joy feels, but Mother wants to help. Rykie may be a very jolly girl, Jen. We may find we’re glad to have her. I don’t know why we’ve made up our minds she’ll be a nuisance.”

Jen shot a shrewd look at her. “But you think she will. You don’t expect her to be nice.”

“I suppose it’s because Belle has thrust her on us, without giving us much chance to refuse. It’s unfair to blame Rykie; she can’t help herself. Probably we shall like her very much. You see what a great help to us you can be, don’t you?”

“A bit, perhaps. I suppose two will be easier to look after than one, even if one of them’s me—I mean, even if I’m one of them!”

“That sounds better,” Joan laughed. “And, quite apart from Rykie, we always like to have you at the Hall.”

Jen reddened suddenly. “You can’t really mean that, you know, Joan. I’m untidy, and I’m noisy—a real shrieker; everybody says so! I’m the very opposite of all of you at the Abbey; you ought to hate having me there. You’ve been marvellous, to put up with me so much. And now you’re asking me for the whole term! I just don’t believe it.”

“You keep us lively and stop us from getting old and stodgy,” Joan said seriously.

“I hope this Rykie person isn’t really another shrieker!” Jen exclaimed. “You couldn’t stand two in the house!”

“You only shout when you’re thrilled about something. Mother likes having you, and of course Joy and I like you quite a lot!”

“I can’t imagine why,” Jen said humbly.

“You’re a part of our schooldays; you make us feel young again,” Joan said solemnly. “Quite often I wish I could go back to school.”

“Oh, Joan, do come!” Jen gave one of her wild shrieks of excitement. “Everybody would love to have you! You could come with me and Rykie every day. I’m sure you don’t know everything yet!”

“I do not! But I’m learning,” Joan told her. “I’ve taken over most of the housekeeping from Mother and I’m finding out just what a lot of things I don’t know. And Joy is working really hard at her music. We’ve plenty to do, though we aren’t at school. Don’t imagine I sit and read novels all day!”

“You’re coming to the coronation on Friday?” Jen asked wistfully.

“Of course we are! I have to do my last public act for the Club by crowning Muriel with forget-me-nots before she abdicates and crowns Nesta as the new Queen.”

“I forgot; yes, you still have one Queen-thing to do.”

“One duty as a Queen; not Queen-thing, please! What a dreadful expression!”

Jen laughed. “Sorry! Yes, it was ugly. I hope you won’t ever feel too old to come on May Days, not even when you’re a grandmother.”

“A grandmother!” Joan gave a shout of laughter. “I’ll have to be a mother first, and I don’t see any sign of that happening. I don’t suppose I shall ever marry. I shall stay at home and take care of the Abbey; that’s my job. How could I leave it and go away? But you’ll go away, my dear! This isn’t your home. Your people will want you, as soon as you’re done with school.”

Jen’s face clouded. “I wish home was nearer. I wish—oh, I don’t know what I wish! But I don’t want to go away from you and the Abbey.”

“You’ll always come to us for May Day,” Joan promised, to comfort her. “Consider yourself invited, here and now, for every coronation! As long as I go back to school to be a Queen I shall want you for my maid.”

Jen’s face lit up. “Thank you, Joan. I shall always come.”

“Unless, of course, you are Queen yourself some day,” Joan added. “I’ll give up my maid if she becomes a Queen, but for no other reason.”

“Oh, they won’t choose me! But I think perhaps good old Beetle will be it next year. She’d be a jolly nice Queen, though she’d look funny, as she’s

so little and round.”

“I’m sure Beetle would be a good Queen,” Joan agreed, and said no more about her secret hope, which she knew Joy shared, that Jen would be crowned some day.

CHAPTER FOUR

QUEEN HONESTY IS CROWNED

“I had such a kind letter from your mother, Jen.” Joan drew her maid-of-honour into a corner of the dressing-room, where the Queens were preparing for the procession.

Nesta, looking shy and rather frightened, wore her silver train, with its purple border strewn with glittering white circles; she was bareheaded, for she must receive her crown of starry narcissus from Muriel, the outgoing Queen; in her white shower-bouquet were a few stems of honesty seeds which had survived the winter, and some sprays of purple flowers.

Joy, her bronze hair gleaming under a crown of young beech leaves which matched her bright green train, stood talking with the first two Queens, Miriam, who wore a white robe embroidered with forget-me-nots, and Cicely, whose golden train toned with the daffodils of her crown.

Joan’s robe was of violet velvet, with a border of white violets and a crown which was woven of violets in both colours. She carried a neat little posy to match, and Jen, as her maid, wore a violet girdle and collar on her white frock, which had white violets round the hem, invisible to any but those close at hand, but worked on the frock by Joan as a secret between Jen and herself.

Jen looked up eagerly as Joan told her news. “What did Mother say? I haven’t told anybody yet, just for fear something happened and the lovely plan fell to bits.”

“It mustn’t fall to bits; we can’t do without you. Your mother will let us have you, so long as it doesn’t interfere with your school work. It mustn’t do that, of course, or the Head will have something to say.”

“I won’t let it interfere. I’ll do my prep just as usual. Then is it really settled? May I tell everybody?”

“You may. We want you to come to-morrow. We may as well have you for the week-end.”

“Oh, cheers! Oh, marvellous!” Jen’s cry of joy was heard all over the room. “When does young Rykie turn up?” she added.

“What’s thrilled Jenny-Wren?” asked Cicely, the President, who had started the Hamlet Club.

“We’ll tell you later,” Joan promised. “Muriel wants to go, and I’m quite sure Nesta does.”

“Oh yes, please!” quavered the frightened Queen-elect. “We’d better get it over!”

“Buck up, Queen!” said Beetle vigorously.

“Oh, please!” began the reigning Queen, Muriel, whose duty it was to lead the procession up the big school hall to the platform. “Couldn’t Miriam go first? She was the first Queen. The girls would like it; they love to see her and the President. I—I don’t want to lead. It will be horrible to go out there first.”

She was a grave, quiet girl, who had not come out of her shell much even during the year of her reign. Her robe of speedwell blue gave the clue to her character; she was as shy and timid as her name-flower. The girls had liked her and she had been a good Queen, in a subdued, retiring way; but she had dreaded public functions, and now she looked as white as Nesta, shrinking from the ordeal before her.

“How odd!” the President commented. “Are you really frightened, Speedwell?”

“Desperately!” the Queen shivered.

“You’d better lead, Mirry. We don’t want a fainting Queen,” Joy remarked.

“Turn the procession upside down and let Muriel come last, after me,” Joan suggested. “Then she’ll feel thoroughly protected.”

“All the old Queens first. It’s rather a nice idea,” said Marguerite, the third Queen.

“Standing on its head; the procession, I mean,” Jen murmured.

“What a dreadful picture, Jenny-Wren!” the President had overheard. “All of us walking up the hall on our heads!”

“Oh, well, you know what I mean!”

“I do, and as Marguerite says, it is a nice idea. We’ll try it for this year. You lead, Mirry, and I’ll follow. Then Marguerite, Joy, Joan, and Muriel last.”

“The girls will be dumb with surprise,” Joan said. “We ought to go; they’ve had several dances. You’ll lead beautifully, Mirry.”

Miriam, fair and tall and stately, led the procession with great dignity in the slow march up the hall, followed by the golden President, strawberry-pink Marguerite, bright-green Joy and violet Joan.

“Mirry should do this every year,” Muriel whispered to Nesta and Beatrice, as she took her place behind Joan, whose maid she had been the year before. “She’s perfect, so gracious and regal. I know I should have scuttled along like a frightened rabbit. But Mirry goes so slowly and steadily that nobody can want to run to the platform.”

“Joan and Joy do it nicely too,” Nesta murmured. “They could lead, if they had to do it. And the President always looks like a Queen. I’ll try to be dignified when you come to fetch me.”

“I’ll try to walk slowly,” Muriel said. “I shan’t feel so bad once we’ve started.” And she went out, following Joan.

“They’ve changed everything. Miriam’s the leader; how odd!” The word ran round, as the dancing girls sprang into lines to cheer the Queens.

“I think it’s a good plan,” said somebody. “I expect Queen Speedwell was shy.”

“Mirry always makes me think of a bride, in her white flowers and robe,” said another. “She’s a good leader.”

“She will be a bride soon. Hadn’t you heard? She’s being married this summer; to a cousin, I think.”

“I didn’t know. What a thrill! Fancy the Hamlet Club having a Queen old enough to be married!”

“Mirry must be twenty-two. It’s five years since she was crowned.”

“Five? But there have been six Queens?”

“You’re fairly new,” her friend commented. “You don’t know the early history of the Club. There were two Queens in the second year; the President had just been crowned when she had to go away to Ceylon, so they chose Marguerite in her place. The President never really reigned at all.”

“Oh, well! She’s always bossed the Club. But Miriam is our first Queen to be married.”

“I expect they all will, in time. They’re a very good-looking lot.”

“I can’t imagine the President married, or Joy Shirley. They don’t seem the right sort.”

“Oh, I don’t know! But if anyone wants to marry Joy, he’ll need to be careful he doesn’t get Joan by mistake.”

“He’d be lucky. Joan’s much nicer than Joy. Oh, look, Joan’s crowning Muriel now!”

Joan was laying the forget-me-not wreath on Muriel’s dark hair. “There, Queen Speedwell! It looks lovely. Now go and fetch Nesta; don’t be frightened!”

By this time Muriel had lost her fear, and she came down the hall with real dignity to fetch her successor.

“She’s all right now,” Joan said, watching with sympathy. “I’m glad she’s been Queen, and she has done the job well.”

“You’ve taken care of her,” the President remarked. “You’ve mothered her very kindly.”

“Well, she was my maid. I’ve always liked her. Isn’t she pretty in the speedwell blue? Here comes Nesta. How nice her silver train looks!”

“Frightened but brave. I felt just the same,” Joy commented.

Jen had arranged Joan’s train so that it showed to the best advantage, and was now sitting at her Queen’s feet. “Honesty will be a good Queen,” she said.

“We’ll wish Honesty every happiness,” Joan agreed.

When Nesta, crowned, had taken her place on the central throne, the dancing began again.

The Queens watched the plaiting of the maypole and the morris dances that followed, then talked together under cover of the music.

“About Rykie, Jen,” and Joan bent to speak to her maid.

“Oh, yes! What a pity she couldn’t have been here for this evening! When will she come?”

“We expect her early next week. If she doesn’t turn up at once we’ll bring you to school in the car, for the first day or two. We can’t have you cycling alone.”

Jen laughed at her. “I’ll love to come by car! But I’d be all right; I’d be careful. I wouldn’t do anything mad.”

“I hope you wouldn’t. But Mother would worry, if you were riding alone. We can’t have that.”

“How I wonder what Rykie will be like!”

“So do we,” Joan assured her. “It’s going to matter a lot to all of us this summer.”

“I expect she’ll be nice. Most people are, when you get used to them.”

“Very true and quite generous, Jenny-Wren!”

“Joan, we ought to give Miriam a wedding present from the Club.”

“The President has thought of that,” Joan assured her. “She’s going to speak to you all about it soon.”

“Oh, good! I wonder if Mirry’s little girls will come to school and be Queens?”

“Who says Mirry will have little girls? She may have only boys—if she has any children!”

“Oh, she’s sure to have a family! She looks like a person who would have girls.”

“Let her get safely married first! You’re looking rather far ahead,” Joan suggested.

“Is she going to live near enough for her girls to come here?”

“I must tell Mirry what you expect of her! I believe she’ll live somewhere just outside the town.”

“That’s all right! Her girls are sure to be as nice as she is, so they’re certain to be Queens.”

Joan laughed. “Those girls are as far off as your ten boys.”

“Ten children! Only about seven are to be boys.”

“I really must tell Mirry your plans for her and for yourself!” Joan said.

CHAPTER FIVE

A BAD START FOR RYKIE

Jen's news was received with unbelieving envy by the new Queen and her maid and the rest of her classmates.

"You're going to live at the Hall for the whole term?" Beetle cried. "But why?"

"You're jolly lucky," Nesta exclaimed. "I shouldn't have thought the Head would let you go."

"Joan wants me. You'll soon know why. Oh, well, I'll tell you. A cousin's coming to live with her, and she's younger than I am, so she'll have to come to school, and Joan thinks I'll be company for her. I'm to keep her from worrying them too much, especially Mrs. Shirley."

"Will she come here with you?"

"Who—Mrs. Shirley? Oh, you mean Rykie!" Jen teased. "Yes, of course; we're to cycle together."

"What's her name?"

"Rykie. Short for Frederica."

"Goodness!" Beetle said.

"The whole of it's Rykie Reekie."

"Jen!" There was a shout of protest.

"It is! It's weird, I know, but she can't help it."

"I hope she isn't as weird as her name," Nesta remarked.

"I really don't see how she can be as odd as that," Jen agreed. "We think perhaps they shortened Frederica to Reeka, and then, when she went to school——"

"Shrieker!" There was a shout from Beatrice. "They called her Shrieker and she didn't like it!"

"So her family suggested Rykie instead," Jen assented. "But we don't know, so don't say anything to anybody, will you?"

"We'll see if she is a shrieker first," Beetle promised. "We won't call her that unless it fits her."

"You can't make Rykie into Shrieker," Jen pointed out. "And she may have a soft quiet voice like Joan's. Joan speaks just as Mrs. Shirley does; Rykie may be like her aunt."

"Aunt? Oh, yes, Mrs. Shirley, of course. All right, Jen; we'll wait and see whether she shrieks or not," Nesta agreed.

The car came for Jen on Saturday afternoon, and she leapt in beside Joan, calling greetings to Joy, who was driving.

“Isn’t this sport? Take care of us, Joy! It’s the first time you’ve had the honour of driving me; don’t smash me to bits! It’s a lovely car!”

“Like her?” Joy asked, gratified by the admiration of her treasure.

“She’s gorgeous! Couldn’t we go round by Thame or somewhere, just to give me a little longer?”

“You’ll have plenty of her. I may have to bring you to school next week.”

“Rykie is arriving on Tuesday evening,” Joan explained. “Mother had a letter this morning. Belle will bring her as far as Wycombe, but she can’t come to the house to see Mother. She has to rush back to town, as she is starting for the States early next morning.”

Jen looked at her, startled. “She isn’t coming to see Aunty Shirley at all?”

“No,” Joan said briefly.

“Not even to thank her for having Rykie?”

“She hasn’t time.”

Jen thought this over in silence, while Joan watched her with interest; Joy’s attention was concentrated on the traffic, but her face was grim.

“But—but—how *rude!*” Jen said at last.

“Exactly!” Joy flung over her shoulder.

“I’m very sorry they’ve left it so late,” Joan said gravely. “We hoped to see Belle for a day or two, at least.”

“It’s horrible!” Jen cried vehemently. “They’re just making use of you!”

“Quite right, Jenny-Wren!” Joy turned to the open country.

“It feels like that,” Joan agreed. “But they may not mean to be rude. Perhaps Belle’s plans have been changed at the last moment. She didn’t explain why she had to go in such a hurry.”

“Is Aunty Shirley upset?” Jen asked indignantly.

“She’s disappointed; she wanted to see both the girls. She’s being kind to them for their mother’s sake. Yes, she’s rather hurt,” Joan admitted.

“I hope you’ll tell the Belle girl what you think of her! You’ll see her at the station, won’t you? You’ll need to go, to meet Rykie.”

“It would serve Belle right if we didn’t meet Rykie,” Joy jerked.

“We must fetch her, of course. Mother wants to come to the station for a glimpse of Belle, but we’re persuading her to give up the idea. She wouldn’t get any satisfaction from it, and it would be a great effort; in the evening, too. She wouldn’t sleep after it.”

“I say, Joan! I bet you Belle doesn’t come at all. She’ll shove the kid into the train at Paddington and go off to finish her packing,” Joy called over her

shoulder. "Aunty simply mustn't attempt it. She'd have a horrible shock."

Joan looked troubled. "It's possible. We don't know much about Belle. She may be the sort who could do it."

"I bet you she is!" Jen cried. "She won't come all the way to Wycombe just to turn and go straight back. Fancy not wanting to see the place where her sister's going to live! I do think she sounds a rotter!"

"It doesn't follow that Rykie will be like her," Joan said quickly. "You mustn't be prejudiced against her. I want you two to be friends."

Jen gave a doubtful grunt. "Can't say I like what I've heard of the family so far!"

"Rykie may be quite different from Belle."

"She may, or she may be just like her," Jen growled. "I'm not looking forward to seeing her very much. But I'll be nice to her, of course, or you'll send me back to school."

"I hope we shan't need to do that," Joan said seriously.

Jen shot a look at her. "Are you bothered, Joan?"

"Just a little," Joan admitted. "I'm hoping for a lot of help from you."

"I'll do my level best," Jen promised.

"Belle has given Rykie a bad start, by disappointing us like this," Joan went on. "We mustn't hold it against Rykie that her sister has been—shall we say callous and unkind, especially to Mother."

"I should say, downright brutal," Jen said bitterly. "Poor Aunty Shirley! It's a shame, when she's so sweet and good and is putting up with these girls because she liked her sister who died! But it may not be anything to do with Rykie; I see that. We don't know much about her yet."

"Except that she must be some years younger than Belle and would have to fall in with any plan Belle chose to make."

"Four years, at least," Joy remarked. "The brutal Belle couldn't go off alone to a mysterious job in the States unless she is quite eighteen, and she may be a good deal more. Aunty doesn't know her age and Belle hasn't seen fit to tell us. She cares nothing about anybody's feelings but her own. Callous is the word, Joan."

Jen gave a deep sigh. "I feel in my bones that Rykie isn't going to be our sort. I expect she'll say the Abbey is quaint, or perhaps dinky."

"Oh, Jen!" Joan cried, laughing. "I hope she won't be as bad as that!"

Joy gave a shout of laughter. "Is that the lowest depth?"

"I shall find it very hard to be nice to her, if she does," Jen said firmly. "There are some things it's difficult to forgive, and that's one of them."

"If she's like that, you'll have to educate her," Joan suggested.

Jen sighed again and became silent. Joan glanced at her and slipped a hand through her arm. Jen pressed it to her side and gave her a small smile.

"I'll try. I want to help you," she said.

The car swept up the avenue between the double row of beeches and reached the steps of the terrace. Jen flung herself out and raced indoors to find Mrs. Shirley.

"Aunty Shirley, I've come! It *is* so nice to be here again! And it's lovely to see you; you look so well and jolly, dear!"

"I hope the kid won't say anything to worry Aunty," Joy said, as Joan stepped from the car.

"She won't. You can trust Jen; surely you know that by this time," Joan retorted. "She'll keep off the Reekies, unless Mother speaks about them."

She was right. Not only Jen but the whole family avoided the subject, and the discussion of possibly difficult days ahead was postponed.

Jen ran to the Abbey to greet her friends, the Mother Superior, a stout elderly black cat, her shaggy foster-son, Gray Timmy, and her own boy, the tall slim Curate with the square white collar under his chin. To them, in the strict privacy of the sacristy, she confided her dread of the strange girl to come on Tuesday, but to Joan she said no more, and to Mrs. Shirley nothing at all.

"It would only make them feel worse to keep on talking about it," and she stroked the Mother Superior's sleek head. "I don't believe Rykie's going to fit in, and everyone else is so jolly that it will be simply awful if she doesn't. But it's because of her I'm here, in term time, so I won't grouse too much. Don't tell Joan I said anything, will you, Timmy?"

Timmy tossed his wild gray locks and rolled over on his back and promised to say nothing. He held up his paws and asked to be tickled under his arms, and Jen laughed and obliged.

It was a quietly happy week-end. Joan and Jen sat together in the Abbey on Sunday afternoon, and Jen wrote to her mother, thanking her for the permission to come here, but saying nothing about the Reekie girls. Joy went to her piano and played lullabies, and Mrs. Shirley listened happily, enjoying the music.

Then came Monday and the delight of an early-morning drive to school, sitting beside Joy in the front seat of the car. Much discussion of Nesta's crowning and some parrying of questions about the new girl were followed by another car-ride after school and a quiet evening of prep, shut alone into the library.

"I've liked to-day!" Jen sighed, as she went to bed in the little room which was always kept for her. "I wish things could go on like this, without Rykie Reekie coming here at all!"

CHAPTER SIX COUNTRY COUSINS

“Don’t tell Rykie why you are living with us,” Joan warned Jen, as they drove to the station. “Just say you are staying at the Hall for a while. We don’t know her yet; she might resent the idea that you have come to help us.”

“To keep her in order; yes, she might get her back up,” Jen assented. “I’ll be careful. I’m staying with you, as I’ve done lots of times. That’s right, isn’t it?”

“Quite right, and very natural. I’m sure it will be best.”

“I shall wait for you in the car,” Joy said, as she drew up at the station. “There’s no need for a whole mob to greet one infant.”

“But you want to see Belle, don’t you?” Joan asked. “She has half an hour to wait for a train back to town. I thought we’d give her coffee in the restaurant and have a talk with her.”

“I forgot Belle,” Joy acknowledged. “I’ll come, then. Yes, I’d like to see her. But I don’t really believe she’ll be there.”

“I hope she won’t have sent poor Rykie all alone to meet strangers,” Joan said.

“We’ll ask her what her mysterious job is in America,” Jen suggested. “I do hope she’ll come. I want to know what she’s like.”

They were standing together on the platform when the train drew in. After the usual bustle of arrival the crowd cleared, and the girls looked eagerly for their guests.

One small girl was left behind, standing by her suitcase and asking a porter to find her trunk.

“No Belle,” Joy said briefly. “I’m not surprised.”

Joan hurried forward, but Jen was before her. Rushing to the stranger, all her motherly instincts stirred, she cried, “Have you come quite alone? Oh, how dreadful for you! But we’re glad to see you; you’ll soon feel at home with us. You are Rykie, aren’t you?”

“I am Rykie,” the new girl assented, looking her up and down. “But who are you?”

“Jen is staying with us.” Joan came up. “I’m Joan, your cousin; and this is Joy, my cousin.”

“The one the house belongs to?” Rykie’s eyes rested thoughtfully on Joy.

The other three were looking curiously at her; Jen in simple wonder, Joan with astonished indignation. There would need to be changes in Rykie before she went to school.

The girl from Scotland had very fair hair, beside which Jen's plaits looked yellow; it was shoulder-length and beautifully waved, in long smooth curls. Her lips were bright red; she was certainly wearing rouge and powder, and her fingernails matched her lips. She was, in fact, made up as completely as a film star.

"At fourteen!" Joan thought in horror.

Joy looked at Rykie and grinned in whole-hearted amusement. "Trying to impress the country cousins?" she asked pleasantly. "Or do you always go about looking a figure of fun?"

Rykie stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"I think you know," Joan said brusquely. "But we won't discuss your appearance here. Come along; the car's outside. The sooner you get home and clean yourself up the better."

"Oh, don't you like make-up?" Rykie asked, with would-be innocence. "You don't use any, do you?" She spoke, they all noticed, without a trace of Scottish accent.

"I shouldn't think of it," Joan retorted. "And you aren't going to use it either, in our house. You may as well know that at once. If you don't like the idea of having a clean face, you can go back to town; there's a train in half an hour. What your sister can be thinking about to let you paint yourself like this at fourteen, I can't imagine."

"Oh, is it all put on?" Jen cried, listening wide-eyed. "I was thinking how pretty she is! But if it isn't real, that's different."

"It isn't real," Joan assured her. "Are you coming, or are you going back to town, Rykie?"

"Oh, I'm coming," Rykie said, rather sulkily. "I don't want to go back. But it's not your house; it's hers," with a glance under her long lashes at Joy.

"It's mine," Joy assented. "But anything that Joan says goes, with me, and don't you forget it. Besides, I don't want a stage puppet in my house. Your Belle must be mad. Fourteen!"

"Belle makes up herself," Rykie said heatedly. "She has to look nice, meeting people as she does. She must be up to date."

"Nice!" said Joan. "Look here, Rykie! We don't want to be unkind, when you've just arrived, but you've been a bit of a shock, you know. I dare say when you've got that stuff off your face and hands, we may like you quite a lot. It must be more Belle's fault than yours; we'll be fair and remember that. But to us you look—well, completely unsuitable and even silly."

“Of course, I suppose it doesn’t matter how one looks here.” And Rykie flung a doubtful glance round.

“It matters that you mustn’t look like a little old woman when you’re only a schoolgirl,” Joan informed her. “When we get home you’ll go straight upstairs and wash your face before Mother sees you. You couldn’t kiss her with all that lipstick on. She’d be upset, if she saw you like this.”

“She’d have forty fits,” Joy said, taking her place at the wheel. “Jen will lead you to the bathroom as soon as we arrive. And before we start, my child, I’ve one thing to say. As you reminded us, it’s my house, and I’m willing you should live in it. But if you do one single thing to worry or upset Aunty, you’ll be fired; you’ll go right back to town in double quick time. I will not have anything to bother Aunty. She isn’t strong; I won’t have her made ill. So be careful, if you want to stay with us.”

“You couldn’t send me back to town!” Rykie cried. “Belle’s starting tomorrow!”

“Oh, couldn’t we? We know the address of that lawyer-guardian-trustee; Belle gave it to us. I could easily run you up to London and dump you in his office, if you don’t fall in with the ways of the house.” And Joy looked capable of it, as she drove carefully out into the traffic.

Rykie said nothing for a time, but sat looking very thoughtful. “It’s a nice car,” she remarked at last.

Joy warmed towards her at once. “She’s new,” she said. “We had a tiny run-about at first.”

“This is much jollier. You drive well, don’t you?”

Joy grinned; this sounded very much like an attempt to soften her hard heart. “I’m very keen on driving.”

Joan in the back seat was sitting between Jen and Rykie, saying nothing, but looking troubled. Her new cousin seemed likely to be a bit of a problem.

Jen squeezed her arm. “Joan! Will she show me how she does it?”

Joan looked startled. “How who does what, Jenny-Wren?”

“How she puts that stuff on. I’d like to see her do it.”

Joan knit her brows. “I dare say Rykie would show you. Why do you want to know?”

“I’m curious. I know grown-up people do it. I want to see how it’s done.”

“You can ask her. But I shouldn’t have thought it would appeal to you in the least.”

“Oh, it doesn’t!” Jen assured her. “I only want to know how she does it; I’d never want to do it myself. I think she looks horrible.”

Joan laughed in relief. “I thought you said it was pretty?”

"It is, in a way. But now that I know it's just stuck on, I don't like it. She looks like a very posh doll in a shop window. And—whisper, Joan!"

Joan bent, not very far, for Jen was tall.

"Her nails are awful!" Jen murmured. "I've seen shopgirls with hands like that. I loathe red nails!"

"You're very sound," Joan said. "I loathe them myself."

Rykie was watching them. "What are you whispering about?"

Jen crimsoned. "Sorry! I didn't mean to be rude. I asked Joan if she thought you'd show me how you do it; make yourself look like that, you know."

Joy gave a smothered chuckle. "Jen, if you begin painting your nails and lips, I'll fling you out too."

"You don't understand," Rykie said defiantly. "I use make-up because Belle does."

"Then Belle ought to be ashamed of herself, for setting her young sister such a bad example," Joy said.

"Belle must do it. She'd look dreadful, if she didn't. Everybody does, where she is. She's going to Hollywood; didn't she tell you?"

"Hollywood!" Joan exclaimed. "Do you mean——?"

"Gosh!" cried Jen. "Has Joan got a cousin who's a film star?"

"How extremely unsuitable!" Joy grinned broadly. "How completely unlike Aunty and Joan!"

"Belle's always been good at acting." Rykie's tone was full of pride. "A man saw her and said she'd be a success in pictures. He gave her a test and they said she was just right. She had a small part in a film, made in a London studio, and then she had an offer from Hollywood. She's off tomorrow morning."

"I'm stunned and breathless!" Joy said solemnly. "So that's Belle's mysterious job, is it?"

"We didn't understand." Joan spoke gently. "It helps to explain you, Rykie. I hope Belle will be successful, though I can't think it will be a pleasant life. But it's full of glamour, I suppose. I wouldn't care for it myself."

Jen chuckled. "I can't see you as a film star, Joan dear."

"We understand now," Joan went on. "If Belle is in film circles, I've no doubt make-up is essential and she's had no choice. But for you, here in the country, it's quite unsuitable. So you will get rid of it, as far as you can, when we reach the house, won't you?"

"Oh, I suppose so, if you feel like that." Rykie's tone was grudging. "But it's awfully old-fashioned not to use make-up."

“Not in the country,” Joan said, quietly but firmly. “You’ve come to live in the country. You must get used to country ways.”

“Where does Belle sail from to-morrow?” Joy asked. “Southampton? Liverpool?”

“She isn’t sailing. Some people she knows are flying and they managed to get her a seat in the plane. Hollywood wants her in a hurry,” Rykie said importantly.

“Flying!” Joy exclaimed. “Gosh, I’d love to fly! Some day I shall try it. Belle’s in luck.”

“I don’t think I’d like it,” Jen ventured.

Joan smiled at her. “You aren’t likely to have the chance at present, Jenny-Wren.”

“Why do they call you that?” Rykie demanded.

Jen reddened. “It’s daft. It’s terribly silly, but everybody at school does it. My name’s Jen Robins, and robins and wrens seem to go together in some people’s stupid minds. They called me Jenny-Wren, and it stuck.”

“It doesn’t suit her,” Joan laughed. “Wrens are little and Jen’s big. But it’s her pet name and she can’t get rid of it.”

“Where does she live?”

“I’m a boarder at school, but I live in Yorkshire, on the moors near Sheffield.” Jen spoke for herself.

“Then why——?” Rykie began.

“I’m staying with Joan. I often do.”

“We like to have her at the Hall,” Joy said seriously. “Joan and I are so terribly old and staid. It brightens the house to have some young life about.”

Jen grinned. “I do my best to cheer you up. Rykie will help, I expect.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Rykie sat silent as the car climbed to the hills. "These people may be quite nice, and I think they want to be kind. But they can't understand," was her conclusion.

Jen glanced across at her. "Don't you like our hills?"

Rykie looked round doubtfully. "I don't see any hills. Where do you mean?"

Joan laughed and Joy snorted. Jen cried indignantly, "We've just come up a terribly steep hill! You should try it on a bike!"

"Oh, that! It was a bit steep; I thought she managed the car awfully well," with a glance at Joy's back. "But there aren't any other hills?"

"We're on the hills," Joan explained. "Jen, I imagine Rykie is used to Scottish mountains, just as you are used to moors. You can't expect her to be impressed by our Chilterns!"

Jen lapsed into disappointed silence, while Rykie looked puzzled.

Joy, without comment, drew up, and they sat looking out over the plain, far below. They were on the edge of the hill country, which fell away in a sudden steep slope to the flat land, stretching mile after mile into blue haze.

Jen glanced shyly at Rykie, but said nothing. She loved the view from this point so much that it would hurt to have it greeted with jeers.

"Oh!" Rykie said. "Yes, I see. We've been right on the top. It looks like a hill from here. Where are all those places?"

"Thame is just down there. Oxford is in the distance. If you make love to Joy, she'll take you on a tour some day," Joan said.

"It's very pretty," Rykie owned. And with that Jen had to be content.

"She sounded so superior!" she complained to Joan, later on, with no conception of the grandeur and beauty of the Firth of Clyde, which to Rykie was a familiar scene.

"You don't sound as if you came from Scotland, Rykie," Joan remarked. "Why have you no accent?"

"That was Mother. She was English and we learned to talk from her," Rykie said proudly. "It's who you're with when you're a baby that matters. At school they laughed at us and called us English kids. But I had Mother till I was six, and Belle was ten."

Joan had smiled at the slip in grammar but made no comment. That could come later.

“That explains your English voice,” she agreed.

Joy drove on, and the car turned into the winding road which led down to the plain.

“There’s the Abbey,” Jen said. “And the Hall—and the Manor.”

“The Hall’s where we’re going, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Joy’s house. The Abbey belongs to Joan.”

“Show me the Hall! I don’t know what you mean by the Abbey.”

“The grey house is the Hall,” Joan said. “You can see it because of the lawns all round; the trees don’t crowd it. See the blossom in the orchard! The apple trees are in full flower. The white house next door is the Manor. You shall see the Abbey to-morrow; the ruins are in the garden of the Hall.”

“Oh—ruins!” said Rykie, in a tone of complete indifference. “I like new, modern places.”

“I bet you do.” Joy grinned over her shoulder at Jen, who was keeping very quiet. Her eyes were smouldering, but she held herself in and said nothing.

Joan laughed and slipped a hand through her arm. “We could tell you stories about this winding road, Rykie. It has to bend and turn, because the hill is so steep; farm carts couldn’t manage it, if it went directly up the slope. But do you see this very straight track, cutting across the road and going right up the hill? It’s the Monks’ Path, and is older than the road. The monks from the Abbey used to climb up to a quiet little cell at the top of the hill to meditate and pray, and that was the way they went.”

“How interesting!” Rykie said politely. “How soon shall we see the house?”

Joan’s eyes met Jen’s in a sympathetic look. “In a moment now. Here is the gate,” Joan said.

“The house isn’t modern, my lamb,” said Joy. “It’s old and very fine; Tudor, if you know what that means. Before we reach it, you may please admire the beech avenue, which is one of my treasures.”

“Joy is very proud of her trees,” Joan added.

The double row of huge beeches on each side of the carriage drive made a grey wall, touched with the freshest of young green, where the leaves were opening. A shimmering emerald curtain seemed to hang overhead like fairy gauze; a carpet of dull red lay beneath.

“Last year’s leaves. They’re always there,” Joy said. “It would take years to sweep them away; and we like to see them.”

“What a huge place!” Rykie sounded rather awed. “Is this all yours? How big is the garden?”

“This is the little home park. The garden is by the house, and the orchard is behind.”

“I say, you are lucky, aren’t you?”

“That,” said Joy grimly, “is why you’re here, my child.”

“I don’t understand,” Rykie said, startled.

“Think it out for yourself. Or ask Jen. She knows.”

Jen had seized the chance to whisper a word to Joan. “She doesn’t care two hoots about the monks.”

“No, she’s not interested. Perhaps she’ll care more when she has been here a little while.”

“When she’s seen the Abbey, do you think? I don’t believe she’ll like it.”

“I think perhaps she won’t care very much. Here we are, Rykie. How do you like Joy’s house?”

The grey mansion stood on a terrace, gracious and beautiful, with long, mullioned windows looking over well-kept lawns surrounded by flowering trees. Lilacs and laburnums and red and white hawthorns had scattered their petals on the grass and stood with coloured circles round their feet.

“Oh!” Rykie said. “What a lovely place! Fancy having it for your own!” and she looked enviously at Joy.

“Out you go! I’m taking the car round to the garage,” Joy commanded.

Joan led the younger girls by the terrace steps to the great door. “You’ll take Rykie upstairs at once, won’t you, Jen? Show her her room and the bathroom, and help her to tidy herself before supper. I must speak to Mother; she’ll be disappointed to hear we didn’t see Belle.” She turned to Rykie. “Mother’s not strong. I begged her to stay in the warm room and not come out to the door; we can’t risk any illness for her. But I’m afraid—yes, I thought so!” as a door opened into the great hall and the frail, white-haired little lady appeared. “Hop off and make yourself decent!”

Rykie, overawed by the size of the hall, with its dark oak furniture, long stained-glass windows with coloured coats-of-arms, and the wide staircase leading to a gallery, followed Jen without a word.

“What a whacking big house!” she murmured.

Joan went quickly to her mother and drew her back to the fire. “That was bad of you, dear. You promised me you’d wait for us in here. You shall see Rykie presently. I’ve sent her up to wash her face.”

“To wash?” Mrs. Shirley echoed dazedly.

“After the journey,” Joan explained. “We didn’t see Belle; Rykie came alone, but she didn’t mind. She isn’t shy. Sit down, dear; I want to tell you something. Rykie explained about Belle, who is trying to be a film star. She hasn’t reached that point yet, but she has ambitions that way and she’s been in one picture already.”

“A film star?” Mrs. Shirley exclaimed. “Oh, Joan, how very unlike her dear mother!”

“Unlike all our family, I’m quite sure. Joy and Jen are jeering at the thought of my having a cousin in films. Belle’s off to Hollywood.”

“How unfortunate!” Mrs. Shirley said, much disturbed.

“Oh, I don’t know! I suppose it’s a fine career, if she’s any good, and Rykie’s sure she’s first class. She’s going with friends; she’ll be all right. But obviously she couldn’t take a kid of fourteen with her. She had a sudden chance to travel with people she knew, so she’s dashing off to-morrow, and she hadn’t time to come with Rykie. But this is what I want to tell you, Mother. The girls have evidently been among theatrical people lately, and Rykie arrived made-up like a little actress. I couldn’t let you see her in all that paint and powder, so I sent her to wash off as much as she could.”

“She was dolled up like a shop-window puppet,” said Joy from the doorway. “She looked a perfect sight. I think she was trying to impress us; country cousins, you know.”

Mrs. Shirley exclaimed in dismay. “Oh, my dears, how very distressing! And how foolish!”

“Crazy,” Joy said. “Belle must be mad. It’s a good thing you didn’t see her.”

“I didn’t want you to see her looking like that, Mother,” Joan said earnestly. “I expect she’s nice enough really. As for impressing anybody, Joy has done most of that. Rykie is rather stunned by the house, and the grounds, and the car; and I think the sight of the hall, as we came in, quite frightened her. She went off to the bathroom like a lamb.”

“Jenny-Wren will be very good for her,” Joy remarked. “I must go and wash, after driving. Don’t worry, Aunty. We’ll soon civilise her.”

“This is very disturbing,” Mrs. Shirley said unhappily.

“Mother dear, please don’t worry!” Joan begged. “I’m sure it will be all right.”

“Don’t let yourself be disturbed by young Rykie,” Joy said. “Joan and Jen and I can cope with her between us.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

VERY ODD PEOPLE

“This is what we call Jandy’s room.” Jen opened a door and showed a small but pretty bedroom. “It’s to be yours now. Jandy used to sleep here, but she’s gone to the South Sea Islands and got married; we had a box of wedding-cake, from Sydney. I’m next door, so if you want anything you can thump on the wall—but not too loudly, you know! Now I’ll take you to the bathroom.”

“Have you been here long?” Rykie broke into the flow of would-be cheerful talk.

“Only since Saturday, this time. But I’ve stayed here a lot, while Jandy was here, and once for most of the holidays, when Father was ill. Auntie Shirley—I call her that—has been a darling to me; and I’m terribly keen on Joan—and on Joy too, of course. They’ve left school now, but I knew them first at school, and I’m Joan’s maid-of-honour in the procession.”

“Procession?” Rykie was using cold cream on her face very carefully.

“The May Day procession. Joan and Joy are both May-Queens.”

“Oh! But they’re grown up! They don’t go on playing at being Queens, I suppose?”

“I don’t know about playing,” Jen said, rather indignantly. “We don’t think of it like that. All the old Queens come for the crowning of the new one. It’s quite a long procession; the coronation was last Friday, and Nesta was the seventh Queen. We were sorry it had to be before you came. But perhaps you wouldn’t have cared about it,” she added.

“I don’t suppose I would,” said Scottish Rykie. “It sounds rather infantile. I should think they’d feel silly, when they’ve grown up and left.”

“Joan looked lovely. They both did,” Jen said loyally.

Rykie laughed and brushed out the silky waves of her lint-white hair. “Will Joan like me better now?”

“You look much nicer. I don’t know why you bother to put on that stuff. You’re all right without it. Your hair’s nice.” Jen spoke grudgingly.

“Belle said I could have a perm. It’s straight, so I look awful if I don’t have it waved.”

“Oh!” said Jen, and stared at the shining curls suspiciously.

“You feel as they do; you don’t like make-up.” And Rykie gazed at her. “It’s awfully old-fashioned and country-cousinish, you know.”

“I don’t know,” Jen said stoutly. “I love the country, and paint and powder look silly in the country. And”—with sudden indignation—“your fingers are ghastly, just like a shopgirl’s. The waitress in the dairy where we have lunch paints her nails like that.”

“Shopgirl! Waitress!” Rykie cried. “Oh, you’re hopeless!”

“I’d rather be hopeless than have hands like that. Can’t you get it off?”

“No,” Rykie said curtly. “Not in a hurry. They’ll have to put up with it. I’ll do it later. I’ve got some stuff that will take it off; Belle said you might not like it. Oh, tell me! What did Joy mean about her house, when I said she was lucky? She said that was why I was here. And she told me to ask you what she meant.”

“I don’t always know what Joy’s thinking,” Jen said cautiously. “It would be easier, if it had been Joan. But I think Joy feels that just because she’s been so lucky, she must share and try to be decent to other people. It was a most tremendous bit of luck for her to have Sir Antony for her grandfather; she feels she’d done nothing to deserve it—it just happened to her. And so she tries to do nice things for other people and pass on the luck to them. It’s lucky for me to be asked here, and it’s lucky for you.”

Rykie stared. “Nice of her to feel like that!”

“It’s different with Joan,” Jen went on. “Sir Antony left the Abbey to her, because she loves it so much. Joan takes care of it, and she tries to be like the monks who once lived there. They welcomed everybody who came to the door and took them in and were good to them.”

“Joan can’t take in everybody,” Rykie interrupted.

“She can be good to people who need help,” Jen retorted. “The first time I came here was because the school had diphtheria, and rather than let me go among the others and need to be in quarantine, Joan and Joy brought me home with them. And there have been other times, when I needed somewhere to go; and other people who needed help. You needed somewhere, so Joan let you come here. It’s because of the monks, so you’d better not laugh at them.”

“I’m not laughing! But it sounds as if Joan was a bit crazy about ancient history. Still, it’s been jolly useful to me; I hadn’t anywhere else to go.”

“I’ve been wanting to ask you,” Jen began. “How do you get Rykie out of Frederica?”

Rykie’s face stiffened. “Father didn’t like Freda, so they called me Reeka as a kid. But when I went to school the girls were horrible and made a mess of it. I hated it, but I couldn’t stop them. So when I went to a bigger school I said my short name was Rykie; it was Belle’s idea.”

“How rude of the girls!” Jen’s eyes were dancing, but she carefully looked the other way. “You were very sensible to change it,” she said nobly.

“Is Joan really silly about her old monks?” Rykie went back to the previous subject.

“No, of course not! But she loves them, and the Abbey. We’d better go down,” and Jen led the way, looking unhappy.

“I knew she wasn’t going to be our sort!” she said to herself.

“What odd people!” was Rykie’s summing-up, as she followed Jen down the great staircase. “But it’s a gorgeous house. I’ll put up with a lot for the sake of living here.”

“Aunty Shirley, here’s Rykie,” was Jen’s introduction.

“Hallo, Aunt Margaret! Thanks for having me,” and Rykie went forward to be kissed. At sight of the little old lady, she was suddenly glad her lipstick was gone. Joan had certainly been right about that.

Mrs. Shirley gave her a keen look, but was satisfied. “My dear, we are glad to see you. We want to hear all about Belle and yourself. But you must be hungry, so we will go to the dining-room at once.”

“Belle was sorry she couldn’t come to see you, Aunt Margaret. She sent a letter by me, to thank you for having me. Here it is! But she had to go; it was really important,” Rykie explained.

“I’m glad Belle did that much, anyway. Joan!” and Jen, following them, caught Joan’s arm, “is ‘Aunt Margaret’ right? I never heard Aunty Shirley’s name before.”

“I don’t suppose you did,” Joan agreed. “Perhaps you don’t know that my full name is Joan Margaret Shirley?”

“I didn’t know. I’ve never heard you called anything but just Joan. Why didn’t they call you Margaret Joan? It’s prettier that way.”

“It doesn’t matter, since I only use the Joan part. My father’s name was John, so I’m called after them both.”

“I see. Joan Margaret! How funny!”

Joan smiled. “Not so very funny, Jenny-Wren.”

“Joan!” and Jen dragged her back into the hall, as Mrs. Shirley led Rykie to the room and showed her where to sit. “She—Rykie—thinks we’re awfully odd; I know she does.”

“Well, we think she’s a little odd, so that’s all right. People can’t be just alike,” Joan said cheerfully.

“She thinks it’s funny about you and Joy being Queens, now you’re grown up.”

“That’s not very serious! I expect lots of people think that.”

“Joan, her hair’s not real. I thought it was so pretty.”

“It’s permed,” Joan agreed. “It looks very nice. But she’s too young; no one here will give her money to have it done again when it grows out.”

“I said her fingers were like the girl’s in the dairy; the waitress, you know. She didn’t like it.”

“I don’t suppose she did. But don’t rag her too much. She has lived in a different world; she’ll need to get used to ours. I must go and help Mother.”

Rykie’s thoughts were busy during supper. The size of the dining-room impressed her deeply, and her eyes kept going to Joy, who saw it with amusement.

“I’m in luck. We had no idea it was such a big house,” was Rykie’s conclusion.

“I think you and Jen should go to bed quite soon,” Joan remarked, as they sat with Rykie in the hall beside a little fire. “You’ve evidently had a busy day in town”—for Rykie’s tongue had been hard at work during supper, telling of Belle and her doings and the thrilling friends they had met.

All her talk was of recent days in Glasgow; of her early life she said almost nothing. She had lived in the country, but had spent years at boarding-school. Her father had died; his money had gone. She and Belle had stayed with Glasgow friends and had been taken up by a theatrical set, and Belle had been acclaimed, for her beauty and talent, as a great discovery for film work. So said Rykie, with much pride.

“Then you had the journey and the car ride,” Joan went on. “As for Jen, she has to get up at dawn, almost, to do her prep, which she left to-night, so that she could come to meet you. Take some biscuits up with you, Jen, and don’t start working before six.”

“I only hope I’m awake by six,” Jen groaned. “I simply must finish my history and polish up my French.”

“I’ll knock on your door at six,” Joy promised. “I shall probably be up. I love being in the garden very early.”

“Wish I could come with you!”

“Shall I poke the Curate into your room, to help you with the French?”

“No, please don’t. I shouldn’t do much work! And he doesn’t know any French. He’s quite good at history, I expect.”

“The dissolution of the monasteries, by Henry the Eighth,” Joy grinned.

“The cat,” Joan explained, in answer to Rykie’s wide-eyed stare. “One of the cats. They live in the Abbey, so Jen thinks they’ve picked up some history there.”

“Oh—cats!” Rykie was not interested.

“And to-morrow you’ll be going to school,” Joan went on. “So you’d better have a good night’s rest.”

“School! I’m not going to school,” Rykie said defiantly.

CHAPTER NINE COPING WITH RYKIE

There was a pause. Rykie's face flamed with indignation. Jen listened and watched and waited, excitement smouldering in her eyes.

"Oh, yes, my dear! Of course you must go to school with Jen," Mrs. Shirley said placidly. "It is all arranged. Miss Macey is willing to have you."

Rykie's eyes went from one to another. "I've had enough of school. I don't want to start in a new place."

"And what did you think of doing?" Joy asked pleasantly.

Rykie gave her a suspicious look; Joy's tone was too gentle to be real. "I want to specialise. I've had enough of ordinary subjects. I thought perhaps I could have lessons in elocution and singing and go to dancing classes."

"Joan can teach you dancing," Jen said, but no one took any notice of her.

"Are you thinking of following in Belle's footsteps?" Joy still spoke in that dangerously easy tone.

Joan sat gazing thoughtfully at her small guest. "Are you, Rykie?" she asked.

"Yes, I am. My singing and dancing aren't up to much yet—I mean, I haven't done a lot, but as far as I've gone people say I'm jolly good. But I love acting and I've been in heaps of plays."

"You're thinking of being an actress or going into films?"

"Of course I am!" It seemed to Rykie that Joan sounded surprisingly reasonable. "I can't waste time messing about with maths and French and history. I want to start in earnest, with special classes—good ones, not just school stuff. Could I go to London for lessons? It isn't really far. Or is there somewhere nearer?"

"All that sounds sensible enough, but it's about two years ahead," Joan said decisively. "You're only fourteen; at sixteen you can begin to specialise, but for at least two years——"

"I'm nearly fifteen!"

"For two years more, your ordinary school work comes first. You'll be a better actress if you've had a good sound general education."

"I don't want it. I've had enough! I've been to school for years."

"Can you speak French?" Joy demanded.

"N-no. French might be useful. I could go to classes for that, perhaps."

"More than useful; necessary, I should think," Joy told her.

“Rykie dear, don’t be silly,” Joan said. “You’re going to school for the next two years, if you stay with us. It’s a good school and it has a very fine headmistress; you’re lucky to go there. You’ll cycle with Jen every morning, and you’ll do your prep every night.”

It was a hateful prospect to Rykie. “And if I won’t go?” she raged.

“Oh, that’s easy.” Joy mocked her anger. “Back to town, in double quick time.”

“We can only keep you here if you’ll do what seems reasonable to us,” Joan said. “We shall certainly take you back to your lawyer-trustee, if you don’t do as we wish.”

“And thank goodness we know his address!” she said to herself fervently. “This would be a hopeless mess, if Belle hadn’t given us his name.”

“You don’t understand!” Rykie said furiously. “It’s time I started in earnest. I ought to have been dancing for years!”

“Ballet-dancing, you mean?” Joy asked.

Rykie stared at her. “What other sort of dancing could I mean? I want dancing for the stage, not ballroom, or reels and strathspeys.”

“What are those?” Jen asked eagerly. “Haven’t you any country-dances in Scotland?”

“Oh, country-dances!” Rykie said scornfully.

“We are very keen country-dancers here,” Joan explained. “And if you hope some day to go on the stage, Rykie, you couldn’t do better than learn our dances. Nothing will help your balance and poise more than folk-dancing; it would be really valuable to you. But that’s as you wish. I expect we can find ballet classes and you could have lessons once a week; singing and elocution too, in time, but you can’t do everything at once.”

“I can, if I don’t have to mess about with school work!”

“It’s only on condition that you go to school and work properly that I’ll make any effort to find you special classes in your pet subjects,” Joan said firmly. “Good school work is the absolute condition.”

“No school, no ballet, in fact,” Joy observed.

“Why should you all bully me?” Rykie almost sobbed. “I know what I want to do! I’ll work like anything and it will be really useful, and you won’t let me do it! You don’t know half as much as me about what I need!”

“I know you need to speak good English,” Joan said dryly. “Your grammar’s shaky. You need at least two more years of school.”

“What do you mean? I didn’t say anything wrong!”

“Oh, yes, you did! ‘Half as much as I do’—not me.”

“What does it matter?” But Rykie reddened in annoyance with herself.

“Only that you sound uneducated. If you are going to meet artistic people, you must be able to speak properly.”

“But it’s such a waste of time! And I’m getting so old! If I want to do anything in ballet I ought to be working at it every minute. You don’t understand! I’m fourteen.”

“I should have thought you were far too old,” Joy said. “Don’t you have to start in the cradle to be a ballet-dancer?”

“No!” Rykie snapped. “That idea’s all wrong. But I ought to have begun years ago, and—and we lived in the country and Belle hadn’t thought of going into films, and there were no classes, and anyway, I was at boarding-school. But they say I’ll make quite a good dancer if I start at once.”

“I thought you wanted to be an actress?” Jen queried.

“I do! I’m going to act—I must! But dancing and singing will be useful. I want to do them all.”

Joan interposed. “Rykie, listen to me! You have come to live with us, and we want to do our best for you. The career you have chosen doesn’t appeal to us, but we’ll help you as far as we can. It’s your life, and you must have your chance. But we are older than you, and we know it’s important that your education should be carried on. If you are to succeed in this or any other career, you can’t go into it half-educated. You must be able, for instance, to speak good English; you’ll meet all sorts of people and they mustn’t have any reason to look down on you. Your whole life is before you and you must be equipped for it. You’ll find excellent teaching in singing and elocution at Miss Macey’s; it’s too soon to train your voice, if you have one, in earnest. I realise the importance of time in your dancing, and I’ll make inquiries about good teaching for you in Oxford, and you can go by train on Saturdays. That seems to me the most you can do at present. But there is one condition: school, and good solid work, and prep properly done. You can think it over. If Miss Macey has to complain of your behaviour or your work, the ballet lessons will stop. I know this is the best way for you, and I believe it is what Belle would wish.”

“If Belle has any sense, it certainly is,” Joy said.

Rykie’s eyes fell. She knew very well what Belle had said. “You’ll need to go to school for a while longer, kid. Aunt Margaret will see to that. But when I’ve made good you’ll come and join me, and then we’ll see what we can do for you.”

“Now, off you go to bed,” Joan said briskly. “We’re sorry to have had all this talk on your first night, but we never dreamt you would refuse to go to school. I’ll give way on one point; you needn’t go to-morrow. You can have one day to get used to us and to see everything—the house and the garden,

the village and the Abbey. And you can be thinking over what I've said. Off you go! You go too, Jenny-Wren. Remember to-morrow morning!"

"I'm remembering all right," Jen said sadly. "But this has been so fearfully interesting."

"Good night, my dear." Mrs. Shirley had listened to the discussion with troubled face, much disturbed by Rykie's rebellion and her plans for her future.

"Interesting!" Joan groaned, when the two girls had gone. "So that's what Jenny-Wren calls interesting!"

"A lot too interesting," Joy said. "What a little ass! But you coped with her all right. Don't worry!"

CHAPTER TEN

A CHANCE FOR RYKIE

Jen glanced at Rykie as they went upstairs. "We'd better not talk to-night. Some days perhaps we will, but I'd rather not be too late. I really do want to work to-morrow morning."

"Do they keep you at it all the time, at this place?" Rykie asked sombrely.

"Oh, not too bad! But I didn't do any prep to-night, because I came to meet you. Will you be all right? Thump on the wall if there's anything I can do. You aren't feeling homesick, are you?"

"No, not a scrap. We've been away from home for quite a while." Rykie's tone was curt and she went into her room and closed the door.

Jen gazed at it, then sighed and went into her own room.

"Not our sort! Quite a stranger!" she said sadly. "But she may get nicer when we know her better. She doesn't like us very much at present, I'm afraid."

She greeted Rykie cheerfully next morning, however, virtuously conscious of an hour's good work behind her.

"I wish you were coming with me to-day! But it is rather soon, perhaps; you don't know your way about yet. I say, Rykie! I won't say anything to the girls about Belle and the films."

Rykie stared at her. "Why not? I'm terribly proud of Belle. You don't think I'm ashamed of her, do you?"

"Gosh, no! It's the other way round," Jen cried, indignant at the misunderstanding, "The girls will be frightfully thrilled—some of them, anyway. I thought you'd want to tell them yourself. I don't want to spoil it for you by getting in first."

"Oh, I see." Rykie's face cleared. "I thought you wanted me to make a secret about Belle. Tell them, if you like. If you don't, I shall; I'm proud of Belle. I wish I was half as clever, and as smart, and as pretty as she is."

"I'll leave it to you." Jen noted that Rykie's nails were at last clean, but she made no comment. "I've had an idea for you," she said, as they went down to breakfast. "You could be Jaques. I expect the Dramatic will welcome you with open arms."

"What's that?" Joan asked. "Did you sleep well, Rykie? Good! That's our fine country air. Prep done, Jen? Splendid! What's this about Jaques? Is the Dramatic doing *As You Like It* again?"

“At the end of term. Why ‘again,’ Joan? Have they done it before?”

“That’s part of the history of the Hamlet Club,” Joan explained, attending to cups and coffee. “It was before my day, but I’ve heard about it from Cicely. The Club and the dancing were secrets; only the Club members knew, for they practised and learned dances in the woods or in the big barn at Darley’s farm. The Dramatic were preparing *As You Like It* for the end of the spring term, and at the very last moment Rosalind and Jaques went down with measles. They had no understudies, so the whole thing had to be postponed till midsummer. They’d sold tickets and invited people, so they tried to get up a last-minute concert. Then Cicely had her great idea. She talked to the Hamlets, and they offered to give a show of country and morris dancing. No one knew anything about it then, so everybody was thrilled, and it all looked lovely, and they crowned Mirry, who wore a white robe and looked very pretty. It was a great success, and the Hamlets had saved the situation. But they’d given up their secret for the sake of the school, and they’d helped the Dramatic girls, who had not been at all nice to them, out of a dreadful hole. I suppose you hadn’t heard that story?”

“Not a word of it. How jolly decent of the Hamlets!” Jen cried, her eyes shining. “I do love anything sporting!”

“Can’t the Dramatic find anyone to be Jaques?” Joan asked.

“There’s no one quite good enough. I expect Rykie would make a lovely Jaques. She’d like declaiming—‘All the world’s a stage.’”

“You don’t declaim it,” Rykie retorted. “Jaques was thinking aloud; you have to say it like that. I’d rather be Rosalind.”

“Nesta—Queen Honesty—is Rosalind and she’s jolly good. You’d better join the Dramatic and let them hear what you can do.”

“I want something better than school acting.”

“All in good time,” Joan told her. “This would be fine experience for you.”

Joy came strolling in, a little late as usual. “Are you expecting me to run you in to school, Jenny-Wren?”

“*And* to fetch me home,” Jen said happily. “But I’ll cycle, if you like.”

“To-morrow you shall ride with Rykie. Don’t have any returned lessons and make me wait for hours!”

“I think I’ll just scrape through. I’ll have another look at my French in the car. You do ride, don’t you, Rykie?”

“Of course I do. But I haven’t got a bike here.”

“Neither have I. I’m going to have Joan’s.”

“Rykie can have mine. You must try them to-night and see if they’re comfortable. I don’t believe they’ll need any adjusting; you’re big hefty girls.”

"I can ride Joan's all right. I've done it often," Jen said.

"Oh, you're a maypole! More coffee, please!"

"You won't make me late, will you?"

"Have I ever made you late yet?" Joy demanded.

"No, but I always think you're going to."

"Then don't think it any more. You'll have to start earlier than this tomorrow, my child."

Rykie said no more about not going to school. If school was the condition on which she could have special classes in her desired subjects, she would go, but she did not intend to over-exert herself. And if there was a school play, she meant to be in it and to make a name for herself among these girls. It would all be good practice.

"You will find out about ballet classes, won't you?" She looked anxiously at Joan.

"Presently," Joan retorted. "I must see that you are in earnest about school first. If you're going to slack and fool about I shan't take any trouble over you."

"Then I won't go to school," Rykie muttered.

"No, you'll go back to town," Joy said pleasantly, rising to go and get out the car. "Don't be an ass! You can't get round Joan; you'll soon realise that. I can't, and I've tried often enough. She can cope with any of us; she'd have made a splendid school-mistress, if she hadn't inherited the Abbey. I'll be ready for you in ten minutes, Jenny-Wren."

"Joy talks a lot of nonsense," Joan observed. "You go to school and throw yourself into things and do good work, and I'll see about your classes, Rykie. But if it should happen that you are needed for the play, extra classes will have to wait till next term, or till the holidays. You can't take on too much at once."

"You promised I should have ballet lessons if I went to school," Rykie said indignantly.

"So you shall, but not while you have a big part in a play. If you do too many things, you'll do none of them well. Don't be silly! There will be Saturday rehearsals; the Dramatic can't possibly put on a play with only after-school practices. When would you go to your classes? If the Dramatic want you, I'll see about ballet lessons after the play is over."

Rykie looked very dissatisfied, but she did not dare to say any more.

Jen caught Joan for a private word. "Joan, are you going to take her into the Abbey?"

"I thought so. She ought to see it. But I don't believe she'll care much about it."

"Neither do I. I'd have liked to be there, to hear what she says."

Joan gave her a meaning grin. "Don't you think it's wiser not?"

"Oh!" said Jen. "I see. You think I might say things that would make her mad?"

"You love the Abbey so much that you might be hurt, if she didn't appreciate it. I'll tell you how she reacts."

"You love it more than I do. But I suppose you won't say as much as I should. Do you mean that, Joan?"

Joan laughed. "I fancy my feelings are under better control. I shan't let fly, as you might do. I'm used to showing the Abbey to people who don't really care about it and are just curious."

"Tourists and Americans, and people who say 'quaint,'" Jen agreed. "That's true, of course. There's Joy calling; I must run. Tell me at night!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE OPPOSITE POINT OF VIEW

“Like to come with us, just for the run?” Joy asked, as Rykie stood at the door looking at the car.

“No, please!” Jen cried. “I want to rub up my French. If she comes, I shall talk; I always do. She’ll see plenty of school presently, and she’ll soon know all about the road, if we ride every day. I’m not being piggy, Rykie, but if I don’t know those verbs I’ll have to do them after school, and then I shall keep Joy waiting; and I *don’t* know them yet. Joy, you won’t talk all the way, will you?”

“I’ll keep a solemn silence, with my eyes fixed on the road,” Joy promised.

“Rykie is going to unpack and put her things away tidily,” Joan said. “Her trunk is waiting for her. Then we’re going to see the village. Joy will take her round the garden this afternoon.”

“I’ll tell the Dramatic people to look out for you to-morrow,” Jen called to Rykie, as the car set out. “You could look up bits of Jaques; then you’d be ready to show them you can do it.”

“Jen is in too much of a hurry, as usual,” Joan warned Rykie, as they turned back into the house. “It’s quite possible the Dramatic won’t want to put in a new girl at her very first appearance. In spite of Jen, they may have somebody in their minds for Jaques; Jen isn’t a member of the Society and she only hears the ordinary school gossip. Don’t count too much on being given the part! Later, when they know you, I expect they’ll want to use you.”

Rykie said nothing. If she went to school, she meant to be in the play. She felt she had it in her to make an outstanding success of Jaques.

On their way home from the village Joan brought her through the Abbey ruins and introduced her to the caretaker, Ann Watson, and to the cats—the Mother Superior, the Curate and Gray Timmy. To these Rykie gave little attention; they were just cats to her; and Joan, to whom they were friends and companions, smiled and shooed them away to play. She led Rykie to the green garth, the broken cloisters, the site of the great church; to the vaulted chapter-house, the monks’ day-room, and their long light dormitory; and took her up to the beautiful refectory to see its treasures, the ancient Abbey books and parchments and the jewels which had belonged to Lady Jehane. She told how these had been buried in the old church by the lay brother,

Ambrose, who had loved Jehane; how they had been found by herself and Jen, still hidden near the tomb of the first Abbot, Michael; and how Ambrose, after years of wandering, had found his way back to the Abbey, to spend his last days living in the gate-house, looked up to by the country folk as an old saint, happy with his birds and his striped cat, Minette, and her baby.

“We only found that story last summer. We keep finding new things about Ambrose and the Abbey,” she explained.

Rykie stood gazing at the jewels. “I love stones. These are good ones, I’m sure. I expect they’re worth a lot.”

She had no eyes for the parchments, or for the beautiful wide windows, the lovely angel roof, the half-defaced crucifix on the end wall, or the reader’s pulpit. The jewels had her whole attention.

Joan led her away to see the crypt, in which they had been found, and the mysterious tunnels, leading out to the hillside, to the gate-house, or to the Hall. But Rykie did not like the tunnels.

“They’re horrid,” she said. “Suppose you lost yourself, or your torch went out? It would be gruesome.”

“They aren’t exactly the place to be in without a light,” Joan agreed. “You’re careful to take your torch, of course.”

Under Joy’s guidance, Rykie made a tour of the gardens, orchard, and garages, and visited every corner of the house. Then Joan joined them in the car and they raced off to fetch Jen from school.

She came flying out of the gate, while Rykie eyed the great buildings with distaste. She had not the slightest wish to start a new school life, and would only go under protest and because she had been bribed.

“French all right?” Joy asked, opening the door to the front seat.

“Not too bad. I just pulled through. Can’t Rykie come here with you? I want to go in the back with Joan.”

“Care for a front seat, Rykie? We’ll go home the other way and show you more of the country,” Joy said obligingly.

The change was made, and Jen cuddled down beside Joan with a sigh of content. “All right, Joan-Queen?”

Joan smiled at her and spoke in a cautious whisper. Joy was talking to Rykie, pointing out places and telling where the various roads would lead.

“Dreadful!” Joan gave her verdict. “She didn’t care a scrap.”

“About the Abbey? How awful! I knew she wasn’t our sort. Did she say ‘quaint’?”

“She did. ‘It’s a quaint old place’; that was how she put it.”

“Did you slay her on the spot?”

“Oh, no! I just smiled. She can’t help it. The only things that pleased her were Jehane’s jewels. She was fascinated by them.”

“I hope she doesn’t pinch some of them,” Jen said gloomily.

“Jen, how can you?”

“Well, she might have a try. I’d better not talk about the Abbey, if that’s how she feels. Perhaps it’s a good thing I wasn’t there.”

“Just as well,” Joan agreed. “You’ll only annoy her, if you say much about the Abbey.”

“Did you see the cats?”

“Oh, yes, they were there. But Rykie took no notice of them.”

“Not a catty person, like we are,” Jen groaned. “Didn’t she see how pretty Timmy is, and how sweet the Mother Superior looks?”

“She hardly glanced at them. She’s evidently not a cat-lover. I object to being called catty.”

Jen grinned. “Did she like the house?”

“Oh, yes! She loved it; she’s greatly impressed by Joy’s position as the heiress. But I’ve a feeling that it’s the size of the house and the whole estate that weighs with Rykie—the great hall, the big rooms, the large gardens. She feels the importance of living in such a fine place. She doesn’t see that the gardens and park are beautiful, or that the house is like a lovely picture.”

“It’s the bigness,” Jen assented. “It would be. That’s the sort of thing she cares about.”

“She’s very polite to Joy,” Joan said, with a laugh.

“I say, Joan! I’ve made a mess of things again. She can’t be Jaques. They’ve given the part to Aileen Carter.”

Joan knit her brows. “What a pity you said anything about it! I’m afraid she’s counting on being in the play. Silly of her, of course, but she seems terribly keen. It’s the kind of thing she really cares about.”

“I expect she can be in the play, but she can’t be Jaques. If she’s any good they’ll find her a small part.”

“She won’t like that,” Joan remarked.

“I told Muriel about her; she’s secretary to the Dramatic, though she doesn’t act herself. She said they’d shove her in somewhere if she was good enough.”

“You’d better tell Rykie as soon as you can, but not in the car. She’ll be rather cut up, I’m afraid.”

Jen heaved another deep sigh. “I wish she was different. I expect she’ll loathe and despise country-dancing. She isn’t like us in any single way.”

“I’ve been thinking about her,” Joan spoke cautiously.

“It’s all right,” Jen assured her. “She’s not listening. She’s much too thrilled by Joy’s talk. Joy’s far more important than we are. What did you

think about her, Joan? And why did you? Did you have to do it? Wasn't there anything nicer to think about?"

Joan stifled a laugh. "Don't be too hard on her, Jenny-Wren! Don't you realise what has happened?"

"I thought I did. Rykie has come to live with you, and she's all wrong; she doesn't fit in. She's a complete stranger to the Abbey and all its ideas. That's right, isn't it?"

"As far as it goes. But I want you to see more in it than that. Don't you understand? She's the opposite point of view, come to live with us."

Jen stared at her. Then she chuckled. "Of course she is! She's the opposite of us in every way. I shall call her that; no, it's too long. I'll call her the O.P.V. Then I shall remember that she can't help it; she thinks of everything in the opposite way. I'm glad you told me! Now I shall be ready for her, and it won't be a shock, every time she looks at things wrongly. It will make it much easier to bear."

Joan laughed out. "Jen dear, you are funny! It should broaden our minds quite a lot. We all think alike; we love old things and things that are beautiful, for their own sake; we're all keen on folk-dancing and the Abbey and the hills and the cats. Rykie doesn't care two hoots; she can only see the value of Joy's inheritance and of Lady Jehane's jewels. The old stories mean nothing to her; she'll never climb the Monks' Path for the sake of the hermit in his cell! She's not in the least interested in the romance of Ambrose and Jehane; she thinks we're silly about those ancient days. She's our opposite in every way, and she's been plunged into our midst; and she's going to stay. It ought to be very good for us, and for her. Plenty of new ideas for us all!"

"The O.P.V.," Jen said firmly.

"Don't say that to her!"

"No, she wouldn't understand, and she might be mad. It's clever of you to have thought of it, Joan."

"Remember that Rykie can't help it. Our ideas are as new to her as hers are to us."

"And quite as horrid, I expect. I'll make allowances for her; that's what you mean, isn't it? But I'm not going to let her change my way of looking at things!"

"I don't believe she could do that," Joan said. "Be careful what you say to her! Sometimes you're just a little in a hurry, you know."

Jen grinned. "I will take care. Oh, how I do want my tea!"

"We're nearly home. After tea you must tell Rykie about Jaques."

CHAPTER TWELVE

TALKING TO JOAN

“I’m awfully sorry, Rykie!” Jen had given her news. “I had no idea anybody had been chosen.”

Rykie sat looking gloomy. “If I’d do it best, they’d have to give it to me. Is this Aileen girl any use? You said no one was good enough.”

“They read parts of the play yesterday, after school, and Aileen wasn’t too bad, so they decided to try her. They can’t take the part away from her now.”

“Is she frightfully keen?”

“Sure to be. Who wouldn’t want the chance?”

“Aileen Carter?” Joy asked. “Any relation of Carry Carter, who was my maid-of-honour? She’s left now, of course. Who is Aileen Carter?”

“Carry’s cousin. She isn’t like Carry to look at; she’s tall and dark.”

“She’ll look more like Jaques than Rykie would; I’m sure Jaques was black and tall. She won’t give up the part, now that she’s got it; that family never gives up anything. Look at the way Carry carried on as my maid when we’d had that row and hated one another like poison! I couldn’t get rid of her.”

“Aileen may not be like Carry,” Joan remarked.

“I bet she is; same family. Give up all thoughts of being Jaques, Rykie! Aileen will stick to him for all she’s worth.”

Rykie said nothing, but her thoughts were obviously busy.

“You’ll come to school to-morrow, won’t you?” Jen asked wistfully. “The girls want to see you. Have you tried Joy’s bike?”

“It fits me all right. It’s a lovely bike. But I like the car,” Rykie said curtly.

“Oh, so do I! But Joy can’t go on running us in to school. It takes up too much of her time.”

Rykie said no more, and the girls settled down to work in the library, Jen at prep, Rykie busy with a book.

As she said good night to Joan, Jen managed to whisper a private word. “Come and talk, Joan! I want to say something.”

“Yes. But be very quiet,” Joan warned her.

When she slipped into the small room, Jen was sitting up in bed waiting for her, thoughtfully plaiting her long locks. She flung the yellow braids back and remarked, “Rykie says I ought to cut this off and have a perm.”

“You won’t be you, if you do. And you needn’t come here again.” Joan sat on the bed. “Whisper, Jenny-Wren. She mustn’t think we have secrets from her.”

“Even if we have! Did you see what she was doing while I did my prep?”

“Reading Shakespeare? She borrowed my copy during the morning.”

“She was learning that speech—‘All the world’s a stage.’ She means to be Jaques.”

“How silly of her! She can’t expect Aileen Carter to be turned out for her sake.”

“She does expect it,” Jen sighed. “She’s sure nobody could be as good a Jaques as she would be. I say, Joan! I’m frightfully sorry I put it into her head. I haven’t been much help to you, have I? You must jolly well wish I wasn’t here. Why don’t you send me back to school?”

Joan laughed under her breath. “We’re definitely very glad you’re here. It would feel odd to have Rykie alone; two seems much more natural. Don’t worry about Jaques! If Rykie is really as good as she thinks, they’ll give her another part. Or are all the parts filled?”

“I don’t think so, but I don’t know for certain. I’d better not make an ass of myself again by having any more bright ideas! Beetle’s going to be Audrey—you know, the silly one who giggles. She’ll do it jolly well.”

“Rykie wouldn’t want to be Audrey, I’m sure.”

“She wants Jaques and nobody else,” Jen groaned. “I hope she won’t go to school and say so!”

“She could hardly be as tactless as that,” Joan said.

“Did Joy play to her?”

“Yes, but Rykie didn’t care about it. She listened and said it was quite nice and that it was a lovely piano and must have cost a lot.”

Jen snorted. “It’s all she cares about; how much things are worth. Did Joy play Chopin?”

“She played that Nocturne we all love so much. Then she played some little things of her own. I think Rykie was impressed by that. She stared at Joy and said she must be jolly clever.”

“I’m glad she had that much sense!”

“She isn’t really musical,” Joan remarked. “She needs music for her dancing, and she wants to sing, but it’s because both will be useful in her career. It isn’t that she cares much for music.”

“Why doesn’t she stick to acting, if she’s so keen?”

“I don’t know,” Joan admitted. “I should have thought it would be better to specialise in one line. But then we know nothing about these things; we’re complete and utter outsiders.”

“And she despises us as much as we—well, not quite that, perhaps!” Jen looked at Joan doubtfully.

“No, not that. But I’m sure she thinks we’re as odd as we think she is. I suppose it’s this film idea.” Joan pondered Rykie’s attitude. “She doesn’t know what will be wanted, and so she means to be prepared for anything. I made her talk while we were out together this morning. She’d rather get a job in films than anything.”

“She’s pretty, of course, even without paint splashed all over her,” Jen said grudgingly.

“She looks much nicer without it. But she doesn’t believe that. Have you had your lesson in make-up yet?”

Jen grinned. “There hasn’t been time. I shall make her show me some day. But you needn’t worry; I’m not going in for it. I’d like to see Father’s face, if I arrived home all permed and painted and powdered!”

“I wouldn’t like to see you permed and painted,” Joan told her. “You look much nicer as you are.”

“Rykie doesn’t think so.”

“The opposite point of view, Jenny-Wren.”

“The O.P.V. I’ll remember,” Jen laughed. “You don’t like her wanting to be an actress, do you?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Joan said, considering her words carefully. “If she really has a gift, she must use it, and we must help her to make the most of it. But I don’t feel sure about it yet.”

“She’s sure!”

“Oh, yes! She’s convinced of it. But it may be only schoolgirl excitement at the thought of being in films; there’s a lot of glamour about Hollywood!”

“Rather! Quite half the girls at school want to get on the pictures.”

“Rykie may be just another. And she wants to be like Belle. We can’t tell yet whether it’s the real thing with her or not. If it’s only stage-struck thrills, she’ll get tired of it and she’ll have wasted her time. That’s why I feel so sure she must have another year or two at school.”

“To find out if it is real or not,” Jen assented. “If she could have been Jaques we’d have seen how good she is; or isn’t!”

“Yes, it would have helped a lot. Perhaps we’ll have another chance to see what she can do. It’s too early to say whether she should go on the stage or not. After she’s had a few weeks at school we’ll consult Miss Cameron, who will know all about her elocution and so on by that time. If Rykie turns out to be really keen, and if she shows promise of having a real gift, be sure we shall do all we can to help her on her way.”

“Rykie’s jolly lucky to have you to look after her.”

“Go to sleep, Jenny-Wren! Don’t think any more about Rykie to-night,”
Joan commanded.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RYKIE GOES TO SCHOOL

The ex-Queen, Muriel, looked with interest at the new girl when Jen introduced her, after Rykie had been interviewed by the headmistress. "I hear you are keen on acting," she said pleasantly. "I asked Jen Robins to bring you to me, as I'm secretary of the Dramatic Society. We're preparing a play for the end of the term; perhaps we can use you."

"I've been in lots of plays." Rykie did not believe in leaving things to chance.

"Then you won't have stage-fright. I expect you'll be very useful. Come to the library after school; I'll collect our members and you can read something and show us what you can do. We can judge a good deal from your voice and expression."

"My voice is all right," Rykie assured her.

Muriel raised her brows. "We'll see," she said. "Are you any good at Shakespeare?"

"Oh, yes! I've done heaps. I'm good at blank verse."

"Well, come along at four o'clock. We'll judge for ourselves."

"May I come too?" Jen asked. "We'll be going home together. I'll have to wait for her."

"Come, if you like. You don't want to join us, do you?"

"Oh, no, thanks! I'm not keen, and I've heaps to do."

Muriel laughed. "Just as well not to do too much," she said, and sent them off. "Well, for cool and complete self-assurance, this Rykie thing beats anyone I've ever seen!" And she found Nesta, Beatrice, Aileen and others who were in the play and asked them to come to pronounce judgement on the new child's powers.

Rykie showed no shyness as the girls of her form gathered round. Yes, she came from Scotland; no, she did not go in much for games—she only cared about acting. Of course she was joining the Dramatic, and she hoped to be put into the play.

"My sister's an actress, and she's just flown to Hollywood. She's going into films," she said proudly.

This caused a storm of questions and an obvious feeling that the new girl was an acquisition to the form and would be worth cultivating. The class swarmed round, interested and eager, and Rykie enlarged on Belle's gifts and achievements and on her own ambitions.

Jen strolled away to join her friends. “I’m not needed! But I really ought to have stayed to listen; she’s telling them heaps more about Belle than she’s told us at home. I suppose we weren’t excited enough, or we didn’t ask the right questions. Perhaps she’s making it all up to thrill the girls! But that’s mean; I expect it’s true enough. I wonder how the Dram will like her! I thought Muriel looked a bit odd. She’s so quiet and keeping-in-the-background herself—so like her Speedwell flowers as Queen!—that it must have seemed queer to hear Rykie swanking about Shakespeare; for she *did* swank! Muriel thinks she’s a weird specimen. But they’ll want to use her, if she’s really good.”

She looked for Rykie at dinner-time, but saw she was still not needed. Rykie had made friends, and was talking and laughing noisily in the midst of a cheerful group of fourteen-year-olds.

Jen shrugged her shoulders and joined Nesta and Beatrice at their end of the table.

“What about your new girl, Jen?” Nesta asked. “Do you like her?”

“She’s all right. I haven’t had much to do with her yet. I was here all day yesterday, and she only came late the night before.”

“Seems odd she should be Joan’s cousin,” Beatrice remarked. “She’s not much like her.”

“She’s not a scrap like Joan. She’s just the opposite.” Jen’s eyes gleamed at a sudden memory. “Shove up, old Beetle, and make room for me. I’m not going to be her nurse; she’s looking after herself jolly well.”

“She’s very pretty,” Nesta began.

Jen’s eyes lit up again. “She’s all right *now*! Now that she’s clean.”

“Clean! What on earth do you mean?”

“She arrived all paint and powder, like an actress. Joan sent her to wash before she would let Mrs. Shirley see her. Her nails were disgusting, like a shopgirl’s, and I told her so.”

“Jen! Not really? A kid like that?”

“A good thing you cleaned her up before you brought her here,” Beetle said austerely. “The Head would have had three fits.”

“Don’t spread it round the school! But she wouldn’t mind. She likes being like that; she thinks Joan and Joy are terribly old-fashioned because they don’t make up. She’s inclined to look down on us all, except Joy; she admires Joy, because she’s the heiress. The rest of us are too dowdy and stodgy for words,” Jen said airily.

“What a little ass!” Nesta exclaimed.

“Don’t expect her to look up to you because you’re the Queen. She thinks that’s all childish, and Joan and Joy are silly to dress up and be in the procession.”

“What a thing to bring to school, Jenny-Wren! And what an odd cousin for Joan!” Beetle grinned.

“Joan’s very much upset about her. You’re going to have her in the play, you know, so you’ll see a lot of her.”

“I thought all the parts were fixed?”

“She’ll get one somehow! If there’s a play going, she won’t be left out. I suppose I ought not to talk about her like this,” Jen said, with sudden contrition. “But it’s such a relief to tell somebody! You two won’t pass it on, will you?”

“We’ll keep the horrid truth to ourselves and let the rest find out.”

“Good old Beetle! I knew you would. Joan feels she has to make allowances and find excuses for her, so I can’t say half as much as I’d like, at home. I just had to let out to somebody.”

“Poor you! Are you getting too much of her already?” Nesta asked.

“Not at school,” Jen laughed. “I meant to stand by her, but she’s made it quite plain that I’m not needed. If you two will comfort me and let me explode now and then, I can bear it.”

“Muriel wants us to stay after school and hear her read, or something.”

“I’m coming to see what happens. Yes, it’s all right; Muriel said I might. I’m afraid Rykie thinks she’s rather wonderful,” Jen sighed. “I dare say she is; I don’t know anything about it. But I wish she wouldn’t go about telling everybody she’s something quite out of the ordinary!”

“Jen, she didn’t! She couldn’t!”

“It sounded like it. Muriel looked upset, I thought. I hope it will be all right this afternoon. She’s determined to be in that play!”

“I don’t see how she can be. I don’t believe there’s a part left. They can’t put anyone out for her,” Nesta said.

“She couldn’t expect that, however much of an idiot she is.”

“I don’t know about that, Beetle. She seems to expect a lot. I believe she thinks she’s a genius. It would do her tons of good to be told she isn’t up to the standard of the Dramatic! But I’m terribly afraid she’ll be too good.”

“She must seem queer and out of place at the Abbey,” Nesta suggested.

“She’s a complete and absolute stranger. Even Joan thinks so,” Jen said sadly. “She isn’t one of the family in the least, and she isn’t trying to fit in. Aren’t they being rowdy over there? They’ll find themselves flung out, if they go on like that.”

“She’s setting them off. I’ve been watching them,” Beetle said grimly. “Your stranger is going to be frightfully popular. Those kids will love her, if she stirs them up like this. She’s a shrieker, all right, but we won’t tell the rest. They may not think of it.”

“Please don’t! I oughtn’t to have said it. She is noisy when she’s with other kids, but she’s not like that at home. They’ve finished; they’re going out. Thanks be! Now we’ve got rid of them,” Jen said fervently.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A CHALLENGE TO THE DRAMATIC

Rykie was radiant and excited when Jen met her after school to take her to the library. She had been a success with her new companions, and at an afternoon elocution class she had been praised and held up as an example. A part in the play was the only thing left to wish for.

“Come on!” Jen said brusquely, alarmed by the eager, determined eyes.

“I expect they’ll like me. Everybody else does,” Rykie announced.

Jen gave a grunt of disapproval. “Jolly bad for you!”

“Everybody except you Abbey people,” Rykie grinned. “But you don’t any of you understand.”

“We don’t appreciate you properly,” Jen retorted. “It’s awkward, when you’ve got to live with us. You’d better ask Joan if you can be a boarder. But I hope you won’t,” she added hurriedly.

“They’d send you too, wouldn’t they?” Rykie turned on her. “Tell me straight! Are you really just staying with them, or are you there to be company for me—supposed to be?”

“Bit of both,” Jen snapped. “It’s easier for them to have two; anyone can see that. Here’s the library. Rykie, for goodness’ sake, don’t swank too much!”

Rykie laughed and pushed past her and entered. She shot a quick look round the group of girls, and then strode forward and addressed Muriel, the only one she knew.

“‘A fool, a fool! I met a fool i’ th’ forest,
A motley fool!—a miserable world!—
As I do live by food, I met a fool,
Who laid him down and bask’d him in the sun,
And rail’d on Lady Fortune in good terms,
In good set terms—and yet a motley fool.’

Is that any use? Shall I go on to the end?”

Muriel and the rest gazed at her. This was no recitation. It was Jaques himself, exulting in his discovery of the philosophic fool. Rykie’s voice was ringing and clear, and she obviously had no shyness; she spoke the blank verse well.

By the doorway Nesta seized Jen’s arm and pulled her down beside her. Beetle’s face was black and angry.

“Horrid little pig!” she muttered.

“How *could* she?” Nesta whispered. “How could she do it? How could anybody——?”

“She did it very well,” Jen murmured. “It was showing off, and I asked her not to swank, but——”

“You don’t understand!” Nesta wailed softly, while Beetle growled again and watched Muriel, who was staring anxiously at Aileen Carter. “That’s Jaques’s first big speech from *As You Like It*—his first bit of blank verse! She couldn’t say more plainly that she wanted the part. How *could* she do it?”

“Aileen will never do it like that,” Beetle groaned. “It was a simply beastly thing to do. And she looks so pleased with herself! I could slap her!”

“Oh! I didn’t know what she was saying. I haven’t read the play lately. How ghastly!” Jen raged. “I call that super-swanking. I wish they’d fling her out!”

“They can’t. They must think of the play. She’s far better than Aileen will ever be. I wonder what they’ll do?”

In complete consternation the rest of the actors stared at Muriel and then at Aileen.

“Shall I say the other big speech—‘All the world’s a stage’?” Rykie asked.

“No, thank you. We’ve heard enough. You’re quite good, but I’m afraid we haven’t a big enough part left in the play to satisfy you. You wouldn’t want a small part. The principals are all chosen.” Muriel’s tone was definitely frosty.

“Oh, but—but if I’m good enough, you can’t leave me out. You must think first of the play!” Rykie protested hotly. “I’ve had a lot of experience and people have always been pleased.”

“Couldn’t we hear her in Jaques’s big speech?” It was Aileen, the chosen Jaques, who spoke.

Muriel gave her a startled glance. “Do you want to hear any more?”

“No, but I think we ought to let her show us how she would do it.”

“Yes, we’d better hear her,” said the girl who was to be Touchstone.

“Right! Go on!” Muriel said curtly to Rykie.

Delightedly believing herself appreciated at last, Rykie launched out into the great speech.

“She’s too good!” Nesta said unhappily in Jen’s ear. “This is putting everybody in an awful hole. I don’t know what they’ll do.”

“Why did you bring her here, Jen?” Beetle groaned.

“I wish to goodness I hadn’t! I didn’t want to lug her round!”

The elder girls were looking at one another again. Then with one accord they gazed at their poor secretary.

Muriel was a quiet girl, who could never have raised her voice in public. But she had high ideals and she was conscientious; if anybody could deal with this difficult situation she was the one.

Aileen Carter was about to speak when Muriel checked her. "In a moment, Aileen. Rykie, you speak out well and your voice is good, and you can say blank verse. I'm sure you'll be useful to us in the future; we won't forget you. But I hardly think we can put you in this play; we've given out all the parts. We'll talk it over, and if we find we can use you we'll let you know. That's as much as I can say just now. Thank you for showing us what you can do; you're not at all bad. Now you and Jen had better run along; you've a long ride and I'm sure you want your tea."

Rykie shot a look at her, understanding the situation perfectly. "Thanks!" she said lightly. "I'll be at school to-morrow, if you should want me. Come on, Jen!"

"Can you and Beatrice stay for a few minutes, Nesta?" Muriel asked.

"They don't want to, but they know they must. They'd much rather escape," Rykie grinned, as Jen closed the door.

Jen turned on her. "It was a perfectly beastly thing to do! I'm sick to death of you, and so are Nesta and Beetle. I rather think all the rest feel the same."

"What on earth's the matter with you?" Rykie asked indignantly.

"You did your very best to take that part from Aileen, when you knew it had been given to her. How would you like it if somebody did that to you?"

"Which was Aileen?"

"The dark girl sitting next to Muriel."

"I'm better than she is," Rykie said complacently. "I know that, by the way they all looked at her. They were wondering what to do about it. I expect they're talking it over now. Jen, don't be an ass! If I'm best in the part they'll have to give it to me. The play matters more than one girl's feelings."

"That's their business, and I'm sorry for them," Jen said curtly, as they went to fetch their cycles. "I wouldn't like their job. But what bothers me is that you should have been such a horrible pig—such an utter outsider—as to stalk in and start spouting Aileen's part at them. Didn't you know anything else?"

"Oh, heaps! But those speeches were fresh in my mind. I'd rubbed them up."

Jen gave her a look of loathing. "You meant to do it. You were trying to pinch Aileen's part. You're hopeless! You don't seem to see!"

“I had to do the best I could for myself!” Rykie was stirred to self-defence. “It’s best for the play, too. It’s you who don’t seem to see! The play’s the thing that matters. If I can help I must tell them so. It will be good for the school.”

“And do you think it’s worth while, on your first day, to make yourself loathed by the girls who are keenest on acting, just for the sake of a part in a play?”

“Loathed? What rot! They’ll love me, if I make the play a success.”

“They won’t,” Jen told her definitely. “Not after to-day. They may feel they have to put you in and chuck poor Aileen out; I don’t know anything about that. They may say you’re good. But they’re not going to like you. They feel you swank and show off. You can be as good as you like, as Jaques, but they won’t forget how you grabbed the part. I saw the way they looked at you.”

“They’ll get over it! And anyway, I shan’t worry. You’re making an awful fuss,” Rykie said lightly.

Jen’s lips set grimly. She rode off, saying no more.

Rykie rode alongside her. “I suppose you’ll rush in and tell Joan all about it?”

“Then you do know you didn’t play the game! Oh, Joan will find out! She won’t need to be told. And she won’t like it. I wish the girls didn’t know you’re her cousin!”

“What rot! How you do go on!” Rykie cried.

Jen said nothing, and they rode in silence, Jen unhappy, Rykie scornful.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE COMPLETE STRANGER

“What has happened? Has something gone wrong at school?” Joan demanded, as she gave the younger girls their much-needed tea.

Jen shook her head and was silent.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Rykie said defiantly. “I got on all right. The girls in my form are quite decent and they seemed to like me. I rather think the Dramatic people liked me too.”

“Well, I don’t!” Jen burst out, her tone shocked.

Joan looked at her and then at Rykie. “Something did happen. Jen is upset and you are angry. What was it? And why is Jen so sure the girls didn’t like you?”

“She has such odd ideas. She’s making a frightful fuss about nothing.”

“You may as well own up.” Joy raised her eyes from a sheet of music paper. She wandered to the piano in the next room, tried a note or two, and came back to scribble a bar. “Yes, that’s better. What’s the matter with you two? Speak up, Rykie! Get it over! Joan will have it out of you sooner or later. What have you been doing?”

“Nothing!” Rykie retorted. “I showed those girls that I could speak blank verse, that’s all.”

“In fact, you swanked.” Joy looked at her keenly. “Jen wouldn’t like that, of course.”

“What happened, Rykie?” Joan asked sternly.

“Oh, well, if you’re going to put on that school-mistressy voice!” Rykie wilted before Joan’s look. “I didn’t do anything. You can tell her”—to Jen. “I know you’re aching to do it. Tell them the whole thing; then they’ll see for themselves what a silly fuss you’re making.”

Jen took a long drink of tea and set down her cup with a bang. “Muriel asked her to read or say something to the Dramatic girls after school, so that they could hear what her voice is like. She stalked in and began to spout Jaques’s first big speech—Jaques, you know! With Aileen Carter sitting there next to Muriel!”

“‘A fool, a fool! I met a fool i’ th’ forest’—that one?” Joy quoted. “It’s a fine speech, but it wasn’t exactly a tactful one to choose.”

“Rykie, how unkind!” Joan exclaimed. “And how very foolish! Couldn’t you see how the girls would feel?”

“Crazy,” Joy added. “And then you say they liked you!”

“They didn’t,” Jen said.

Rykie looked from one to another, bright-eyed and indignant. “I knew none of you would understand! The play’s the thing. I could play Jaques; I had to show those girls. Now it’s up to them. If they think I’m better than the other person they’ll have to give the part to me.”

“And jolly comfortable you’ll feel, with Rosalind and Audrey loathing you, and probably all the rest too,” Jen said bitterly.

“Were Nesta and Beatrice there?” Joan asked, looking troubled.

“Of course they were there! They looked as black as thunder.”

“Did they understand that Rykie knew Jaques had been chosen?” Joy looked up from her work.

“Yes. They knew I’d told her.”

Joy whistled and returned to her notes. “I wish you people would fight this out somewhere else! How can I make up a dance with you all yattering away?”

“You shouldn’t work in the dining-room,” Jen retorted. “Go and sit in silence beside the piano!”

“Oh, but I wanted to hear about school.”

“And do you like it, now that you’ve heard?” Rykie demanded.

“Not one bit. I think you’re an awful ass,” Joy told her cheerfully.

“I thought you might understand,” Rykie complained. “I knew Joan wouldn’t.”

“Is that meant for a compliment? I’m more inclined to look on it as an insult,” Joy informed her. “Why should I approve of sneaky behaviour?”

“There was nothing sneaky about it!” Rykie cried.

“Oh, yes, there was! You tried to steal the part from Aileen. I don’t know her, and I don’t like her family, but I hope she’ll stick to the part and fight you for it. And I hope she’ll win.”

“She can’t, if the rest give the part to me.”

“Do you think they will?” Joan looked at Jen.

“I’ve no idea what they’ll do. It’s horrible for them. They looked awfully worried.”

“Don’t blame them. It’s a nasty problem,” and Joy bent over her work again.

“Rykie, didn’t you see what an awkward position you were putting those girls in?” Joan asked gravely.

Rykie shrugged her shoulders. “That’s up to them. If I gave them the chance of a better Jaques than they’d got, they ought to love me for it, if they care about the play. I don’t say I did; that’s for them to decide.”

“But you think you did,” Joy said, without looking up. “In fact, you’re sure of it. For sheer cheek you beat anyone I’ve ever met. There’s no end to

your good opinion of yourself.”

“You’re all of you wrong.” Rykie went back to her argument. “I’m right, you know. It’s the play that matters, and the school. I may not be better than this Aileen girl, but if I am they’ll have to use me.”

“That’s sound enough,” Joan said quietly. “We’re not objecting to that. What upsets us is the way you’ve tried to take the part from Aileen. If you had given the girls any other speech—you must know plenty—and if they had been impressed and had asked if you knew any of Jaques’s words, then it would have been all right. We might have felt sorry that you should cut out Aileen Carter, but that would have been just bad luck for her. But you didn’t wait to be asked. You started on Jaques—and you knew they had a Jaques already. It was a mean trick, and very unkind, and it has created a difficult position for a whole crowd of girls. I’m more sorry about it than I can say. And I can’t pretend I’m proud that the school knows you’re my cousin.”

“Oh, rot!” Rykie said, but she had grown crimson and looked uncomfortable.

“I suppose you have prep? You’d better get on with it,” Joan said coldly. “What the Dramatic will do I can’t imagine; I’m sorry for them. But you’ve done your share and now we must wait and see.”

“That other girl ought to resign the part,” Rykie muttered. “She can’t stick to it if the rest want to have me.”

“She won’t.” Joy spoke without looking up. “Isn’t her name Carter? That family never gives up anything. She’ll stick to it through thick and thin and fight you for it. And I hope you’ll have a happy time.”

“Aileen may not be like that, Joy,” Joan remonstrated. “She’s only Carry’s cousin. She may be quite different.”

“What’s she like, Jen?” Joy asked.

“I can’t tell you. She’s in the Sixth; I’ve never had anything to do with her. She looks much more like Jaques than Rykie would do.”

Rykie laughed. “One can make up to look like anybody.”

“You know all about that, of course,” Jen said, with deep meaning.

“You’ve created a difficult problem for Aileen,” Joan said. “I’m sorry for her.”

“And for Muriel,” Joy added. “I’m sorry for Queen Speedwell.”

“She looked frightfully worried when we came away,” Jen said, picking up the case she had dropped. “Well, I’ve work to do. I’ll go and get on with it.”

Joan went out to her mother, who was sitting in a sheltered corner in the garden, to give her a very gentle account of this new trouble, and Joy went

to the piano to try over her dance. Rykie, left alone, followed Joy. "I haven't a lot to do. Play it to me, Joy! Is it pretty?"

"No," said Joy. "I mean, I won't play it to you. Of course it's pretty. Go away! I don't like you."

"You're all hateful!" Rykie burst out.

"None of us like you," Joy said ruthlessly. "Go away!"

And Rykie, unwanted by anybody, went sulkily to do her prep and to do it very badly.

"Isn't she awful, Joan?" Jen managed to whisper at bedtime.

"Don't worry too much, Jenny-Wren. It's very awkward, but it will work out somehow."

"You're out of it," Jen groaned. "I'm right in the middle of it, at school, for everybody knows she comes with me. Beetle says she wishes I hadn't brought her."

"You couldn't help it. It's really my fault, isn't it?"

"Oh, Joan, no! It's my fault for telling her about the play. But who could imagine she'd do a thing like this?"

"She can't see our point of view, and we can't see hers. But she has a point of view, and she's quite sure she's right."

"She's a complete and absolute stranger to every idea we have!" Jen sighed. "She simply can't understand how we feel."

"'A fool, a fool! I met a fool i' th' forest,'" Joy quoted, when she met Rykie at supper-time. "If I want to meet a fool I'll know where to find one. I shall come to look for you."

"You've no right to call me a fool!"

"I should think you'll feel like one, if you're put into a play where everybody loathes you for pushing yourself in," Joy remarked. "I wouldn't like it. I should think you'd feel awful."

"She won't. She doesn't care," Jen said gloomily. And in a murmured aside to Joan—"It's the O.P.V. again, isn't it?"

Joan laughed in spite of herself. "It is, Jenny-Wren. But be careful! Don't make things any worse."

"Tell Joy to stop saying those lines at her. It only makes her mad."

"I'll warn Joy," Joan promised. "But it is tempting, Jen!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE DRAMATIC IN A DIFFICULTY

The Dramatic Society girls were facing a crisis.

As the door closed behind Jen and Rykie, Muriel spoke. "Before anybody says anything, can anyone tell me this—did that child know the part of Jaques had been given to Aileen Carter?"

"Yes." Nesta had no hesitation in replying. "Jen Robins had told her."

"Then I don't feel we want her in the play."

"Hear, hear!" said Orlando, a tall, fair girl named Gillian "She tried to pinch the part."

"It was a horrible thing to do," said her friend Jennifer, who was to play Celia.

"But she did it jolly well." The opposite point of view came from Shirley, who was to be Touchstone.

"She'd be a marvellous Jaques, judging from those two speeches," added Susan, a small girl who was chosen as old Adam.

Muriel looked at them, her fingers playing nervously with her pencil. "Exactly! There you have it. A good Jaques but a horrid girl."

"Loathsome," said Jennifer.

"Oh, not as bad as that!" Shirley cried. "She's ambitious and she wants the part. You can hardly say that's loathsome!"

"But it's Aileen's part, and the girl knew it!" Gillian protested.

"Yes," Muriel said grimly. "We mustn't forget that. It's not merely a question of a good Jaques or an unpleasant girl. We've already chosen our Jaques."

Everyone looked at Aileen Carter. She had made no comment, but had been sitting with bent head listening to the outcry.

Now she faced the girls bravely. "I should never do the part as this girl would do it."

"Oh, but you haven't learnt the words yet! We can't possibly tell!" Muriel said quickly.

"No amount of coaching will make me as good as she'll be. She's a born actress; I'm not. I might recite the part nicely, but she'll live it—she'll *be* Jaques. I can't get outside myself like that. I'd better give it up."

"No, rather not! We won't allow it!" There was an instant chorus, even from those who, a moment before, had been inclined to want Rykie.

"We've chosen you, and we'll stick to you," Muriel said warmly.

“It’s nice of you, but you can’t, if it’s better for the play, and you know it is. The play’s the thing that counts.”

“And what if the rest of us won’t act with this new child?” Orlando demanded.

“Gillian, you can’t do that!” Aileen protested.

“Oh, can’t we? I don’t like the kid. I don’t want to have a lot to do with her. She’ll be always with us, if she’s Jaques.”

“She’s much younger than any of us and absolutely new to the school,” said Angela, who was playing Phyllis, the shepherdess. “Why shouldn’t she wait a year? I don’t see why she should walk straight into one of the best parts in the play! She doesn’t even belong to the Society yet.”

“Oh, but she’s going to join right away,” Beetle put in gloomily.

“I think she should wait,” Nesta said. “By next year we shall know what she can do and all about her. Jen Robins feels awfully sick with her over this.”

“But what about *As You Like It*?” Susan insisted. “You can’t say she wouldn’t be a marvellous Jaques! And she’s practically joined us.”

“She has!” Beetle growled. “Those speeches were dramatic enough for anything.”

“We want the play to be good,” Angela said, wavering between two points of view.

Aileen Carter rose. “Please listen, everybody! I’m not giving up the part on the spot. I feel I ought to do it, but I did want most frightfully to be in the play, and they were all so pleased at home when they heard about Jaques. I can’t give it up without telling them. I want time to think it over. May I wait till to-morrow before I decide?”

“We don’t want you to give it up,” Muriel said quickly.

“It’s jolly decent of you to think of it,” Nesta cried.

“We didn’t mean to put you out, Aileen,” Susan began.

“Then what did you mean?” Aileen turned on her, not unnaturally. “You can’t have two people being Jaques.”

“I don’t know,” Susan groaned. “We want to stick to you, but——”

“But you want the best Jaques? You want the play to be as good as possible?”

“Yes, I suppose I do,” Susan acknowledged.

“So do I,” Aileen retorted. “If I feel this Rykie child will be better than I’d ever be, what can I do but back out and give her the part?”

“I’m not convinced that it’s the right solution, Aileen,” Muriel put in. “Rykie—we must find out what that odd name means!”

“Frederica, after her father, Jen Robins says,” Nesta explained.

“Oh! Well, Rykie may be a better actress than any of us, but if she’s a nasty sort of girl she won’t be any help to the play. If we’re unhappy because she’s there, the thing can’t possibly go well.”

“But need we be like that?” Angela said.

“I don’t know. It’s for all of you to say. If Aileen is really such a brick as to withdraw, for the sake of the play, then the question will be—are the rest of you going to put up with Rykie and take her in and be a jolly crowd all together? For if not, we’d better stick to Aileen. We know she’ll fit in.”

There was a pause, as the Society considered the position with Rykie in the cast.

“I don’t much like the idea,” Gillian admitted.

“It would be heaps jollier with Aileen,” Jennifer agreed.

Beetle spoke up in a gruff voice. “It’s a big question. We’d better go home and sleep on it. I’ve a ghastly feeling that the kid will not only do her own part so awfully well that she’ll make us all look and sound feeble, but that she’ll always be telling us how to do ours as well.”

“She may be a born actress, as Aileen says. The trouble is, I’m afraid she knows it,” Nesta sighed.

“But all that would be jolly good for the play,” Shirley argued. “People would say it was the best we’d ever done.”

“It won’t be very pleasant for us,” Gillian retorted.

“Let’s do a different play! Something she’s never heard of!” Angela suggested.

“Too late,” Muriel said. “We’ve told everybody. And the Head wants us to do Shakespeare.”

“I’m quite sure there isn’t anything of his that kid hasn’t heard of!” Beetle muttered.

“She can’t know them all off by heart.” Angela defended her idea. “If we choose something new, we’ll have to fix the parts all over again and we can leave her out.”

“We’ve done that already. We’ve decided on our parts. The trouble is that she has pushed in, and she’d do it again,” Muriel said. “Aileen and Beatrice are right; we need time to think it over. We’ll leave it till tomorrow, and longer, if we must. But remember, everybody! If Aileen decides to withdraw, then the rest of us have to decide to welcome Rykie properly—not merely to put up with her for the sake of the play. She’s very keen to join us; we must be keen to have her, or we shall get nowhere.”

“No, Muriel, I do protest!” Gillian exclaimed. “She’s only keen to join us for her own sake, so that she can be in the play. She doesn’t care about us or the Society; she doesn’t really care about the play, or the school, whatever

she says. She only cares about herself and her part, and about making a great success of it.”

There was a pause. At last Muriel said: “Isn’t that rather unkind, Gillian?”

“Probably. But I’m sure it’s true.”

“I know it’s true,” Nesta said. “Jen talked about her. The kid’s full of ideas about the stage and about getting on, and she’s bursting with conceit over her sister in Hollywood.”

“Hollywood! Is her sister in films?”

“Going to be. She’s just flown to Hollywood. They sent for her to go.”

The Dramatic Society looked at one another.

“We shall have to put the child in,” Jennifer groaned.

“We’ll never hear the end of it from her crowd, if we don’t,” Aileen said brusquely. “How can I possibly hang on to Jaques, knowing everybody is saying how much better our little actress would have done it? Oh, go home, everybody! Don’t talk any more to-night!” And she took up her books and went off to the cloakroom.

“She’ll give it up,” Nesta said, as she went with Beatrice from the room.

“It’s a jolly good thing for the Dram that it has Muriel,” said Beetle. “Speedwell may not act herself, but she sees things all round and keeps everybody straight.”

“That’s why she was such a good Queen, although she’s so quiet. I’m not half good enough to come after her,” Queen Honesty admitted.

“Oh, rot! Don’t be footling! You wouldn’t have been chosen, if you weren’t good enough,” her maid-of-honour told her bracingly.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE THIRD-IN-COMMAND

Several people came to school next morning with disturbed and anxious minds.

Rykie was annoyed to find no message waiting, asking her to see Muriel at once. In spite of warning from Jen—"Don't be an ass! They'll have to think about it!"—she had expected her impression on the Dramatic Society to be so deep and emphatic that no thinking would be necessary. She was not sent for, and she was disappointed and inclined to be snappy to everyone.

Muriel had spent an unhappy night and was not looking forward to the day's events, and she knew her work was unprepared. She could not afford to let it suffer, for she had an exam before her. The affair must be settled as soon as possible. But how?

Aileen decided it for her. She had had an almost sleepless night and she looked tired, but her mind was made up, and, finding Muriel at break, she spoke definitely.

"Speedwell, I can't take that part. The rest must do their bit and be nice to Rykie; that's nothing to do with me. But I can't be Jaques; I should feel awful, after all this fuss."

Muriel knit her brows. "I believe you would, Aily. I'm terribly sorry about it, but it really isn't anyone's fault. This child has turned up and she's good."

"And she's made up her mind to have my part! Oh, she's better than I'd ever be; I know that quite well. It's just bad luck that I'm the victim; it might have been one of the others. If she'd happened to know Rosalind, I suppose she'd have expected that to be given to her! How did she happen to be so ready with Jaques, by the way?"

"Nesta says Jen Robins had told her, when she first arrived, that we hadn't chosen Jaques; we asked you next day, and Jen told Rykie she'd lost her chance, but apparently Rykie didn't see it that way."

Aileen looked at her. "She'd made up her mind to have the part. It's rather beastly, you know. Even now I don't feel quite sure that it wouldn't be better if we ignored her."

"I've been wondering about that, and all the other points of view. It might be the best thing for Rykie herself."

"For her morals," Aileen said grimly. "But I can't do Jaques now, and I don't suppose anyone else would like the part."

“What did your people say?”

“Mother said I must do as I think right, but she agreed that I wouldn’t be happy in the play after this. Father was disappointed; he’d been so pleased! I was terribly sorry to upset him. He said some stiff things about Rykie. My cousin Carry came in, and she was furious when I said I’d have to give up the part. She thinks I’m quite mad. You remember her, don’t you? She was Joy Shirley’s maid, and they had some sort of row. Carry wanted to be Queen, but Joan was chosen to follow Joy and then you came after Joan, so Carry was never Queen. She’s had a grudge against the school ever since. She says I’m an idiot not to hang on to Jaques.”

“All the more because Rykie comes from the Abbey, of course,” Muriel agreed. “Shall I speak to the others?”

“Yes, tell them I can’t do Jaques now. Don’t let them plague me!”

Muriel sent word by a junior to those of the cast who were not in her form, and they met after morning school to hear her report. Aileen was not present, and Muriel, after telling of her decision, warned the rest not to talk to her about it.

“She’s withdrawn for the sake of the play and the school. She’s feeling sore, naturally. Leave her alone! There was no other way; she felt that as clearly as we did.”

“She’s been a brick over this mess,” Jennifer said.

“More than the Rykie child has been,” Gillian growled. “Oh, well, we’ll have to put up with her! There’s no need to like her just because we act with her.”

Gillian’s attitude was that of most of the others. Rykie was aware of it, but was merely amused. Sent for by Muriel at last, she went jubilantly.

“You’re joining the Dramatic, I suppose?” In spite of herself, the ex-Queen’s tone was on the curt side.

“Yes, please, Muriel. I’m very keen.” Rykie’s eyes snapped.

“We’ll be pleased to have you.” Muriel struggled to speak more cordially. “As it happens, we can use you at once, if you’d like to be in the new play. Aileen Carter feels she won’t have time to do Jaques, so, as you know the longer speeches, we’ve decided to offer the part to you.”

Rykie’s eyes gleamed again. But she only said, very demurely, “Thank you. I’ll like Jaques. I’ll do my best.”

“Miss Cameron, who is producing the play, speaks well of your elocution. She told us to decide on the cast, subject to her approval; I don’t suppose she will object to having you in place of Aileen. We shall have a reading on Monday, so be prepared to stay after school for an hour.”

“Yes, Muriel. And thank you.” And Rykie danced off in wild jubilation to tell the news to her friends. They had no other representative in the play,

and they were properly impressed.

“And what’s going to happen to me?” Jen demanded wrathfully, as they rode home together. “What am I to do for an hour, while you’re spouting with the Dramatic?”

“You’d better go home. I can ride alone all right. It’s a silly idea, making us go together. I shall have lots of rehearsals.”

“I shall collect a crowd and have some dancing,” Jen vowed. “Not many of us are in the Dramatic, and the girls always like to dance. Joan won’t let us ride alone.”

“Then you’ll have to wait for me. I’m going to be really important to the play,” Rykie said happily. “I’ll make something big of Jaques, and he’s not a small part, in any case.”

Jen said no more. She liked to watch plays, but she did not care about the inner working or the preparations.

“I’ve got the part!” Rykie’s triumphant shout rang out as she entered the house.

Joy turned from her piano, her brows raised. “Oh? So you’ve bagged it, have you? I wonder the rest will put up with you.”

“What about Aileen?” Joan asked.

“She hasn’t time. That’s what she says.”

“Do you mean to say Aileen Carter gave up the part?” Joy demanded. “Aileen *Carter*? There must be some mistake!”

“How splendid of her!” Joan exclaimed. “That has made things easy for everybody. What a brick!”

“But a *Carter* give up something, for other people’s sake? Impossible! Unheard of!” Joy cried.

“Oh, Joy! It’s awfully decent of Aileen!” Jen urged.

“Oh, frightfully, terribly decent! But Aileen must be jolly different from the rest of her family.”

“She’s only Carry’s cousin, Joy,” Joan reminded her.

“She must be an unusual sort of Carter,” Joy said, turning to her music again. “Well, I *am* surprised!”

“I’m not much use to you, Joan-Queen.” Jen found Joan in the Abbey during the evening. “Rykie’s quite different from me; she doesn’t like the things I like and she doesn’t want me for company. She’ll have to stay after school for rehearsals, and she says she can ride home alone. She’s made heaps of friends and they’re not my crowd; and now she’ll be taken up by the Dramatic. I’m outside all the things she cares about. Seems to me you’d better send me back to school again.”

“But if we want you here, Jenny-Wren?”

“Oh, do you really? What use am I to you?”

“All the use in the world. We can’t have Rykie riding so far alone. Frankly, I don’t trust her. I like to know you’re with her.”

“That’s nice of you, but I don’t see why?” Jen asked humbly.

“She’s unsteady,” Joan said decidedly. “She’s wild; she might have a sudden idea and go off to do some mad thing. You’re balanced and sensible: you have decent principles behind you; she hasn’t been brought up as you have. If she tried to do anything silly on the way home you’d bring her safely back to us.”

“What could she do?” Jen asked, greatly intrigued. “And I don’t believe I am like that, you know.”

Joan laughed. “I think you are. I’d trust you anywhere, or with anybody. As for Rykie, I haven’t the slightest idea, but I’m sure she’d never stop to think of our feelings, if there was anything she wanted to do. She might go home with somebody for the evening, and it would never occur to her to phone to tell us where she was, and Mother would be terribly worried.”

“Oh, I thought you meant she’d run away with a circus, if she saw one.”

“She might do that, or she might go to the pictures or the theatre. I’m quite sure she wouldn’t stop to consider us, or her prep. Please stand by her and bring her safely home!”

“I could get on with my prep and have more time with you at night. Or we might have some dancing,” Jen said thoughtfully. “I say, Joan! Do you suppose I could teach anybody anything?”

Joan looked at her in amusement. “I don’t see why not. If it’s something you know very well and like very much, so that you want to pass it on, I’m sure you could teach. Who, and what, Jenny-Wren?”

“Country-dancing, of course. I’ve often thought I’d like to try, later on, in our village at home. I believe the kiddies would love it.”

“Of course they’d love it. You think you could collect some of our juniors and start on them?”

“You and the President teach the Club, but perhaps I could get them ready for you,” Jen said modestly. “Do you think a few juniors would like to have a try?”

“I believe they would. But if it’s just the babes, what about singing-games? Kiddies love those, and they’d be a splendid preparation for country-dancing.”

Jen’s face lit up. “‘Roman Soldiers’ and ‘When I was a Schoolgirl’ and ‘Looby Light’—you mean those?”

“And ‘Sally go round the Moon’ and ‘Old Roger’ and ‘Mulberry Bush’; there are plenty of them. You wouldn’t need a pianist, for you’d all sing the tunes. Shall I ask the Head if you may use the small hall on those days when Rykie has rehearsals?”

“Oh, would you, Joan?”

“Then when you’ve had three or four times with your children I could come and see how you’re getting on. I expect Cicely and I will be very grateful to you, when your class is old enough to join the Hamlet Club. They’ll have a good dancing step and nice movement, and they’ll know how to work together as a team and how to respond to music. You’ll be really useful to us; our Third-in-Command, in fact.”

Jen’s face glowed with happiness. “I shall enjoy waiting for Rykie now!” she said with enthusiasm.

“And when you go home to teach your village, you’ll know how to start,” Joan agreed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A LETTER FROM BELLE

Joy unkindly gave a shout of laughter at thought of Jen as a teacher.

"I can stop if I find I can't do it," Jen said sturdily. "I believe it will be fun."

"It will be just as much fun for you as Jaques will be for Rykie," Joan asserted.

Rykie laughed scornfully. "Kids' stuff! But it will give her something to do, if she has to wait for me. There isn't any need; it's mad."

Joy turned to her. "I suppose you feel you've now started on your stage career?"

"I'm going to make a success of this part," Rykie said defiantly. "If the local newspapers put in a report I mean to be mentioned. They ought to report the play; it's a big school."

"There will be reports, and pictures. You'll love that," Joy remarked.

"Joan and Joy have been in the papers more than once, because of being Queens. There are always reports of the May Day dancing," Jen told her.

"Do you really mean to make the stage your career?" Joy was following out her line of thought.

"Of course I do!" Rykie cried. "When there are bits in the papers about my early life, they'll say: 'She was a great success in school theatricals, and was particularly noticed by the Press for her excellent performance as Jaques.'"

"See that it is excellent, then! Well, if that's to be your future, my dear kid, I've some advice for you. There's one thing you'll need, wherever you are and whatever you act, and that's tact. Without it you'll have a brute of a time. Begin to practise it right now! You've a marvellous opportunity, for I don't mind betting the rest of the Dramatic loathe you for the way you butted in and pinched that part from Aileen; I should myself. You'll need all your tact to get along well with those girls. Make them like you, if you can; I'll think you're clever, if you manage it. It will be useful to you all your life." And she went off for an evening tramp on the hills.

Joan said decidedly, "Joy's right, Rykie. It's a chance to practise a thing that will always be useful to you."

"They'll like me all right, if I do the part well and help the play a lot."

"They'll like you more if you do it in the right way."

“What do they mean by tact?” Rykie demanded of Jen, as they went up to bed later on.

“Thinking of other people and not hurting their feelings, I expect,” Jen said soberly. “If you go telling those seniors how to act Orlando or Touchstone, they aren’t going to love you very much.”

“But if I see things that should be different?” Rykie argued. “I can’t say nothing!”

“Leave it to Miss Cameron; you aren’t producing the play. If something really seems too awful for words, ask her privately if it couldn’t be done another way; don’t say it in front of everybody—that would be tactful. And don’t show off, whatever you do.”

Rykie changed the subject. “Will you really like playing footling games with kids?”

“I rather think I shall love it.” Jen herself was placidly tactful. “And they aren’t footling. Some of them are very old and historical; ‘London Bridge,’ for one. We had a lecture on them last term. They’re great fun to do.”

“If you’re five years old, perhaps. But you’re fifteen.”

“Oh, but I’m going to be teacher and stand on a chair and shout, as Cicely Hobart does, when she teaches us new dances.”

Rykie shrugged her shoulders. “Can’t say I envy you!”

“I don’t envy you, so that’s all right,” Jen said cheerfully.

“How are things going at school?” Joan asked, a few days later, as she wandered in the Abbey with Jen.

“Not too bad. Rykie’s showing quite a lot of sense, according to Beetle. She tells me about rehearsals, or Nesta does.”

“Our little actress isn’t telling everybody where they’re wrong? That’s what I was afraid of.”

Jen chuckled. “So were they. Nesta says they were a bit scared for fear she’d keep shoving in. But she doesn’t, Joan. It’s all right, and they’re getting on with her quite well. They call her that—what you said, ‘our little actress.’ She knows, and she likes it.”

“It’s the only outstanding thing about her,” Joan agreed.

“They say she’s awfully good, and they think she’ll look marvellous as Jaques, because she’s so fair. She’ll wear black, because he’s melancholy, and her hair will look lovely, as it’s nearly white.”

“She ought to tuck it under a cap.”

“Oh, but that would waste it! She’ll look a picture in black, with it hanging round her face. There’s no reason why Jaques shouldn’t be fair.”

“I suppose not. And your new class?”

“Oh, it’s not a class! We just play games. I don’t call it teaching; I don’t think I could teach. I keep forgetting I’m in charge and leaping off my chair

and joining in. The kiddies like it, Joan.”

“I’m sure they do. You like it too,” and Joan glanced at her eager face.

“It’s fun. I love it! They’re dear kids. And it gives me something to do while Rykie’s busy. But it’s more than that.”

“Yes,” Joan assented. “I’m glad you thought of it. Some day I’m coming to watch your class.”

Coming in from school one day in the following week, Rykie pounced on an air-mail letter from America.

“From Belle! Now I’ll know all about Hollywood!”

“Not from that flimsy thing,” Joy remarked. “She can’t say much in that.”

Rykie slit the letter open very carefully. “She can say a lot. I’ll tell you presently.”

She buried herself in her letter, neglecting her meal. Jen, very hungry, fell upon bread, butter, scones and cake, glancing at her companion from time to time.

“Belle must like Hollywood,” she said. “You look completely thrilled. But your tea’s getting cold.”

Rykie took a hurried drink and then looked at her, her face ablaze with excitement.

“She loves it. Everyone’s been nice, and she’s had tests, and they’re all pleased with her. The place is marvellous, and—oh, Joan! She wants me to go to her quite soon! She’s sure she can find me a job when I’m old enough, and perhaps at once. There are often junior parts and she knows I’d do well. Oh, do you think I could go?”

“We’d get rid of her that way,” Jen said to herself.

“It would be most unsuitable, at your age, my dear,” Mrs. Shirley said with unexpected firmness. “We must think of your future. You are only half educated. Perhaps in two or three years——”

“Oh, Aunt Margaret!” Rykie wailed. “I couldn’t wait as long as that!”

“Does Belle say anything about sending money to pay for your journey?” Joan asked practically. “I know she couldn’t enclose anything in an air-mail letter.”

Rykie’s eyes fell. “She can’t. She’ll have to save up. She thought perhaps—perhaps one of you—Joy’s got plenty of money. Couldn’t you lend me enough for my fare, Joy?”

“How much?” Joy asked curtly.

“My dear, I would not permit it,” said Mrs. Shirley.

“I don’t know how much,” Rykie admitted. “But we could find out. Oh, Joy, would you?”

“From one point of view I’d love to do it,” Joy told her. “But I couldn’t, unless Auntie agreed, and you heard what she said.”

Rykie shot a suspicious look at her. “Why would you love to do it?”

“To get rid of you,” Joy said cheerfully. “You’ll never settle down here. But it can’t be done. I haven’t large sums of money lying round, and I have to consult Auntie before I take a lot out of the bank. Besides, I’m not your cousin. Ask Joan.”

“I haven’t any large sums of money,” Joan assured her. “What I have belongs to the Abbey for its upkeep. I couldn’t do it, Rykie, and I wouldn’t if I could. You’re far too young and unformed to be let loose in Hollywood. It would probably ruin you for life.”

“Oh, what rot!” Rykie blazed. “Belle would look after me! It would be wonderful to go to her!”

“In two years or so,” Joan said definitely.

With stormy eyes Rykie took up the letter and read it through again. She drank another cup of tea and ate a scone. Then she turned to Joan. “Where can I get one of these things? Do I have to go to the post office? I must write to Belle.”

“To tell her how hard-hearted we are?” Joy asked.

“To say none of you understand one scrap,” Rykie snapped.

“Sorry we’re so dense! I can give you an air-mail. I use them to write to Jandy Mac. She lives on a South Sea island.”

“Jandy Fraser,” Joan laughed.

“She’ll always be Jandy Mac, even if she marries six times,” Jen remarked.

“I hope she won’t do that. Poor Alec! I’ll give you one, Rykie, so that you can tell Belle just what pigs we all are,” Joy said.

Rykie glared at her. “Thanks! But I’d rather you’d lend me the money.”

“No,” said Joy, and went to her desk. “Here you are! Use a thin pen and write carefully. I’ll show you how to seal it—and I won’t try to read what you’ve written! Put your name there, and write only on those three sides,” and she went off to her piano.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

RYKIE'S NEW IDEA

"Joy, couldn't you possibly——?" Rykie had crept into the room where Joy was practising and stood beside her. She spoke coaxingly, her voice full of pleading.

Joy looked up from her piano. "We hadn't time to think, when you asked us first. Do you really mean that if I'd fork out the cash you'd throw over the play and go off to Hollywood, leaving them in the lurch? After the way you grabbed that part?"

"Oh, that! It's only a school thing," Rykie said scornfully. "It doesn't really matter." But her eyes fell before Joy's cool stare.

"You'll find it matters to us. Even if I had the money in the house, I wouldn't give you a penny to help you to let the school down. Not on any account!"

"That other girl could do it. She comes and watches rehearsals."

"Not likely, after the way you turned her out! Joan and I would feel let down for ever if you behaved like that."

"Oh, tosh! They could find another Jaques; if Aileen was snuffy about it. It matters such a lot to me! You're mean! You've got heaps of money!" Rykie blazed out in wrathful disappointment. "And though Joan says she hasn't any, she's got other things. Those stones on show in the Abbey—there are a lot of them and they're worth heaps. If she'd give me just one I could sell it and it would pay my fare."

Joy's hands dropped from the keys and she sat up and stared. "The jewels of Lady Jehane? My dear child, you must be mad!"

Rykie's eyes fell. "It was only an idea. I suddenly remembered those old stones. If Joan wanted to help me she could surely spare one. It's not just for myself; it's my whole life—my career. I want to get started."

"Joan doesn't want to help you—in this. She's sure you aren't ready for Hollywood, and so are the rest of us. As for Jehane's jewels, don't be a little ass! They half belong to me, in any case; Jehane was my relation, not Joan's. They're Abbey property; don't you go staring hungrily at them! They aren't going to be sold to help anybody's career. And I'd advise you to remember this; careers may be very important, though I don't feel sure that yours matters so much. But other things are more important still, and if you want to make a success of your life they matter enormously. I mean things like being fair and honest and not letting people down. If you ever go on the

stage you'll need to stick to your contracts, even if something better comes along. I feel sick to think you'd let the Dramatic down, as you suggest."

"It's only a school thing!" Rykie cried again. "It doesn't really matter!"

"It matters a lot. I can just imagine you in Hollywood," Joy said, scorn in her tone. "Trotting along to your manager—'Oh, please, let me off this contract! I've had the most marvellous offer! I can't refuse; it matters to my whole career!' How they'd loathe you! You'd soon ruin any chance you had."

"But if it was a better offer they'd have to let me take it!"

"You make me ill," Joy said briefly. "Go away and play! You're still an infant; Joan's right about that. Run along; I want to work."

"Then you won't——"

"Certainly not, and neither will Joan. We couldn't think of it for an instant."

Rykie went gloomily away, the chords of a Beethoven Sonata rolling in her ears.

"What was Rykie doing here, Jenny-Wren?" Joan, paying an evening visit to the Abbey cats, had met the schoolgirls in the tresaut passage. Rykie had raced away with a muttered word about prep, but Jen, thrusting aside the thought of work, had turned back to the garth with Joan.

"She asked me to come with her. When she came first, you told me to bring her, if she wanted to see it again. I was rather surprised that she asked," Jen admitted. "She hasn't asked me before. She didn't seem to care about it."

"I saw that. What did she want to see?"

Jen knit her brows. "I can tell you that, for sure and certain. It was Jehane's jewels, in the refectory. She seemed suddenly terribly keen on them; she stood and stared and stared, and pointed to one and then another. She didn't want to see anything else; we didn't go round the Abbey at all."

"How odd!" Joan had not heard Joy's story yet. "She didn't seem particularly keen on them before."

"I don't know what put the jewels into her head. I started telling her more about Jehane and Ambrose, and I showed her Ambrose's gold ring that you gave me, and told her about the blue sapphire ring with his and her initials on it, that Jandy Mac brought back to us from Australia. But she wasn't listening, so I stopped. She was sort of gloating over the stones."

"Queer!" Joan said thoughtfully. "I wonder what has got into her mind about them."

"I don't know! She didn't say what she was thinking. Don't talk about her, Joan! Let's talk to the cats instead. I don't often have you and the cats and the Abbey to myself."

“So that was it!” Joan exclaimed, later in the evening, when the girls had gone to bed and Joy called her into the garden at dusk and told her of Rykie’s latest suggestion. “What a horrible idea! I suppose she was wondering which she’d choose, if she could wheedle one out of me! She’ll try that next!”

“She’s obsessed with this career of hers,” Joy said, gathering roses in the half-dark. “These are for Aunty’s breakfast tray. Isn’t your cousin a ghastly kid?”

“She is. But I’m sorry for her. She seems utterly untrained in all the things that matter to us. Don’t tell Jen what she said about the jewels, Joy! It would upset her fearfully, and things are hard enough for her.”

“I won’t tell her. I fancy Jen sees through young Rykie thoroughly.”

“She doesn’t talk about her much. Would Rykie really let the school down, do you think?”

“I’m certain she would, if she saw any chance to get to Hollywood. The thought of a school play wouldn’t stop her.”

“No, her career comes first. Fairness and being trustworthy don’t matter. Her values are all wrong,” Joan agreed. “All wrong, according to our ideas, I mean. She’ll make some awful blunder and ruin her chances over there, if she ever gets there, unless we can do something about it while we have her here.”

“I told her that,” Joy remarked.

“We have the chance to help her; perhaps it’s the chance of her life. But we don’t seem to be making much impression so far.”

“She’s not ready for Hollywood. You were right about that. I wish there was a ‘Butterfly’ for Aunty, but they’re only tight buds.”

“Those are beautiful; Mother will love them. I’ll tell her you picked them for her in the dark. No, I wouldn’t like Rykie to go to Hollywood at present. I wonder if Belle’s the same? We know nothing about her.”

“Except the way she skipped off and left the kid on our hands, without even coming to see Aunty.”

“It was thoughtless and callous,” Joan agreed. “But if she had been offered a seat in a plane with her friends, you can forgive her.”

“I wish we’d seen her. Either she or somebody else ought to have put decent ideas into young Rykie.”

“Yes, that side of Rykie has been neglected. She’s untrained in some ways,” Joan agreed. “But it may not be Belle’s fault; she’s only eighteen. I’m inclined to blame the father; we know nothing about him. Their mother has been dead for some years.”

“Strangers to us; complete and absolute strangers, in every way.” Joy turned to the house with her roses. She paused and gazed about. “Oh, Joan,

aren't you *glad*?"

Joan's arm slipped through hers. "Glad it's ours? Gladder than glad, Joy dear. You don't mind my saying 'ours'?"

"You know I want you to say it. I'm so glad for Aunty to have all this."

"She loves it. The house has crept into her heart. I'm thankful you were able to give it to her. It has made her so happy."

"I know," Joy assented. "When we were in Bournemouth last year, while you and Jen and Jandy were having adventures here, Aunty used to talk about going home and about how much she loved it all. I could see it for myself; she had quite a nice holiday, but she kept thinking about home. I am so glad for her!"

Joan squeezed her arm. "For you and me too. Because we're so glad and thankful, we'll put up with the stranger dropped among us, and help her if we can."

"Right! We will. But she is a little horror," Joy said cheerfully. "She has the most utterly futile mind of anyone I've ever known."

"And no ideals at all, poor kid," Joan said soberly, as they went up the terrace steps to the house.

CHAPTER TWENTY

RYKIE'S MYSTERIOUS LETTER

“Another letter for Rykie?” Jen cried, coming in from school. “But it’s not an air-mail this time.”

“Where’s it from? Give it to me!” and Rykie seized the letter.

“I couldn’t read the postmark, but it isn’t from America,” Joy remarked.

A wave of colour swept into Rykie’s face. “What luck!” and she rushed off upstairs, clutching her letter.

Joy raised her eyebrows. “From a boy-friend? Have you heard anything about him, Jen?”

“Not a word. She hasn’t told me about anybody. She couldn’t have—what you said, Joy! She’s only a school kid!”

“What’s that?” Joan came in. “Where’s Rykie?”

“Rushed up to her room, hugging her letter and very red in the face. She said, ‘What luck!’ when she saw the writing, and sprinted off. I say it’s from her boy-friend,” Joy suggested. “Jenny-Wren says she couldn’t have one, but I don’t feel too sure.”

Joan looked troubled. “Oh, I don’t think so! I agree with Jen. Rykie’s too young.”

“Not she; not her kind. We don’t know what friends she had in Scotland. She’ll have half a dozen boys by the time she’s sixteen, and she’ll play them off against one another.”

“Then she’ll end up with none at all,” Jen observed.

Next morning as she wheeled out her cycle, Jen had a private word with Joan. “Rykie hasn’t said anything about her letter. But I’m absolutely certain she spent her whole prep time writing a long answer to it.”

“Sure, Jenny-Wren? Then she’ll find herself in difficulties at school.”

“In a regular mess, I expect. She’ll have returned work; we’ll be late home, so don’t worry about us.”

“I thought she had a rehearsal?”

“So she has; I’d forgotten. My babes can’t have the hall to-night, so I’d decided to do prep at school instead of at home. Rykie won’t like it if she has to miss the play. The others won’t love her either.”

“Then she should do her work at the proper time.”

“I know, but I can’t make her stick to it, Joan dear. She scribbled reams, instead of doing her maths, and she took jolly good care I didn’t see the envelope. I tried to pull her up; I asked if she hadn’t better get on with her

work. But she snapped at me and told me to mind my own business. So I did. I don't care if she gets into fifty rows."

"You can't do any more. It's hard on you! Are you sure you don't mind?"

"I'm getting a lot out of it." Jen gave her a happy grin. "Living here with you—it's the dream of my life, even with Rykie thrown in. Don't worry about me! I'm all right."

Joan laughed. "Then I won't worry. Good luck to you to-day. Come home as soon as you can!"

Jen nodded and turned to Rykie. "Ready? Come on, then! Shall I post your letter for you as we go through the village?"

"No, thanks. I'll post it myself in town." Rykie shot a suspicious look at her companion.

Jen smiled and waved to the caretaker at the Abbey gate as they raced down the lane.

Rykie came to her at eleven o'clock, milk and biscuits in hand, her face black with disgust. "I've got to stay after school for both maths and French, and I'm in a ghastly funk about my history. What on earth shall I do about the rehearsal?"

"I'm terribly sorry," Jen said nobly. "But there's only one thing you can do; tell Muriel, or Miss Cameron."

"I told Miss Macey and Mademoiselle about the rehearsal!" Rykie wailed. "But they didn't seem to think it mattered. I said all I could."

"The others in the play will say the things you didn't happen to think of. You can't expect them to like it, can you?" Jen asked reasonably. "After this you'd better listen to me and do your prep before you write your important letters. Sorry! Was that catty? It's true, anyway. There's Muriel talking to Nesta. You'd better tell her at once."

Rykie hesitated, not liking the task. "You come and protect me."

"They won't eat you. They can do scenes with no Jaques in them. Oh, come on! I'll back you up. Speedwell's a dear; you ought to have found that out by now. Muriel! Hi, Muriel! Come on, idiot!"

Very shamefaced, Rykie made her confession. "I'll have to miss the rehearsal. I've two returned lessons. I'm sorry."

"Probably three. We shan't get home for supper," Jen said cheerfully. "You can do without her for once, can't you, Ex?"

The ex-Queen grinned. "What a hideous name to call me! Oh, we can do other scenes! Nesta, we'll probably put some work into you and Orlando. I hope you haven't returned lessons too?"

"Not yet," Nesta laughed. "And I'm hopeful about my French. I expect I'll be all right. I need a lot of practice with Orlando; I'll be glad to have a

good go at it.”

“All the same, Rykie, I do think you might remember the play and prepare your work decently,” Muriel said severely. “Don’t make a habit of it! You’re quite good as Jaques, but you need practice as much as anybody else. Why didn’t you do your prep last night?”

“I had an important letter to write,” Rykie said defiantly.

“You’d be more sensible if you left your letters till the week-end.”

“This letter couldn’t wait,” Rykie retorted. “All right, Muriel. I’ll try not to do it again.”

“I’d advise you to try hard, or Miss Cameron will be after you. She won’t let you off rehearsals often! I’ll tell her about to-night, but do buck up and pull yourself together and work properly!”

“I’ll try,” Rykie said again, and went gloomily to look at her neglected history notes.

“I say, Speedwell!” Jen hung back and then ran after Muriel. “I did my best, but she would do the letter. We don’t know what it’s all about, but I thought I’d warn you of one thing. She’s heard from Hollywood and her sister wants her there as soon as she can go. If Rykie had any cash she’d go at once and never think anything about you and the play. She hasn’t the money for her fare, but if her sister sends it, or if she can scrounge it anywhere, she’ll go.”

“And let us down, do you mean?” Muriel knit her brows.

“I’m certain sure she would. She wouldn’t wait two months, just for the play. Couldn’t you have an understudy?”

Muriel frowned. “Aileen knows the part, and she watches rehearsals quite often. I’ll give her a hint. But it would be a horribly mean thing for Rykie to do.”

“She’d do it. She’s like that. She’d say the play didn’t really matter. I thought I’d better tell you. It wasn’t sneaking, was it?” Jen asked anxiously. “Don’t pass it round! I don’t want to make them loathe her.”

“I’ll keep it to myself, except for Aileen. Thanks for the warning; somebody ought to know. I hope Rykie won’t get the chance,” Muriel said. “It would be hateful if she let us down.”

“Joan and Joy are furious at the very idea,” Jen assured her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A LIGHT IN THE ABBEY

“The boy-friend’s very attentive,” Joy said, mockery in her tone, as she handed a letter to Rykie three days later.

Rykie snatched it from her. “You love to tease, but you’re wrong. He’s not—oh, you know nothing about it!” And she ran up to her room.

“Boy-friend lives in London,” Joy remarked. “She’s frightfully worked up about him, whatever she says.”

“She doesn’t say much. I wish she’d tell us a little more,” Joan groaned.

Rykie offered no explanation when she came down to tea. She was flushed and seemed excited, but her talk was all of school and she went off to do her prep, without referring again to her letter.

“Did she work, Jen?” Joan asked at bedtime.

“I think so. Yes, I’m sure she did. She doesn’t want three returned lessons again! Nesta and Beetle sat on her heavily last time; she was mad, but she knows she can’t go on messing up rehearsals.”

Joan agreed. “She’ll pay more attention to the others in the play than to anything I could say. I’m glad she’s learnt a lesson.”

Rykie’s evening was not all given to work, however. During her preparation time she managed to scribble a letter, and she posted it on the way to school next morning. Much intrigued by this mystery, Jen nevertheless managed to restrain herself and to make no comment.

“I’d give pounds to know what it’s all about!” she confessed to Joan.

“I’d like to know more about this friend and what Rykie is up to,” Joan admitted.

“A millionaire, and she’s coaxing him to finance her career or to send her to Hollywood,” Joy suggested.

Joan looked troubled. “I wouldn’t like to think she was trying to borrow money.”

“Oh, don’t worry! Who would lend money to a kid of fourteen?”

“Nobody, if they knew what she was like,” Jen said. “But the mysterious unknown may not understand.”

“I’d soon enlighten him, if I knew how to find him,” Joy vowed.

“Rykie will take good care that you don’t,” Jen rejoined. “I believe she sleeps on his letters and wears them next her heart.”

“There’s no secret about this letter, anyway.” Joy waved an air-mail form before Rykie next day. “More news from Belle! Tell us her adventures!”

Rykie dropped into a chair to slit open and read the letter.

“No dashing upstairs with Belle’s news!” Joy grinned. “We’ll hear all about it in two secs.”

“There is news. Look at her face!” Joan murmured. “She’s positively radiant!”

Rykie’s eyes were ablaze with excitement. But she thrust the letter into her pocket, after a first hurried reading, and went towards the staircase.

“Good news?” Joy asked casually.

“Marvellous!” Rykie looked at the assembled family from the stair. “But Belle says I’m not to tell anybody yet. Sorry! It’s a complete and absolute thrill. But I can’t say anything till she gives me leave. She’ll write again soon. Will you give me another air-mail to write back to her, Joy?”

“Not unless you tell us a little more,” Joy teased.

“Then I’ll get one in town to-morrow,” Rykie retorted, and ran upstairs.

“I’ll give you one, Rykie,” Joan called after her.

“Thanks!” Rykie leaned over the gallery railing. “You’re a— a jewel, and Joy’s a pig!”

For some unexplained reason a wave of colour swept into her face. She rushed to her room and closed the door.

“Joy, you should not tease her,” Mrs. Shirley remonstrated.

“How very temperamental!” Joy shrugged her shoulders. “She’s made up of moods and secrets! It’s rude, to say the least of it.”

“She can’t help it this time. It’s Belle’s fault,” Joan said.

“I expect Belle’s getting engaged to a millionaire.” Jen swung her attaché-case thoughtfully. “If it isn’t quite fixed, of course she doesn’t want it talked about.”

“Or else she’s on the point of pulling off some simply marvellous contract,” Joy added.

Rykie did not satisfy their curiosity. She came down to tea, looking thrilled and joyful, but would give no explanation.

Joan handed her a letter form, and Jen was moved to protest. “You ought to pay for that! They’re sixpence each; it’s not like ordinary stamps! Joan will have to buy another. It’s mean!”

“I notice the meanness didn’t worry you when I was the victim,” Joy observed.

“You don’t matter; Joan does! And anyway, you can afford it better than she can.”

“Jen, don’t be an ass!” Joan said, laughing. “I can afford to give Rykie an occasional air-mail.”

“Yes, but it’s becoming a habit,” Joy commented. “I agree with the Wren. If Belle is going to need constant sixpences, Rykie must begin

providing them for herself.”

“There’s no need for that.” Joan closed the discussion by asking questions about school.

“Your correspondence, young Rykie!” Joy handed Rykie a picture postcard of St. Paul’s next day.

Rykie glanced at it and coloured.

“Most mysterious!” Joy mocked.

“It’s nothing to do with you!” Rykie flashed. “I know you’ve read it, but it didn’t tell you much.”

“Nobody could help reading it,” Joy retorted. “We had to look at the address. It might have been for me.”

The card bore the letters—“O.K.—A.”

“Now who is ‘A’?” Joy pondered. “As you say, it doesn’t tell us much. Belle is ‘B,’ but who is ‘A’?”

“Don’t you wish you knew?” and Rykie fled, to prepare for tea.

Then, all in a moment and unexpectedly, the questions were answered.

On Friday night Joan was roused from sleep by someone shaking her gently. She stared drowsily up at Jen.

“Joan, get up! Put on some clothes, and a coat. There’s something happening!” Jen hissed.

Joan sat up hurriedly. “Mother?”

“No—oh, no! It’s Rykie; she’s gone out. I heard a sound and I looked out, and she was crossing the lawn, all dressed. She’s gone to the Abbey.”

“The Abbey?” Joan gasped. She reached for her clothes and began to dress at express speed.

“I’m going after her, to see what she’s up to. I thought you’d like to come too. Don’t wake Joy! We don’t want her. I’m going to put something on; I’ll be back in two minutes,” and Jen vanished.

Wild thoughts whirled in Joan’s mind as she pulled on a warm skirt and jumper and twisted up her hair. She found strong shoes and a big coat, and took up her torch just as Jen, fully dressed, came to the door again.

“The Abbey keys,” Joan whispered.

“I bet she’s taken them,” Jen said, shivering with excitement as they stole noiselessly down the staircase. “But what on earth can she want in the Abbey at midnight? Oh, Joan, has she gone to meet ‘A’? Were those letters to arrange it?”

“They may have been.” Joan’s lips were closed tightly. “She couldn’t! Oh, she couldn’t!” she said to herself. “Jen doesn’t know how she asked Joy about the jewels. But Rykie wouldn’t do that! The keys are gone,” she said.

“Of course. She couldn’t get through the gate without them. I’m sure she’s gone to the Abbey. We’ll go after her, won’t we, Joan?”

“We must. *I* must. I wish you’d go back to bed.”

“Joan! You couldn’t be so mean! You wouldn’t know, but for me!” Jen cried in righteous wrath.

“Don’t shriek like that! Joy might wake. Come on, then! But I wish I’d been the one to discover this.”

“You couldn’t go alone! If Rykie really has gone to meet ‘A,’ they’d be two to one. They might attack you. I’m coming to stand by you.”

“Why should they attack me?” Joan was talking quietly to keep her worst fears at bay.

“Not Rykie, of course. But we don’t know who or what ‘A’ is, except that we’re sure it’s a he.”

Joan said nothing to this. They found the Abbey gate unlocked and crept through, looking about them cautiously.

Everything seemed as usual. The wide refectory windows towered above; the scent of wallflowers was all about them.

Suddenly Jen caught Joan’s arm. “A light! In the refectory! Look, Joan! Someone’s switched on a torch!”

Joan’s heart was like lead. The jewels of Lady Jehane were spread out in the glass case on the refectory table.

“Jen, I want you to go back to the house. Please, Jen!”

“I couldn’t,” Jen said firmly. “Not even to please you, Joan dear. I’m going to see this through with you.”

“Then come along,” and Joan, very apprehensive, led the way by the tresaunt to the garth and so to the refectory stair.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

RYKIE'S FAULT

"You shan't!" A sharp cry of protest rang out as Joan and Jen crept up the old steps. "Only one, one little one; oh, Angus, *no!*"

Like a flash Joan was at the door, Jen at her heels.

"I'll bag the lot. We'll all be in clover all our lives. They're worth a fortune." It was a man's voice.

"You shan't!" Rykie cried again. "I'll fetch somebody—oh, Joan, stop him!" she shrieked.

A tall fair lad, lanky and thin, bent over the display case of jewels. He straightened, saw only two girls, and laughed and flung open the case.

"Rykie, who is this?" Joan demanded.

Before the eager boy could touch the jewels there was a yell and a wild fury launched herself upon him. He was stooping over the case; the sudden onslaught threw him off his balance and he fell. Jen was no lightweight, and though he struggled, she sat on him heavily. He grappled with her and would have flung her aside, but both Rykie and Joan were on him.

Joan pinned down his arms firmly, while Rykie, shaking with sobs, held his feet and stopped his kicking.

"You shouldn't have tried to take them all," she gasped.

"You beast! You were going to steal Lady Jehane's jewels!" Jen raged. "Shall I phone for the police, Joan?"

"Not yet. We'll see about that presently. It's no use," as the lad struggled again. "We're three to one. You'd better be quiet. If you go on fighting, or if you hurt any of us, I shall lock you in and send for the police. You couldn't get out of this place. If you keep quiet I'll think it over."

The boy, or man, lay suddenly still, his eyes fixed on her watchfully.

"We have the phone in the Abbey," Joan said calmly. "It doesn't mean going all the way to the house. If you want me to call the police, go on struggling; if you keep still till I understand, I'll see if I can find any excuse for you. Rykie, you must have brought him here. Who is he?"

Rykie quivered. "It's Angus."

"Yes? And who is Angus?"

A storm of sobbing shook Rykie. "My brother."

"Your *brother?*" Joan and Jen shouted together.

"Didn't know you had one," Jen exclaimed.

“We didn’t tell you. He was away—on a ship. We knew you wouldn’t do anything for him; you helped me because I was a girl. Then I had a letter saying he was back and on leave in London.”

“Yes?” Joan said quietly. “But Mother didn’t know you had a brother, I’m sure.”

“She isn’t his aunt; our mother wasn’t his mother. He’s older than Belle—three years older.”

“Oh, I see; a half-brother. Then he’s no relation of mine,” Joan said grimly.

“What a mercy!” Jen ejaculated. “He would be a jolly cousin for you, wouldn’t he?”

“Tell us the rest of the story, Rykie.” Joan’s tone was merciless. “You asked him to come here, by night and in secret?”

Rykie broke into passionate weeping. “I thought you could spare one little stone—just one; but you wouldn’t give me even one. I want to go to Belle so frightfully badly, and you won’t help.”

Jen stared at her, blue eyes wide with horror. “You let him in and brought him here, so that he could steal Jehane’s jewels? You utter little pig!”

“I didn’t want you to know,” Joan observed. “I did my best to send you back to the house. I wouldn’t have told you.”

“Oh, but I had to be here! I knocked him down and sat on him!” Jen’s hands were firmly on Angus’s arms, as she helped Joan to hold him still. “You needed me; you know you did.”

“And then, when he saw the jewels, he said—he said——” Rykie sobbed.

“Said he’d bag the lot. And I bagged him instead,” Jen said with gusto.

Rykie lifted tear-drenched eyes to Joan’s face. “I couldn’t let him take them all. I wouldn’t have helped you if he hadn’t said that. But he’d have taken the lot, and I couldn’t have stopped him. I never meant that. It was really stealing; I thought just one little one wouldn’t matter. You might never have missed it.”

“Oh, yes, we should!” Jen said bitterly. “We know exactly how many stones there are of each colour. Just suppose we’d looked and found only five rubies instead of six! Did you really think Joan wouldn’t know?”

“I suppose Angus was to take one stone and sell it in London and share the money with you?” Joan asked quietly.

“That’s what I meant,” Rykie whispered. “But he wasn’t satisfied with one when he saw them.”

“You were playing with fire,” Joan commented. “You might have guessed what would happen. And to take one was just as much stealing as to

take them all.”

“It didn’t seem like that. It didn’t seem really bad till—till he said he was going to take them all.” Rykie quivered again.

Joan looked at her. It was evident that she had had a real shock and that the discovery of her brother’s intentions had frightened her badly.

“Let him get up, Jen,” she said, and stepped aside. “Listen, you!” as Angus sat up gloomily, rubbing his bruised arms, for Jen’s grip had not been gentle. “Get out of this as quickly as you can, and see that you never come back. You can’t get in without the keys, and I shall see that they are kept out of reach.”

Rykie looked up, her face scarlet. “I suppose you think I stole them?”

“I’ll say you did!” Jen exploded. “You took them without leave; that’s stealing. Joan’s keys! Oh, how I loathe you!”

“Hush, Jen!” Joan said quietly. “We’ll deal with Rykie later.”

“But you aren’t going to let him go? He’s a burglar!”

“Only attempted burglary, so far,” Joan reminded her.

“He’ll go and do it somewhere else!”

“Then someone else can prosecute him. Think, Jen! How could I hand him over to the police? It would upset Mother fearfully.”

“He deserves to go to prison,” Jen protested. “So does she, for that matter. And he’s no relation to Auntie Shirley!”

“There’s a family connection. Mother would be heartbroken. We couldn’t have a police-court case without bringing Rykie into it,” Joan said gravely. “We can’t do it, you know. And he hasn’t stolen anything.”

“He tried jolly hard.” Jen looked dissatisfied. “I’m sure Joy wouldn’t want you to let him go.”

“Mother would agree, and that’s what matters most.”

“I wish I’d jumped on him much harder! I’m going to count those jewels!” and Jen sprang to the table and ran her eyes hastily over the stones in the case.

Rykie watched her indignantly. “He never touched them. You can’t call in the police.”

“Oh, yes, we could!” Joan assured her. “My evidence and Jen’s would be quite enough to get him into serious trouble. If we hear any more from him it will all come out, and we shall have to explain who opened the Abbey gate and let him in. Everyone knows there’s no way into the Abbey except through locked gates; this was obviously an inside job, with an accomplice in the house who had the keys. So you had better keep very quiet, or you’ll be in trouble too.”

Rykie had grown white. These possibilities had had no place in her crude plans. “Well, then, let him go. He won’t come here again,” she said

desperately.

“He’d better not! If he does, I hope I’ll be here to jump on him some more!” Jen vowed.

Joan looked at Angus. “You may be twenty-one, as Rykie says, but you look more like seventeen and you behave like eleven years old. I can quite well prosecute you for attempted burglary, if I have any more trouble with you. Go right away, now, at once, before I change my mind. Rykie, show him the way.”

“He’d better go by the gate-house,” Jen said unhappily. “We don’t want him wandering round the garden all night. I suppose he came in by the garden.”

“Yes, that will be better. I’ll unlock the Abbey gate. Lead the way, Rykie!”

“Don’t leave them to follow us. They’d grab those jewels,” Jen hinted.

Joan looked at Rykie. “Go on!”

“Oh, come away out of this! I wish I hadn’t brought you here!” Rykie exclaimed, and led the way down the steps to the garth.

“That’s a good thing!” Jen muttered. “I’ll lock the door, Joan. You keep an eye on them.”

In silence Angus was conducted to the gate by which tourists entered the Abbey. Joan unlocked it, and escorted by the three girls, he went through the gate-house to the lane.

“The village is down that way,” Joan said briefly.

“Where is he going to sleep?” Rykie demanded.

“I haven’t the slightest idea; under a hedge, I dare say.”

“We don’t care a scrap,” Jen informed her. “He isn’t going to sleep in the Abbey. That’s all we know.”

“It’s a fine night. It won’t hurt him to spend it walking the roads.” Joan had no tenderness for Angus. “Off you go!” she said. “It’s no use hanging about here. Rykie’s going to bed.”

Angus shrugged his shoulders and strode away.

But at the gate he turned. “I’m sorry,” he jerked. “It was because there were such a lot. I never meant to take more than one, but when I saw so many I lost my head. I thought I could help the girls. Belle may not get on, and this kid ought to be with her. I knew those stones would see us all through.”

He had a pleasant voice, rather surprisingly low and musical, and with the Scottish accent which was lacking in Rykie.

“Go away, and don’t make excuses!” Jen cried.

Angus shrugged again and obeyed. He went out to the lane and turned towards the village.

“It’s more than he deserves,” Joan remarked. “But I’m thinking about Mother. Now—oh, here’s Ann! I was afraid she’d hear us.”

The caretaker, Mrs. Watson, came from her rooms in the wall. “Miss Joan?” she asked anxiously. “Is anything wrong?”

“Wrong!” Jen exploded. “Only a burglar after Lady Jehane’s jewels!”

“It’s all right now, Ann.” Joan checked Mrs. Watson’s cry of dismay. “It was just a silly boy. He won’t come back. I’ll tell you more about it tomorrow. These girls must get to bed.”

Mrs. Watson’s eyes looked wonderingly at Jen and Rykie. “I never heard nothing,” she faltered.

“It’s not your fault. There was nothing you could hear, till I opened the big gate,” Joan said quickly, to comfort her.

“Be the stones safe now, Miss Joan?”

“Oh, yes! We’ve locked the door again. Don’t worry, Ann! Go back to bed, there’s a dear. We’re all very tired.” Joan drove the schoolgirls before her to the garth.

“But how was the door unlocked? How did he get in?” Mrs. Watson wanted to know.

“That’s the question. How did he?” Joan said grimly. “Go after her, Jen!” as Rykie fled. “Take her to bed. Ann dear, I can’t talk to-night. I’ll tell you more in the morning. Everything is locked up and safe; you’ve nothing to worry about. He can’t get in again, and there was nobody with him. So be a dear and let me go to bed too. I’m tired out with all the fuss.”

She left the caretaker looking very dissatisfied, and followed the girls to the house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

JEN THE COMFORTER

Jen was waiting at the door. "Rykie's gone to bed. Oh, Joan, dear, isn't she a little horror?"

"It's the only word for her." Joan dropped into a big chair in the entrance hall, suddenly conscious of complete exhaustion. "Go to bed, Jenny-Wren. I'll come in a minute or two."

Jen looked at her anxiously. Then she crept away, but not to bed.

Joan lay back in her chair, her eyes closed, the scenes of the night dancing before her. This must stop, she knew, if she was to sleep, but she could not forget. Rykie—Angus—Mrs. Watson. What to do about it all?

"I'd better lie down, but I can't possibly sleep," she said to herself. Then she sat up suddenly. "What was that? I heard something. Oh, not any more to-night, surely!"

A light came from a back passage. Joan went hurriedly to investigate and found the big kitchen lit up and Jen busy at the stove.

"Jen, what are you doing?" she demanded from the doorway.

Jen looked up. "Did you hear? I tried to be quiet. Only making a cup of tea for you, Joan, dear. You looked so tired. The kettle's almost boiling. There! You shall have it in a moment. You want it, don't you?"

Joan sank into Cook's arm-chair. "You angel! How did you know I was dying for a cup of tea?"

Jen closed the door. "We don't want Joy or Aunty Shirley to hear. I was going to bring it to you, but we'll have it here; it will be safer. There! Doesn't that look comforting?"

"Very comforting!" Joan's laugh almost broke into a sob. "Jen, you dear! It's just what I was needing, but I wouldn't have made it for myself."

"That's what I thought. I could do with some too," Jen admitted.

She crept to the dining-room for the silver biscuit-box, and brought a cake from the larder. "We shan't do so badly. I'll pour out your tea; I know just how you like it."

"It's good of you, Jenny-Wren. You enjoy mothering people, don't you? Perhaps I shall be able to sleep after this." Joan took her cup gratefully.

Jen glanced at her. "I know how you're feeling; all churned up inside. I'm just the same. I boil over if I think about that awful kid, and yet I suppose we've got to keep her here. Or will you send her away?"

“You’ve put your finger on the difficult spot; one of them,” Joan said wearily. “Angus is another. The business isn’t finished, although we’ve got rid of him for to-night.”

Jen looked at her thoughtfully over the teapot. “It would be finished, for most people. But for you—no, you’ll want to do something about it. I wasn’t thinking of him. But I do feel it’s difficult about Rykie. I don’t want ever to speak to her again, but I suppose I’ll have to, if she stays here.”

“We won’t talk about it to-night. There’s a lot to be said and planned, but not at one o’clock in the morning. Rykie ought to have some tea and biscuits,” and Joan sat up. “I thought she looked quite ill; I’m sure she had a horrible shock when she found what Angus really meant to do. She’ll cry herself into a fever. Pour out a cup and I’ll take it up to her,” and she put biscuits and a slice of cake on a plate.

Jen silently found a tray. Then she asked, her tone subdued, “Would you like me to take it up?”

Joan shot a look at her. “Would you? I wish you would.”

Jen swallowed hard. “All right, I will—to please you and because I want you to sit still and rest. Perhaps I’d better speak to her again; the last thing I said was that I loathed her and all her family.”

“I don’t blame you. I know how you feel.” Joan lay back in her chair, looking very weary. “But it’s no use; we have to get over that sort of thing. Do take up the tray, Jen dear, and say something kind if you can. If you can’t, I’d better go myself. The kid’s in trouble; she’s had a bad shock and she’s all alone with us.”

“And she knows we don’t love her a scrap,” Jen assented. “She must feel rather stranded. I’ll try, Joan. If I can be nice to her I will.”

“Don’t fall over the Curate!” Joan warned her, with a thought for an early morning adventure of the year before.

Jen chuckled. “Here he is; he would be! You’d better grab him and keep him out of my way.”

Joan caught the slim black cat and gave him milk in a saucer. “You’re a lucky boy, to come in for a meal at this time of night!”

Jen came back presently, looking grave. “I’m glad you thought of it, and I’m glad I went. She hadn’t undressed; she was lying on the bed, crying quarts. I hate to see anybody cry like that.”

“Could you comfort her?” Joan knew very well that Jen’s motherly heart had been touched.

“I tried. I told her not to be an ass and that it would be all right and you were always kind. I said you’d understand, and we’d see about things in the morning. And I said I didn’t loathe her quite so much, if she was sorry, but I still loathe Angus rather a lot. The trouble is, she wants Belle.”

“Someone of her own,” Joan agreed. “She has never felt she really belongs here. Thank you for going to her, Jen dear. Did you see her into bed?”

“I thought I’d better. She’s having the tea and eats. She’s frightfully tired. I think she’ll go to sleep.”

“The food will help her. Thank you, Jenny-Wren. Take some more tea yourself. We won’t talk any more till the morning.”

“I don’t know about that,” said a voice from the doorway. “What’s the meaning of this?” and Joy, in her green dressing-gown and with long red plaits hanging on her shoulders, stalked into the kitchen.

“Oh—Joy!” Joan wailed. “I hoped you wouldn’t wake!”

“Must be my fault,” Jen groaned. “I did try to be quiet. But perhaps Joy heard me in Rykie’s room.”

“I did,” Joy agreed. “And I heard the tinkle of a cup on a tray. Is the kid ill? But why are you and Joan dressed? Yes, thank you, Miss Robins. Since you’ve offered it so generously, I will have a cup of tea and some of that cake.”

Joan went quietly to the door and closed it. “We mustn’t wake Mother. I’m sorry we disturbed you.”

Jen peered into the pot and grinned. “I don’t think there is any more tea. I didn’t make enough for such a big family. Shall I make some more?”

“Put some water in,” Joan advised. “It may not be very good tea, but Joy doesn’t deserve the best. She ought to be in bed.”

“I like that! What about you and Jen? All dressed up to go out—though I can’t say I admire the way you’ve done your hair, Miss Shirley!”

Joan pulled out the pins and let the long plaits fall on the shoulders of her brown jumper. “I bundled it up anyhow, when Jen called me. I must have looked a sight.”

“You did,” Joy said frankly, perching herself on the table. “Thanks, Mrs. Wren; it’s quite good tea. Now some cake; thank you. So it’s Jen’s party, is it? Do you mean to say she woke you and brought you down to the kitchen to have tea and biscuits, at one a.m., and that you both dressed up in skirts and jumpers and winter coats? I simply don’t believe it! What have you been up to? You’ve been out; I’m sure of it. Why didn’t you call me? I don’t like being left out of any fun that’s going.”

“Fun!” Joan said sombrely, the scene in the refectory rising before her eyes.

“We didn’t want you,” Jen said promptly. “There were quite enough of us racing about the Abbey without you there, getting excited and making things worse.”

“I getting excited—or should it be ‘me’? Well, I like that!” Joy said indignantly again. “Who lets out wild yells when anything happens, so that she’s heard miles away? You’ve been in the Abbey, have you? I might have guessed; it’s where you and Joan would go, at any hour of the day or night! But why, on this particular occasion? How does the Rykie child come into it? I shouldn’t have thought you’d want *her*. And how dare you have a party in the Abbey at midnight and not invite me? I don’t mind telling you I feel very hurt about it.” And she certainly looked it, as she gazed at them with indignant, wide brown eyes.

Joan and Jen looked at one another.

“Couldn’t you wait till the morning?” Jen groaned. “Joan’s just about done in. I made the tea because she looked so ghastly. She can’t go over it all again to-night. She’ll faint, or be sick, or cry, or something, if she has to talk any more just now.”

Joy gave her cousin a sharp look. “She does seem rather off colour. But you’ve made me desperately curious. What *on earth* has happened to upset old Joan so much? She can generally cope with anything without collapsing.”

“Don’t be an idiot, Joy! I’m not going to collapse,” Joan said. “But I’m more than ready for bed.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but I simply couldn’t bear to go to bed until I know all about this,” Joy said inexorably.

“May I tell her, Joan?” Jen pleaded. “You can pull me up, if I say too much. That wouldn’t be as bad for you as having to do the talking yourself, would it?”

“I didn’t want to think any more about it to-night.” There was a sudden break in Joan’s brave voice. “We’ve had a horrid shock, Joy. I think I’m just beginning to feel it. We had to keep going while—well, you’ll have to know, I suppose. Could you tell her, Jen? I’ll be glad if you will.”

“You were splendid while it was happening,” Jen cried. “No one could have guessed you were a scrap upset! But that makes it all the worse for you now, of course.”

“I shall wring your little neck in a moment, Jenny-Wren,” Joy said gently.

“It’s a different little neck, somebody else’s, that you’ll want to wring presently,” Jen assured her. “All right, I’ll tell you. Don’t touch me! Or you won’t hear a word.”

Joy went back to her seat on the table. “Fire away, then, and be quick about it,” she commanded.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR TELLING JOY

“Something woke me.” Jen gazed at Joy and spoke rapidly. “I thought Rykie was moving about, so I slipped into her room; she might have been feeling ill. She wasn’t there, and she hadn’t been to bed. I heard the garden door, so I looked out, and there she was, crossing the lawn to the Abbey gate. So I woke Joan, and we dressed and went after her.”

“You might have come for me!”

“We were afraid of waking Aunty Shirley. You talk such a lot,” Jen said simply.

Joy grinned. “Go on! But I can’t quite forgive you.”

“We saw a light in the refectory, so we rushed up, and there she was
_____”

“After Jehane’s jewels?” Joy’s eyes were wide. “You don’t mean to say she really tried to pinch them?”

“How did you know?” Jen stared at her. “What made you think she would?”

“We knew she was keen on them. She asked us to give her one little one,” Joan said. “We didn’t tell you. We knew it would make you wild, and it’s been hard enough for you to be friends with her.”

Jen thought over this idea. “It wouldn’t have made it any easier,” she acknowledged. “Thank you, Joan. That was kind.”

Joy leaned forward and poked her. “Go on with the yarn! Did you throw yourself on Rykie and throttle her?”

“I jumped on somebody else.” Jen’s eyes gleamed. “She had a man with her—a boy, if you like, but he’s grown up—and he was staring at the stones and saying he’d bag the lot. Rykie had meant him to take just one little one, and he was to sell it and send her share; but when he saw how many there were he couldn’t resist them. He said he’d take the lot and they’d all be in clover for ever.”

Joy stared at her and then at Joan. “Gosh! What a mercy you were there! Who was he? How did she get hold of him? Did Jen really jump on him?”

“You’re very dense, or half asleep,” Jen retorted. “He was ‘A,’ of course, and those letters were planning it.”

“Oh! Yes, I see now. He’d come from London to help her to get hold of one stone, and then he was tempted by the sight of them into a full-scale

burglary. But who was he? I suppose you saved the jewels? Where is he now?"

"Joan sent him away. She said she couldn't prosecute him, for Aunt Shirley's sake."

"For Rykie's sake, too," Joan remarked. "Her share would have had to come out. It would have been horrible, Joy. Mother would have felt it dreadfully."

"We took him to the gate and sent him off, to sleep under a hedge or walk back to London. I hated doing it, but I suppose Joan was right." Jen still sounded doubtful.

"It was the only thing to do," Joan said wearily.

"I wouldn't have done it! I wouldn't have allowed it, if I'd been there!" Joy said wrathfully. "You caught a thief red-handed and you just tamely let him go? I've often thought you were soft, Joan. Now I know it!"

"She's not soft!" Jen cried. "It's a good thing we didn't wake you! We knew you'd make a fuss. Joan's never been soft about anything! I suppose you'd have sent for the police on the spot?"

"Of course. It would have been the right thing to do."

"It wouldn't! Joan said it wouldn't, and she knows."

"Oh, Jenny-Wren!" Joan began to laugh. "You know it's exactly what you wanted to do! Yes, Joy? You'd have rung up the police. And then?"

"I'd have given him in charge as a burglar."

"He hadn't taken anything. We'd have had to prove he meant to do it. Yes? And then?"

"He'd have gone to prison, and serve him jolly well right."

"That would have been pleasant for us all! And what about Mother? Her feelings wouldn't have mattered, I suppose? He's not related to us, but he's certainly connected. And we'd have had to say that Rykie let him in."

"I'd have told the police. It would have given her a jolly good fright; it wouldn't hurt her! How do you mean, 'connected'?" Joy frowned. "I don't want to have any connection with him!"

"You haven't, but Joan has," Jen observed. "We didn't tell you that bit. Rykie says he's her brother."

"*What?*" Joy gasped, and sat staring at them. "Oh, that's rot! She can't have been concealing a brother all this time!"

"She can have half a dozen brothers, so far as I can see," Jen rejoined. "We don't know much about her family or her past life."

"That's true. She's been rather an oyster." Joy turned to Joan. "Do you believe he's your cousin?"

"He isn't," Joan said placidly. "He's Rykie's half-brother. Her father, who married Aunt Isabel, had been married before and had a baby boy. I

don't know if Mother knew. She didn't like Uncle Frederick and she never went to their house. Or she may have forgotten."

"It complicates things." Joy frowned again. "His name's the same as Rykie's, of course."

"Angus Reekie." Jen agreed.

"Aunty wouldn't like a court case," Joy admitted. "But I hate to think you let him slink away. Tell me the rest! Did Jen really jump on him?"

"With a roar of fury," Joan assented, with a laugh. "She knocked him down—he wasn't expecting a hefty person to launch herself on his back! She sat on him, and I went to help. Rather to our surprise Rykie helped too, and held him so that he couldn't kick. The three of us were too much for him."

"It was jolly mean of you to keep it to yourselves! I'd have given him a few extra thumps!"

"We had to find out who he was and all about it," Joan explained. "Rykie told us; she was in an awful state, sobbing as if her heart was broken." She sat up. "You know, Joy and Jen, the kid hadn't meant it to be serious. She really thought we'd never miss one little stone. But when Angus said he was going to take the lot, she had a real fright. She shrieked to me to stop him. It gave her a horrible shock."

"Yes," Jen admitted. "Yes, Joan, it did. That was why she helped us to sit on him."

"I'm sorry for her," Joan said sombrely. "I'm quite sure she's feeling terrible now."

"Do her good. She needed something to bring her to her senses," Joy said callously. "To pinch one stone was just as much stealing as to take twenty-five!"

"Of course. But not to Rykie, Joy. It wouldn't seem as bad to her. She really felt we could spare one."

Joy gave an angry snort. "What do we do now?"

"Go back to bed," Joan said promptly. "And as fast as possible. Put the cups in the sink, Jen; I'll explain to Cook in the morning. Go straight to bed, and sleep as long as you can. We'll have breakfast at ten o'clock, if necessary. I shall have to be up to look after Mother, but you and Rykie needn't hurry. Don't talk any more to-night, either of you."

She was going into her room when Jen crept to her. "Joan, I'm sorry, but Rykie's still crying. Shall I go and tell her not to be an idiot?"

Joan smiled at her. "No; go to bed. I'll go to Rykie."

"That's much nicer for her, of course. But you're tired to death, Joan."

"I am, very nearly. I'll not stay long," Joan promised.

She closed Jen's door on her firmly and went into the next room and sat on the bed. "Rykie, you must go to sleep. Or at least you must be quiet."

Rykie caught her hand feverishly. "Joan, I never meant it! I only meant one little stone; I thought you could spare one. You've such a lot, and we need it so frightfully badly. But when Angus said—oh, Joan! I never meant that!"

"No, I don't believe you did," Joan said gently. "You shall tell me more about it in the morning."

"I'm sorry. I'm so dreadfully sorry, Joan!"

"Good!" To her own surprise Joan bent and kissed her. "You'll feel better now you've said so. I hope you'll go to sleep. Good night!"

"You're nice. You've always been kind," Rykie murmured.

"She'll sleep. She's worn out, poor silly infant," Joan said to herself, as she went to bed at last.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MORE ABOUT ANGUS

Sitting by her mother's bed, Joan told the story of the night's adventures as gently as she could.

Mrs. Shirley, shocked and alarmed, broke down and wept. "That poor child! Oh, that poor little girl!"

"That's how I feel," Joan agreed. "I'm glad we think alike, Mother dear. I'm terribly sorry for her. It isn't easy to make Joy and Jen understand, but with you behind me I'll manage it."

"They are very young. They don't look at things as you do."

Joan laughed. "Oh, Mother! Joy's only a month younger than I am!"

"To me she seems still a child. Little Jen often has more sympathy and understanding than Joy."

"That's true. Even last night Jen was feeling sorry for Rykie. Did you know about this boy, Mother? He may be three years older than Belle, but he didn't seem like twenty-one, and I told him so."

"I had heard of him, but I had forgotten. I never visited Isabel; I did not care for her husband. I had forgotten there was a stepson," Mrs. Shirley admitted.

"Rykie must tell us more about him. I think they have been brought up together, as one family. I must find out if he had any excuse, or if he's just a plain, common thief. That would be horrible, wouldn't it?"

"What excuse could there be? It was plain, common theft," Mrs. Shirley said brokenly.

"There may be something behind it. I feel as if Rykie had some excuse—just a little. She does want money very badly, so that she can join her sister. She had seen the jewels and she knew they were valuable; and she asked us for one and we refused. Last night she said, or rather sobbed, 'I thought you could spare one little one.' And of course we could spare one quite well. They aren't any use to anybody lying in a glass case. It's only the idea of keeping all Jehane's treasures together that matters. To Rykie, wanting money so badly, they must seem wasted, kept in the refectory. It wouldn't matter in the least to tourists if there were five rubies instead of six! It would matter to me, and to Jen, and perhaps to Joy, but that's just our feeling for them. It seems as if maybe they ought to be used."

Mrs. Shirley looked at her. "You have been thinking all night, haven't you?"

“A good deal of the night,” Joan said cheerfully. “This afternoon I shall be an old lady and have a nap. But I must talk to the others first, and to Ann; she was terribly upset last night.”

When all the late breakfasts were over, Joan invited Rykie to come into the Abbey. “I want you to tell me some things. If tourists come, we’ll sprint back into the garden, but it’s early yet and we may not be disturbed.”

“May I come too?” Jen asked wistfully. “Or is it private?”

“Not private at all; I want you with Rykie. Coming, Joy?”

“Oh, rather! I want to know things too.”

“Yes,” Joan agreed, and led the way. She was secretly amused but a little perturbed by the attitude of the three girls to one another; this must be put right, or the household would be uncomfortable, to put it mildly. Jen was reserved and unusually silent, obviously suspicious towards the criminal of the night before, but determined to be polite and trying hard to be kind. Joy’s brown eyes had a mocking look which told Rykie that she knew the story, and she seemed always on the point of making some cutting speech. Her expression kept Rykie on tenterhooks of anxiety all through breakfast-time.

Rykie herself was on the defensive, waiting for reproaches which did not come. She looked uneasy and restless, and she kept close to Joan, as to her only champion.

“Don’t let them rag me!” she whispered, as they went down the shrubby path.

“They won’t do it,” Joan promised. “Bring cushions, Jen; we’ll sit on the cloister steps.”

“I had a talk with Ann Watson,” she said to Joy, as they settled down. “She’s going to take the jewels to her room every night and sleep with them under her bed.”

Joy gave a shout. “Oh, tell her not to bother! Nobody can get in without the keys.” She looked pointedly at Rykie.

Rykie flushed and her eyes fell. “I won’t do it again.”

“You won’t get the chance,” Joan assured her. “I shall sleep with the keys under my pillow. That’s far more useful than Ann’s idea. She couldn’t foil an intruder, if one came after the treasures! But as no one can get in she really needn’t be frightened.”

“I know how she feels.” Jen carefully avoided looking at Rykie. “She was horribly upset last night. I hope she will sleep on the stones. I’ll feel better about them if she does.”

“It sounds knobbly,” Joy remarked.

“If I were Mrs. Watson, I couldn’t sleep, feeling somebody might be burgling the refectory; not after last night,” Jen insisted.

“But you know no one can get in, Jenny-Wren,” Joan protested. “Do you think we’d have let you sleep alone in the little room, if anyone could come in to frighten you?”

Jen’s eyes gleamed. “Someone did!”

“Yes, your stowaway. But that was an inside job too; Susie Spindle let him in. You know the Abbey’s safe from outsiders.”

“All the same, I think Mrs. Watson’s very sensible.”

“I shan’t object, if it makes her feel happier. Rykie, tell us about Angus!” Joan began. “I suppose your mother brought him up along with you two girls?”

“Yes, but—but she was ill for a long time, and we did what we liked,” Rykie muttered, her eyes downcast. “And Father was away a lot, and anyway, he never interfered.”

The elder girls looked at one another.

“That explains a good deal. It’s what I expected,” Joan said, gravely gentle.

“What form does the family genius take in Angus?” Joy demanded. “For Belle, films; for you, acting. Does he do anything? Or does he just drift?”

“Music!” Rykie snapped at her. “You ought to be nice to him. You’re so keen yourself.”

“Music!” The rest warmed into interest at once. “What does he do? Play? Sing? Compose?” Joy asked.

“He didn’t look like a musician,” Jen protested.

“It’s been horribly hard on Angus!” Rykie broke into an excited rush of explanation. “Father was all against it; he wanted Angus to learn his business. He thought we were mad, because we were keen on theatres, but he felt worse about Angus; he was quite sure he was crazy. He said it might be all right for Belle to act and show herself off, because she really is lovely; he was proud of her. And he said I might not be too bad when I was older. But for Angus to want to make his living by playing the violin seemed to Father the maddest thing.”

“A violinist!” Joy managed to put in a word, as Rykie paused for breath. “Is he any good?”

“He’s awfully good! He can get any amount of jobs, playing in trios and orchestras, or with dance bands or in theatres. They’re always glad to get him; he’s a splendid leader. He’s been doing it for years. He can keep himself, though he couldn’t look after us too. But it isn’t good enough. He wants to play in big concerts; he hates the small orchestras, and they don’t pay much. He wants to have lessons, really good ones, and if he did, he’d be brilliant. He’s never had a chance——”

“Wait a moment!” Joan checked her. “You’re going too fast. All this has rather stunned us. How did Angus learn to play, if your father was so much against it?”

“And who gave him the fiddle?” Joy asked.

“But I thought you said last night that he’d been on a ship?” Jen cried.

“To get some money, so that he could have more lessons.” Rykie flung the words at her. “You can’t spend much at sea; he thought he’d save his pay and have lessons when he came back. It’s easy to find a job at sea, if you live in Glasgow; we had heaps of friends who had to do with ships. But Angus didn’t like it; it was a rough life and he hated it, and he hadn’t any chance to practise. The men loved his fiddle and made him play to them, but he hadn’t much time and it wasn’t the sort of music he likes. They only wanted the tripiest of tripe.”

“That’s a good expression; I must adopt it,” Joy said. “They would want utter tripe, of course. And Angus has a soul above tripe?”

“He likes good stuff,” Rykie said shortly.

“How did he learn to play?” Joan asked.

“Oh, that was all right! Father let him have a fiddle and learn to play; he liked to listen when Angus played songs, or reels and strathspeys. He often played at home, for people to dance, and Father didn’t mind that; he was rather proud of him. But when it came to making his living by fiddling, that was different. Father raged and ordered him to go into an office. Angus said he wouldn’t touch business with the end of the poker and it would be sheer waste of time for him. So Father turned him out and told him to go and make money with his fiddle, if he could.”

“A family row,” Joy commented. “I feel for Angus.”

“And could he? Did he get on well?” Jen asked breathlessly.

“He made enough to live on, but not enough for the good lessons he wanted. It was terribly hard on him,” Rykie urged again. “He knew he could be really good, and yet he had to spend his time playing every night and never getting near what he really wanted. He hated the stuff he had to play, but nobody would help him to get on. You can’t understand,” and she glared at Joy. “You’ve always had the lessons you needed, and you’ve been encouraged to go in for music and been helped all the way along. Nobody has helped Angus, and he’s felt as if everyone was keeping him down.”

Joy whistled and looked at Joan, and reddened. No one knew better than she how difficult she had been during the years of frustration, when the lessons she craved for were out of the question and the music that was in her was stifled and trying to push its way out. They had been hard years for her, and quite as hard for Joan and Mrs. Shirley.

“Joy knows more about it than you think, Rykie,” Joan said soberly. “We haven’t lived here long, you know. Before that we had very little, and music lessons weren’t possible. She can sympathise with Angus, if anyone can.”

“But I didn’t resort to theft to pay for my lessons,” Joy said dryly.

Rykie grew scarlet. “That was my fault. I thought he could help us both, and you have so many jewels, and they’re no good to anybody lying there. It isn’t as if you’d had them made up into brooches and things, so that you could wear them. They’re just being wasted.”

“And when Angus saw them he wanted to bag the lot,” Jen remarked.

Rykie coloured again. “It meant everything to us. You can’t understand. When he saw so many lovely stones, it—he——”

“It was too much for him. He was tempted,” Joan said quietly. “I think we do understand. Angus is feeling as if everything is against him and no one will give him any help. His principles are not strong; he’s weak, and he hasn’t had the firm hand over him that might have saved him. He’s artistic and disappointed, and he lost his head when he saw the jewels. Is that right?”

“I suppose so,” Rykie said sulkily. “But it was me, not Angus.”

“It was your idea,” Joan assented. “Do you think now that it was a good one?”

Rykie’s eyes fell. “N-no. Not very good,” she mumbled.

The bell clanged at the Abbey gate, and the girls sprang to their feet. Jen snatched up the cushions and hurled them into the small room which opened off the cloisters.

“Come on, everybody!” and Joan led a wild race to the tresaunt and back to the garden of the Hall.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ONE BIG RUBY

“We won’t talk any more at present,” Joan said. “Rykie has told us what we need to know. I’m sorry for Angus, and I feel we did the right thing when we sent him away last night, but I hope very much he’ll never do anything of this kind again.”

Rykie caught her hand in a fierce grasp. “Thank you for letting him go! I’d hate to have him in a real mess.”

“You wouldn’t like to know he was in prison,” Joy remarked. “I’m sorry for him too. I know that frustrated, shut-in feeling; it’s rather awful. But all the same, if Angus wants to do anything worth while in music he must be honest. I know that much; sincerity matters enormously. If he isn’t sincere and honest he’ll never do well. So tell him to pull up and behave himself for the sake of his music, if for no other reason.”

“You can give him that message from a real musician, Rykie,” Joan said. “You’ll write to him about last night, of course. Tell him what Joy says; she knows. She’s going to write music some time, and then she’ll be famous.”

Joy reddened. “Oh, I don’t know! My stuff may not be really good. But I mean to try. I say, Rykie! I still don’t quite see why you’ve concealed Angus all this time! You might have told us of his existence!”

“But you—I mean Aunt Margaret and Joan—helped us because we were just two girls, left alone to shift for ourselves. We thought, if you knew we had a brother——” Rykie paused.

“We’d say Angus should look after you,” Joan said. “And Angus couldn’t do it. We understand that.”

“He’d gone away on the ship. There was no need to speak about him,” Rykie urged.

“I wish you’d been more honest about your family,” Joan remarked.

“She’s always been a bit of an oyster,” Joy agreed.

A maid came from the house. “Miss Jen is wanted on the telephone.”

“Gosh! I hope Father isn’t ill!” Jen rushed to take the call.

She came back in a moment looking relieved. “It was Jack. I’ll have to play this afternoon; there’s a match against that Risborough school. Kath woke up this morning with a streaming cold and a bad throat and she’s feverish; her mother won’t let her out of bed. Jack’s frantic; she really needs me. I promised to go, Joan. Did you want me for anything?”

"I want you to play for the school, so long as you can do it and still be my maid-of-honour." Joan smiled at her.

"Then I'll dig out my whites and see if my frock needs pressing. I may cycle to Risborough alone, I suppose? Rykie won't want to come; cricket bores her to tears."

"I'll run you over in the car." Joy had been listening. "I'll park her and climb up to the Cross and have a picnic while you're playing. Care to come, Joan?"

"I'd love it, but not to-day. I'm going to bed after lunch," Joan said promptly.

"Oh! I'm not feeling as bad as all that! I'll picnic on my own, then. I've a fancy to see the Cross again, and I want to think."

"A new tune?" Jen asked, as she turned to go indoors.

"No, something else. You'd better come with Jen," Joy said to Rykie. "There won't be anything for you to do here."

"Shall I go with you? I've seen that Cross from the road on the way to school."

"I bet you have. No, I don't want anyone with me, unless Joan had been able to come."

"The Wild Cat will walk by her wild lone," Joan laughed. "You go with Jen, Rykie, and clap when she takes all the wickets."

"I bowled their captain last year." Jen's eyes gleamed as she ran to find her cricket suit. "I'll put in a little practice this morning."

The car came back about seven. Jen was jubilant, and Rykie regarded her with new respect. Joy looked deeply thoughtful and had little to say; her lonely brooding by the white chalk Cross had evidently been full of interest.

There was no brooding about Jen. "I did it again!" she shouted joyfully to Joan. "I took four wickets and one was their captain's. She yelled with horror when she saw me; she can't stand up to my balls, and she knows it. We won by twenty-three, and Jack's gloomy because she can't have me all the time. And—oh, Joan! Honesty-Nesta told me to ask you if we could have a party here on Saturday night or if it would need to be at school."

"Ask Joy." Joan smiled at her. "Congrats on the wickets!"

"Sorry, Joy! I didn't mean to be rude. Will you let the Club come here? They love parties on your lawn!"

"It's better than at school. We will entertain the Club, if Queen Nesta will arrange for a fine evening. But tell them not to come if it's wet," Joy warned her. "We can't do much indoors. I wish we had a barn!"

Jen ran in to change and to tell Mrs. Shirley of her success, and Rykie turned to Joan.

“She was jolly good; Jen, I mean. They clapped her like anything. Why doesn’t she always play for them?”

“Because she’s such a keen country-dancer and she’s not supposed to do both. Her cricket’s very good, but her dancing is better; quite unusually fine,” Joan told her. “She bucks up any set she dances in. Coming to the Abbey, Joy?”

“Yes, I want to talk. Come and sit by my rose window!”

“I thought so.” Joan followed her and they left Rykie standing on the terrace.

“If there’s one place Rykie doesn’t care about to-day, it’s the Abbey,” Joan remarked, as they went round to the sacristy. “She won’t follow us here.”

“We don’t want her.” Joy settled herself on the broad ledge below the empty rose window. “I thought a lot up by the Cross, Joan.”

“I thought a good deal myself. What did your thinking come to?”

“Young Rykie is right. We’re wasting those jewels, and her precious Angus needs them. Just one of them might make his whole life different. We can’t be pigs and keep them all in a glass case.”

“I’m sure that’s right. Then——?”

“Sell one and use the cash to provide good lessons for the great Angus. But *not* to send Rykie to Hollywood.”

“We think alike,” Joan agreed. “Good lessons may be the making of Angus, but Hollywood would be ruin to Rykie. I’d come to the same point. We ought to sell one stone; I’m glad you don’t object.”

“I do! I object most strongly. It’s like having a tooth pulled out. But we must help that silly ass with his music. That’s a thing I don’t like; he is such an ass! It seems like rewarding him for trying to steal.”

“I know.” Joan agreed again. “I wouldn’t give him the money on any account. But we can probably arrange for the lessons through the lawyer-trustee; we’ll say we want to help Angus with his career. Last night must be buried and forgotten. If he gets the music he wants so much, he may be quite different. In a year or two he’ll be bitterly ashamed of last night.”

“You don’t think it would be better for him to go to jail and have time to think it over?” Joy’s serious pondering by the Cross had shown her many sides to their problem.

“No,” Joan said decisively. “No, I don’t. It would harden him and he might turn into a regular criminal. He isn’t that yet; he’s merely a frustrated, unhappy lad, who feels desperate enough to do anything. If he is helped I believe he’ll make good.”

“It’s only because of his music that I’ll agree to help him,” Joy said. “I know so well how he feels.”

“Yes, you can sympathise. And I can understand Rykie. You were so miserable, and we wanted so much to help you, but we couldn’t find any way to do it. We must help them, Joy! Come and choose which stone shall be sacrificed. Then we’ll tell Rykie and arrange for it to be sold. Your lawyer will do it for us.”

“Not an emerald!” Joy pleaded, as they hung over the case of jewels together. “They’re such a glorious colour!”

“Nor a sapphire,” Joan added. “I’m keenest on them.”

“A ruby,” Joy announced. “Just suppose we decided to use Jehane’s stones for jewellery some day, neither you nor I would want to wear rubies.”

“We might want to give them away. But we needn’t consider that. There are several lovely rubies; I’m sure they would sell well.”

Joy gloated over the jewels for a moment. Then she stood upright. “Let’s do the thing properly. That one, Joan!”

“It’s a big one; a very fine stone,” Joan began. “Are you sure you’re willing to part with it?”

“For Angus’s musical education. It ought to see him through; at least to a point where his teacher can tell if he’s going to be any good.”

“Then we’ll decide on that one. It’s a beautiful stone, almost the biggest there is.”

“We must keep the biggest one to show what Jehane could do in the way of jewels. She was a lucky girl,” Joy said. “But it’s a jolly fine stone.”

Joan unlocked the case and took out the big ruby. “I expect Jehane was very proud of it.”

“Warn Ann that you’ve taken it, or she’ll have forty fits,” Joy suggested.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN PLANS FOR ANGUS

“Jen and Rykie, come to my room,” Joan said that evening.

Puzzled and eager, they obeyed, Rykie anxious, Jen expectant and thrilled. Joy followed them and sat on the window-seat to listen.

Joan sat down beside her. “Look, girls!”

The ruby lay in her hand. Rykie stared at it and then raised incredulous eyes to Joan’s grave face.

“Joan!” Jen whispered. “It’s almost the biggest one! Oh, Joan, you couldn’t mean that?”

“You don’t need to be told what we mean,” Joan commented. “You know we have to do it. Rykie, we want to help Angus. We’re going to sell this stone and ask your guardian to arrange for the lessons he needs.”

A sob broke from Jen. “Oh, Joan! Lady Jehane’s ruby!”

“You couldn’t!” Rykie whispered. “You couldn’t be so kind! After last night——!”

Burning colour rushed into her face. Suddenly she was on her knees beside Joan, crying her heart out.

Joan raised her brows in surprise. “Oh, Rykie dear, there’s no need for that! We’re sorry for Angus and we want to help him. This is the only way to do it.” She patted Rykie’s shoulder gently.

“But after what we did!” Rykie sobbed. “You ought to hate us! Oh, I do feel bad! I feel awful! I’ll do anything in the world you want! You ought to have us put in prison, and—and you’re giving us one of the best stones you’ve got! Oh, why are you like that?”

“It’s almost the biggest ruby there is. I can tell you I wouldn’t do it,” Jen said gloomily. “Joy, they’re partly yours. Will you let Joan, Joy?”

“Joy suggested it,” Joan said quietly. “I had thought of it too. And Joy chose this big stone.”

Jen looked at Joy, wide-eyed. “I didn’t know you could be like that!”

“We won’t waste time discussing my character!” Joy retorted. “Rykie, I suppose you can get hold of Angus? He’ll still be at the same address? Then tell him to stay there till we’ve arranged for his lessons. He mustn’t go off to sea again.”

“The money will be for lessons,” Joan explained. “It won’t be given to Angus. We shall send it to your lawyer, who will find the teacher and make the arrangements. And the teacher must be someone of whom Joy approves;

she knows all those musical people by name, or she can find out about them. Angus will have really good teaching, and we shall expect reports on his progress and on his future prospects. But he must support himself; we aren't going to pay for him to loaf about and only practise when he feels like it. You said he could always find work."

"Oh, he can! He'll have lessons and practise during the day and play with bands or orchestras at night. If he feels he's getting somewhere he'll work terribly hard." Rykie looked up at Joan, her face tear-stained.

"We aren't going to pay for you to go to Hollywood," Joy remarked. "We know that was your idea, but it isn't ours."

"You were to blame for what happened last night," Joan reminded Rykie gravely. "I know you helped us to save the jewels from Angus, but it was your fault he was there. You must have known he was silly and weak; you might have guessed what would happen when he saw the jewels. We aren't giving you any of the money; we don't feel you are ready for Hollywood."

"Not by a very long way," Joy observed.

Rykie's head was bent again. "I care more about Angus. I'm terribly sorry for him. Please help him to get on! He won't be—what you said—weak and silly if he feels somebody cares and is going to help. He's felt he had to do it all alone, and he didn't know how to start. If you'll stand by him, he'll be different. Please help him! It doesn't matter about me."

"Oh, yes, it does! That's the reason we won't send you to America. If we didn't care about you, we'd pack you off at once."

Rykie looked at her. Then she hid her face again. "I don't see why you should care. You ought to loathe us all, after last night. You're not only letting us off, but you're going to help. If ever there's anything I can do to show you how I thank you, I'll do it and be glad."

"That's a promise," Joan said, gravely kind.

"Would you like me to give up being Jaques?" Rykie asked unsteadily. "I know you thought I ought not to have the part. I—I'll give it up, if it would please you."

Over her bent head Joan looked at Jen and then at Joy. Then she said, very gently, "Of course not, Rykie dear. Don't be silly! That would be letting down the play and the school, terribly badly. You couldn't give it up now. We want you to do us credit and be the best Jaques anyone can imagine. Go ahead and do your best, and never, never dream of letting anybody down as badly as that."

"Oh! I didn't think of it that way. I wanted to do something to show you—you know! You've been so awfully decent to Angus and me."

"Make good at school and be a success as Jaques, and don't say any more about Hollywood," Joan told her. "It wouldn't do for you at all until

Belle has a settled home and can look after you properly.”

“Oh!” Rykie coloured suddenly. “Oh, as to that!—but she told me not to say anything. I’ll go and write to Angus and tell him how terribly kind you are!” And she fled from the room.

“Belle going to get engaged?” Joy raised her brows.

“It sounds like it,” Joan agreed. “I hope Belle will be careful. She hasn’t had very long to get to know anyone out there.”

“It might be somebody she knew before,” Jen suggested. “Rykie doesn’t tell us much about Belle.”

“She does not! If Belle married, we’d have to let the kid go to her.”

“I, for one, wouldn’t break my heart if the whole family went off to Hollywood,” Joy remarked.

“Don’t you want to know if Angus makes good?” Joan asked.

“Well, yes, I’d like to hear what happens to him. I wonder if he has any special teacher he’s keen on?”

“I wonder what he’ll say when he hears about the big ruby.” Jen eyed the stone regretfully. “I do hate to think of Jehane’s jewels being broken into!”

“We all feel like that,” Joan agreed. “Joy says it feels like having a tooth pulled out. But we really seem to have no choice, Jenny-Wren. Joy, I was surprised by Angus’s voice; he stopped at the gate and said he was sorry.”

“Made excuses, you mean,” Jen growled.

“Perhaps. But he did say he was sorry. His voice was very pleasant; I shouldn’t wonder if he can sing. It’s easier to believe he has music in him when I remember his voice.”

“It wasn’t a scrap musical when he said he’d bag the lot!” Jen argued.

“He was excited and he lost his head, as he said to us. And he knew he was doing wrong; he felt guilty and uncomfortable. He sounded quite different when he said he was sorry.”

“I didn’t think he sounded a scrap nice, ever, any of the time,” Jen said coldly. “But I did notice his hands, when I was sitting on him,” she added. “They looked just right for playing a fiddle; long and thin, you know.”

“I’d like to hear him play some day,” Joy admitted. “Perhaps when he’s famous and plays in the Albert Hall, we could go to listen to him.”

“We certainly will, when that day comes,” Joan assured her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT REELS AND STRATHSPEYS

As Joan placed chairs and rugs round the side lawn on Saturday afternoon, ready for Nesta's party, she thought of Angus and the week's developments.

Joy had driven to town on Monday and had left the ruby with her lawyers, to be sold to the best advantage. The proceeds, slightly over a hundred pounds, had been handed to the "lawyer-trustee-guardian," with instructions that Angus should be told of the gift and asked what plans he wished made for his musical education. Now his reply was awaited with interest by everybody.

"I wonder what he'll do," Joan thought. "I know what I should want to do in his place, but it would be an ordeal and I don't know that Angus has the pluck to face ordeals.—Somebody coming up the avenue—not one of the party—carrying a violin! Gracious! I believe he's done it!"

Suddenly full of sympathy, she ran to meet the stranger. "How jolly brave of you to come!" she cried, noting his white strained face. "I'm sure it was difficult!"

"Yes." Angus Reekie put down his violin. "But I had to come, Miss Shirley."

He looked tired, and she guessed that the effort had been exhausting and very great. "Come and sit down," she said gently. "I'm so glad you came. And you brought your violin. You want us to hear you play, don't you?"

"It seems only fair," Angus admitted. "I—Miss Shirley, I don't know how to say it. You've been quite wonderful. I do thank you, and I'll make good. But I'm so sorry; so terribly sorry. It was a ghastly thing to do. I'll never forget what an ass I was."

"It was a foolish thing to do," Joan agreed. "I'm glad you are sorry. You'll never do anything like it again, will you?"

"I will not!" he said fervently. "I'll show you that I'm sorry. Are you the one who plays and composes?"

"No, that's my cousin Joy. I'll call her; she'll be so glad you've come. She's really interested in your music; she'll love to hear you play."

"I'll call her." Angus opened the case and took out his violin.

While Joan watched, in eager delight, he began to play a Scottish reel. The music had a lilt which made it hard to keep still; Joan, trained in English country-dance tunes, recognised its quality at once.

“Oh, lovely!” she cried. “It makes me want to dance! Our fiddler must hear you; she’ll be here presently——”

“Who’s playing reels? *Angus!*” Rykie shrieked from a window just above them.

Joy’s red head appeared at another window. “Who is it? Who’s the music?”

“Come down, Joy. This is Angus Reekie.”

Jen was first; she dashed out of the house and stood staring. “Gosh! I won’t jump on him again if he can play like that!”

Angus reddened and put down his fiddle. “Was it you?”

Jen came forward with immense dignity. “Introduce us, Joan!”

Joan’s eyes danced. “Miss Jen Robins—Mr. Angus Reekie. I think you have met before.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Reekie.”

“Is it really Angus?” Joy and Rykie arrived together in breathless haste.

“He’s come to say he’s sorry! Oh, Angus, how jolly decent of you!” Rykie shouted. “I’m sure you didn’t want to come!”

“No.” Angus faced Joy bravely. “But I couldn’t take that money till I’d told you how terribly sorry I am that I was such an ass.”

“Ass is the right word,” Joy assented. “It was more mad than evil, wasn’t it? I’m glad you’ve come, and I’m jolly glad you’ve brought the fiddle. You can certainly play for dancing. Now play for me! Play the thing you like best in the world.”

Angus took up the violin and began to play Dvorák’s “Humoresque.” The haunting beauty of the notes hushed the girls to silence.

“You can play!” Joy said gravely, as he paused. “You must be helped. You’re too good for dance bands.”

“There are things I like still better, but I’m not good enough for them,” Angus said wistfully.

He played, very softly, the air from Beethoven’s Violin Concerto, with a loving touch that told of the true musician; and followed it with the theme from the Rondo, gay and eager.

“Oh!” Joy said. “But you want the orchestra to accompany you for those.”

“Yes, that’s what I want.” Angus played in the same way the themes from the Mendelssohn Concerto, and again Joy agreed.

“You have it in you. We’ll help. I don’t feel so sore about that ruby now.”

Angus’s face fell. “Did you care very much? As you’ve so many I hoped perhaps——”

“We cared terribly much!” Jen cried. “Joy said it was like having a tooth pulled out!”

“Oh, I say! I’m terribly sorry!”

“If the tooth is going to help you to bring out your music, it will be worth it,” Joy retorted. “But you will work, won’t you? You should do well, if you’re in earnest; you’re so good already.”

“I’ll work night and day, always at my hardest,” Angus vowed.

“Then you’ll have a breakdown,” Joan remarked. “Don’t be foolish in the other direction! You’re a little unbalanced, aren’t you?”

“He always has been,” said Rykie, in the background. “He wants things so terribly much, and especially music.”

“Is there any particular teacher you would like?” Joy asked.

Angus grew suddenly eager and radiant. “Could I go back to Glasgow? Then I could go to McAlistair.”

“McAlistair? Who is he?”

“A marvellous teacher. I’ve always wanted to go to him. I know a chap who learned from him and he couldn’t say enough about him.”

“You’d find evening jobs at once in Glasgow, where folks know you,” Rykie put in. “You’d have to work up a fresh connection in London.”

“Very true,” Joy agreed. “If there is a good enough teacher in Glasgow, that’s the place for you. I’ll find out; I know people who will make inquiries. If your McAlistair is any good, you shall certainly go—oh, gosh! Here’s our party arriving!”

Joan took charge. “Joy, take him in to see Mother and to have some tea; Rykie, you go too. Jen, you and I will welcome the Club. When they’ve started dancing I’ll come in and leave them with the President as M.C.”

“Couldn’t Angus play those dance tunes for them that he played for us? The Club would love them,” Jen pleaded.

“Later, if he will. He and Rykie must come out and see our dancing,” Joan promised.

When Angus had been explained and introduced, and stood before little Mrs. Shirley, he felt again that rush of shame which had overwhelmed him when he had heard of the gift of the ruby and which had driven him to come. But, though it had been a bitter ordeal, he was thankful he had yielded to the impulse. It was going to be a great thing in his future life to know he was linked with people like these, even though there was no real relationship.

Mrs. Shirley looked at him, gravely kind. “I am glad you came. It is well that we should know you. Some day I am sure we shall be proud of you.”

“Couldn’t he play to her? She’d like it,” Rykie suggested, while Angus silently vowed that they should indeed be proud some day.

“At once, then, before the dancing starts,” Joy said. “We can’t have competing violins! Play those Scottish dances; were they reels?”

“And strathspeys.” Angus lifted the violin to his shoulder. “But I’d rather do something gentler, for her.”

With innate good taste he followed the dances with some of the sweetest of the Scottish songs, and Mrs. Shirley sat entranced, and thanked him warmly when Joy put an end to the concert by bringing cups of tea.

“The dancing’s beginning. We mustn’t interfere with their music,” she said. “After tea we’ll go out and you shall see how you like our English dances.”

The Hamlet Club girls were whirling through “The Old Mole,” when the move to the terrace was made, Joan and Jen dancing together as second couple. Angus and Rykie watched the arches and heys and cast with startled eyes.

“Fascinating!” he said. “Could they do it again?”

“I expect it’s the second or third time through,” Joy laughed. “Jen looks hot! Let them get their breath and then they’ll show you something else.”

Jen came racing to them. “Everybody’s panting and breathless, and we want to have ‘Goddesses’ next! We shall all be dead. Couldn’t Angus play to us while we breathe?”

The Club had collapsed on their rugs. Joan said a word to Cicely Hobart, the President and M.C., and she explained to the girls that while they rested a guest visiting the Hall would play some Scottish dances for them.

Angus stood on the terrace and seemed to pour out tunes without a break of a single beat—“The Deil amang the Tailors,” “Kate Dalrymple,” “The Fairy Dance,” “Soldier’s Joy,” “The Flowers of Edinburgh,” and the first tune again to finish.

Rykie murmured the names to Jen, who stood enthralled.

“Lovely—oh, lovely! I’d like to dance! But why doesn’t he stop between?”

“It’s the Eightsome Reel. He mustn’t lose a beat.”

“He never does! Is it all one dance? It’s a long one! Oh, we’ve a dance to ‘Flowers of Edinburgh’! He’s played this one before! Why does he do it twice?”

“It’s the tune he started with. You begin and end with the same tune—for the introduction and finish.”

“I see. Couldn’t he tell us what to do?”

“Perhaps Rykie could teach us a reel some day,” Joan said. “Go and work off your energy in ‘Goddesses’! No, I’m not coming this time; Nesta wants you for a partner. Thank you, Angus! Our Club enjoyed that.” For the

girls were clapping vigorously. "I don't wonder you can make your living by playing for dancing! Now watch some more of our English dances."

"Goddesses" was followed by "Hunsdon House," and the visitor's eyes opened widely at the contrast in style. "That's like a minuet," he said. "But a lovely tune. I like your music and your fiddler."

"Miss Lane has played for us for years. We'll show you 'Hey, Boys,' for only four dancers, and 'Picking Up Sticks,' for six, and 'Newcastle,' for a round, and some longways. Then you'll have a good idea of the variety in our dancing. What do you think of it, Rykie?"

"It looks all right for parties. It's no use, of course," Rykie said simply.

Joan smiled. "For the stage? No, no use at all. It's just for fun."

Joy came up to Angus. "I'll run you to Wycombe in the car, if you can wait till after the party. Some of the girls have come by train and they'll be glad of a lift home. We can make room for two or three."

"You've been awfully kind." Angus reddened and spoke fervently. "It's as if you'd forgotten all about——"

"We're much nearer forgetting than we were before you came," Joy said. "You've put it out of our minds by coming to see us and then by your music. We'll never think of it again."

"You are jolly decent, all of you!" Rykie said vehemently. "Some day we'll show you how we feel, Angus and me!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

ISABELLA VAN TOLL

Rykie looked at Joan shyly when the last country-dancer had gone, and Joy had driven off with Angus beside her and the back seat packed with tired girls. "Do you think I ought to tell Belle? I must write to her tomorrow. It will upset her to hear about Angus and—and about me. It was really my fault, wasn't it?"

"I'm afraid it was. Don't you want to own up?"

"No!" Rykie said fervently. "But it might come out somehow, and that would be worse."

"Much worse. I should tell her the whole story; secrets in families are always uncomfortable. And Belle started the trouble by suggesting you should borrow from us and go to her."

"That was the beginning of it," Rykie agreed. "But she didn't mean——" and she paused.

"I'm sure she didn't. It was your own very silly idea, wasn't it?"

Rykie stared across the lawn, reddening slowly. "I'll be more sensible. I'll remember how kind you've been, and I'll write to Belle, if you think I should. But I won't send it by air-mail. There's no hurry."

"You couldn't say enough in an air-mail. You'd better write a long letter and tell Belle all about it."

The letter was difficult, and though Rykie seemed to work at it on Sunday, it was not finished. She put it away gladly and plunged into school work; and this time she did not neglect her prep.

"Don't you want to finish your letter?" Jen asked.

"It will do next week," Rykie retorted.

She put her heart into the play and worked hard as Jaques, anxious now to do credit to Joan as well as to herself. She taught the Eightsome Reel, and showed that she had a very pretty step, to a set of dancers invited to tea on Saturday, and Cicely and Miriam, Joan and Joy, Jen and Nesta, Muriel and Beetle, learned the Scottish steps and enjoyed the dance and the music, which Joy had found in a Wycombe shop.

"Marguerite would have loved this, but she's in France," the President said. "A good thing Mirry isn't being married till July, or we couldn't have had our set of Queens and maids."

"If the Club wants it they shall have a try, now that we eight know it, thanks to Rykie," Joan remarked. "But we won't do much of it. That step for

setting would ruin our set-and-turn-single; the girls are inclined to be on their toes as it is. We'll need to be careful."

Next day she seated Mrs. Shirley in a big chair on the side lawn, under the trees where the party had been held, and they all encamped round her, on seats or rugs, to read and write letters.

"You'd better finish that three-volume novel to Belle, Rykie," Joan said. "We shan't be interrupted here. We can see the drive, so if visitors come we shall have warning. The sun's too hot on the terrace."

"I must write to Mother," Jen said.

"Joy and I are writing to Jandy, so we shall be a busy crowd," Joan added.

They were lazily at work, Mrs. Shirley nodding over a book, when at the hoot of a horn they all looked up.

"Bother!" Joy growled. "Who comes here?"

Joan put down her writing-pad and rose, as a large car swept towards the terrace.

"Who—why, Rykie?"

A girl hung out of the car, waving. Rykie had sprung to her feet, and now, with a wild shout, she rushed across the lawn.

The rest stood gazing, dazed with surprise. The girl leapt from the car and Rykie was in her arms.

"It couldn't be Belle," Joy argued.

"It must be Belle. But how astonishing!" Joan cried. "You wait here, Mother dear. I'll bring them to you."

"Belle's got a man with her," Jen said excitedly. "Do you suppose—but how thrilling! Has she got engaged and brought him here to show him off?"

She raced across the lawn, Joan and Joy close behind. All three were in time to hear Rykie's shout, as she drew back to stare at her sister's companion.

"You've married him! Oh, Belle, you're married!"

"Four days ago. And why not?" demanded the dark-haired girl.

She was as unlike Rykie as she could be, with raven-black hair, beautifully waved, big dark eyes and lovely colouring, some, at least, real, though she had added to the effect discreetly. She was like a radiant figure from another world; the tall fair man who followed her from the car looked at her with immense pride in his eyes.

"Belle is my wife, Sister Rykie," he said.

"But I ought to have been there! Why were you in such a hurry? I don't mind her being engaged; I liked you in London, and I knew you wanted her," Rykie said breathlessly. "But—married! You might have waited for me, Belle!"

“Sorry, kid! But Terry had to come to London on a business trip, and he wanted me to come too. There was nothing to wait for. We’ve flown over, and when the business is done we’re going to Paris and perhaps Vienna and Rome. You can come too, if you like.”

“Oh!” Rykie gasped, and stared at them. “Oh, I’m glad you’ve done it, Belle!”

“You must be the cousins.” Belle put her sister aside and looked at the three girls, who were waiting in intense interest till the greetings were over. “Will you forgive us for taking you by storm like this? We reached London yesterday. We ought to have phoned, but we thought we’d give this child a surprise.”

“It’s Belle, Joan!” Rykie’s voice rang out proudly.

“So we supposed,” Joy said dryly. “What’s her name now? She’s no longer Belle Reekie, I gather?”

“We’re glad to see you at last,” Joan spoke up. “But you’ve given us a great surprise, as well as Rykie. I am Joan, your cousin. This is Joy, my cousin.”

“The one everything belongs to,” Rykie put in eagerly.

“I’m only a friend from school,” Jen added. “I don’t count, as it’s a family business.”

“This is my husband, Terence Van Toll,” Belle said proudly. “We’re only just married, and we came as fast as we could to tell Rykie our news.”

“Then you are now Mrs.—what did you say?” Joan asked, a little stunned by the speed of events.

“Mrs. Van Toll. Terry’s dad owns movie-houses all over the States. I flew to Hollywood with him and his mother, and we—well, we got engaged quite soon.” Belle blushed and laughed.

“You had met in London?” Joan asked, shaking hands with the new member of the family. “But, of course, Rykie knew you.”

“Belle Van Toll is an odd sort of name,” Joy remarked.

Belle flashed a laughing look at her. “Isabella Van Toll is better. Now that I’m a married woman I shall claim my whole name.”

“*Very* much better than Belle Reekie!” Joy teased.

“Isabella Van Toll! Whoops!” Rykie shouted. “It’ll look lovely up in lights over the theatres! Are you going to stay in films? Or have you retired?”

Isabella Van Toll grinned. “I shall make some pictures before I retire. Both Terry and his dad want me to stay for a while. Then you can carry on.”

“I’ll never be like you!”

“You couldn’t be more unlike her, to look at,” Terry Van Toll said, with a laughing glance at Rykie’s lint-white curls.

“Come and speak to Mother, Belle; you won’t expect us to call you ‘Mrs.,’ I’m sure!” Joan led the way across the lawn. “Mother isn’t strong; she can’t stand much noise or excitement. But she’ll be very glad to see you at last.”

Belle and Terry looked down at the frail little lady, and Belle’s lovely voice was gentle as she thanked “Aunt Margaret” for her kindness to Rykie. “I ought to have come to see you, but Mrs. Van Toll and Terry found a seat for me in the plane, at the last moment, and—well, I wanted to travel with them so very badly.”

“You must forgive her, Aunt Margaret,” said Terry, instantly adopting the whole family as relations. “I had made up my mind she must belong to me, even then, and I think she knew. My mother wanted to look after her on the journey, so we coaxed her to throw over everything and everybody and come with us. She wasn’t at all easy in her mind about not coming to see you. But she wanted to go with us.”

“I guessed,” Rykie said in triumph. “I wasn’t a bit surprised when she told me——” She paused.

“Told you what?” Terry looked down at his new sister. “There hasn’t been time to tell you anything.”

“That she thought you were going to ask her, and that if you did she would say ‘yes,’” Rykie retorted.

Belle coloured in a most attractive blush. “I only said I thought it might happen.”

“You knew,” Terry assured her. “We both knew.”

“My dear, you are more like your dear mother than Rykie is,” said Mrs. Shirley. “She and I were both dark. She was not as good-looking as you are, but the colouring is the same.”

“Rykie and Angus are like father; he was fair,” Belle said. “Have you people heard of Angus—our half-brother?”

There was an awkward pause. Rykie grew scarlet and shrank before Joy’s amused, accusing stare.

“Why, what’s the matter, kid?” Belle caught sight of her sister’s face.

“We’ve seen Angus,” Joan said quietly. “He was here last week. He’s in Glasgow now. Rykie will tell you about him presently.”

Rykie snatched up her letter. “I could never tell you; I should simply die! Read it! I was going to post it to-morrow. It’s all there; but I couldn’t bear to tell you. I’m sorry! Oh, I’m so terribly sorry!” She dashed across the lawn to the house and disappeared.

“Gosh! What have Angus and Rykie been doing?” Belle exclaimed in dismay.

“Suppose you go and comfort her, Jen,” Joan suggested. “Joy and I will give these people tea. Belle won’t be hard on Rykie when she understands; make her believe that. You can be a comforting sort of person!”

Jen reddened. “I’m not so sure of that, Joan dear, but I will try. I’m sorry for Rykie; it’s horrible for her to have Belle’s visit spoiled like this.”

“Do what you can to help her,” Joan advised.

CHAPTER THIRTY

RYKIE IN TROUBLE

“Who is the attractive kid with the pigtails?” Terry asked, as Jen went reluctantly away from the fascinating visitors.

“A school friend who is staying with us to be company for Rykie. They cycle to Wycombe together; we couldn’t let Rykie ride so far alone,” Joan explained.

“But what is it all about?” Belle demanded. “Did she bring Angus here? I didn’t know his ship had come back. What has happened?”

“You ought never to have let him go on that ship,” Joy said severely. “It couldn’t help being bad for his hands; a violinist’s hands are all important. He ought to be careful. Angus is a real musician, though he’s rather crude and unbalanced as yet. A ship was the last place in the world for him.”

“I couldn’t stop him,” Belle protested. “He’s three years older than I am, and it was his own idea. What you said is true; he is crude and unbalanced, but he really has music in him. I’m sure of it.”

“Oh, he has! It’s there all right; we heard him play. The trouble has been that he couldn’t bring out the best that was in him. He was going all to bits for want of someone to help him.”

“Terry will help him now,” Belle said happily.

“Terry’s too late,” Joy retorted. “Joan and I have helped him. He’ll be all right, now that he’s going to have his music. But he’s weak and silly, you know.”

“He always has been.” Belle looked anxious. “Has he been getting into trouble?”

“You’ll find the whole story in Rykie’s letter,” Joan said. “But I hope you won’t read it till after tea. Mr. Van Toll will be the greatest possible help to Angus later on, when he is ready for help; at the moment Joy and I have done the most that can be done. Angus is all right; you needn’t worry about him now. Here comes tea! I’m sure you are ready for it.”

Her tone of authority put an end to discussion of Angus and his doings for the moment. Belle, looking grave, put the letter into her handbag and said no more.

Terry realised there was some trouble to be told. Tactfully he began to talk of their journey and their plans.

“We shall take Rykie back to the States with us, of course.” Belle looked at Mrs. Shirley. “It’s been terribly kind of you to have her here, but now that

I shall have a settled home in Hollywood, I must have her with me.”

“Certainly her place is with you,” her aunt assented. “But are you sure you would not like her to have a year or two more of English schooling? I can’t help feeling it would be good for her.”

“But will you have a settled home?” Joan looked up from the tea-cups. “You may have a house as your headquarters, but won’t you be racing all over America or coming to London continually?”

“Terry can do that. After this trip I shall get down to work,” Belle said definitely. “And my mother-in-law will live near us, and she’s quite charming and very kind. We really will make a good home for Rykie. I want her badly.”

“In that case we can’t say any more,” Joan admitted.

“But I hope you will send her to school and not let her do only dancing and singing and elocution,” Joy said severely. “She tried to insist on specialising when she came here; she thought ballet classes were all she needed. Joan sat on her heavily.”

“She’s only half-educated,” Joan said grimly.

“But I told her she’d have to go to school!” Belle protested. “Didn’t she say so?”

“She did not! She did her best to escape from school. But Joan was too much for her.”

“She has been doing better at school lately,” Joan said. “And she has a big part in the end-of-term play. She is Jaques in *As You Like It*; that has pleased her very much. I believe she is really good.”

“She’ll love that. But if she goes to the Continent with us——” Belle began, looking troubled.

“Oh, you can’t take her away till the play is over!” Joy exclaimed.

Belle looked at her husband doubtfully.

“Young Rykie will have to choose between the play and the trip,” he said. “Our dates are fixed.”

“She’ll go with you; who wouldn’t? She’ll chuck up the play and let the school down,” Joy groaned. “I wish you had waited three weeks longer before getting married, Isabella Van Toll!”

Belle looked troubled. “I’ll be sorry about the play. But we do want Rykie with us.”

“She ought to be with us now, having tea with you,” Joan said. “I’ll run up and tell her that you don’t know that story yet and that no one will say anything. It’s horrid for her not to be here for your first meal with us.”

“I’ll come with you!” Belle sprang up. “Yes, please! I’ll have more tea presently. I’d like to reassure the kid. She can’t have done anything worth breaking her heart over, since you have obviously forgiven her.”

“That will be kind, my dear.” Mrs. Shirley approved of her. “Our circle ought to be complete.”

Together Joan and Belle went to the house, and Joan led the way up to Rykie’s room. They found Jen sitting on the bed, patting Rykie’s shoulder as she had seen Joan do, and telling her again and again that things would be all right and that Belle was too jolly to be very angry.

“She may be a bit upset, but she’ll be nice about it,” she was saying as the door opened. “Oh, Joan! Rykie wants to have tea with Belle—with Mrs. Van Toll, I suppose I ought to say! But she daren’t go down, so she says she won’t have any. And I want my tea,” she added ruefully.

“You poor, loyal, hungry kiddy!” Belle cried. “You’re both coming to have tea with us right now. And—I say! Forget Mrs. Van Toll! I’m just Belle to everybody here.”

“But I’m not a relation!” Jen argued.

Belle was bending over Rykie. “Come along, kiddy! I don’t know yet what it’s all about, but whatever it is I won’t eat you. Terry and I can’t stay long; we’re missing you, and we can’t afford to waste our visit. Come and sit by me and have your tea. I promise faithfully I won’t ask any questions.”

Rykie sprang up and hugged her. “Belle, I was a perfect beast, *and* an idiot!”

“Were you? That’s a pity. But I guess Joan has said it’s all right now, so I shall have to do the same. Come on! I want my tea. And so does your jolly pal.”

“I’m Jen. It’s not much of a name, is it?” Jen handed a damp sponge to Rykie. “Get up and wash your face! You’ll feel tons better.”

Very subdued, Rykie clung to her sister’s hand, and sat at her feet while Joy and Terry supplied her with tea and waited on Belle and hungry Jen. Terry’s eyes were amused, but he asked no questions.

It seemed probable—even certain—to Belle that the trouble had been concerned with school. Nothing serious could have happened in this peaceful place! So she kept off the subject of the play and talked gaily of Hollywood, of journeys by plane, and of the new friends she had met.

But the state of tension could not last. As soon as tea was over Joan rose. “I’d like to show you two the Abbey.”

“Are you staying with us? We can put you up,” Joy said.

Belle’s eyes swept round the garden and the beautiful old house. “That’s lovely of you! How we’d like to stay! We’ll come back presently, if you’ll really have us. But Terry has to see someone early to-morrow, so we’ll go back to town to-night, if you don’t mind. We only came to have a look at Rykie, and to let you see Terry and to tell you our plans.”

“And to introduce Mrs. Isabella Van Toll!” Joy grinned. “Then you’d better run along with Joan. She’d never forgive you if you didn’t see the Abbey.”

Following Joan, the two crossed the lawn to the shrubbery path. Rykie started to follow, then sank down on her rug again. “Joan’s going to tell her. Will she hate me, Jen?”

“I should say not! She’s much too jolly,” Jen said stoutly. “She’ll have to know, so the sooner the better. You stay here with me.”

“Come and carry cups and things!” Joy commanded. “Then we’ll wash up. It’s Sunday, and Susie Spindle must have her evening out.” And she kept the girls busy for the next difficult quarter of an hour.

“Oh!” said Terry Van Toll, and gazed up at the refectory windows from the Abbot’s garden. “But how perfect!”

“This way.” Joan led them down the dark tresaunt passage to the sunlit garth, surrounded by old grey walls, arched doorways and empty windows.

“Glory! What a setting for a picture!” gasped the cinema expert. “Black-robed monks——”

“White-robed! With black hoods hiding their faces. They were silent monks. But the Abbey isn’t going into films.” Joan left him gazing, fetched cushions, and spread them on the broken cloister steps. “Sit here, Belle, and read the letter. I’ll take Mr. Van Toll to see the refectory and the monks’ working and sleeping places.”

From the lancet windows of the dormitory they looked down on the garth and saw Belle sitting on her cushions, the letter lying at her feet, her eyes gazing at the wide refectory windows.

“Let’s go to her,” Joan said. “She knows the story now. She’ll want to talk to Rykie.”

Belle was already on her feet as they reached her. “Rykie—I must go to her! Oh, Joan, I’m so sorry! But the poor kid—it was awful of her, but she’s breaking her heart about it now. Which is the way back? I love this marvellous old place, but I can’t look at it till I’ve seen her.”

“Stay here with your husband and tell him the story. I’ll send Rykie to you,” Joan said quietly.

“Oh, Terry, that poor kiddy! And it was really my fault, as she says, for asking her to come without making it possible for her. But I never thought—oh, Terry!”

As she thrust the letter into his hand, there came a shout, and Rykie and Jen raced from the tresaunt to the garth.

“Belle—oh, Belle! Wasn’t I horrible?” Rykie gasped.

Belle held out her arms, and she rushed into them and sobbed out her trouble on her sister’s shoulder.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

A TRIP TO PARIS

“I couldn’t stop her,” Jen explained to Joan. “We were washing up with Joy, when she suddenly flung down her towel and rushed off, saying she couldn’t bear it any longer. I thought I’d better come after her.”

“Suppose you take Mr. Van Toll to see the tunnels.” Joan fetched torches from the little room in which the cushions were kept. “You’re quite as good a guide as I am. But I shall come too. Belle and Rykie want to be left alone for a few minutes.”

Terry handed the letter back to Belle, his face sober. “Sorry, little sister! Belle and I were wrapped up in ourselves and I’m afraid we were thoughtless. We shouldn’t have spoken of your coming without telling you how to manage it. And your brother made things worse for you.”

“Belle, have you read it all? Do you know what they did for Angus?” Rykie whispered. “Belle, after what he’d done! Weren’t they terribly kind?”

“Come and see our underground passages!” Joan commanded Terry. “They really will thrill you. Leave these two to talk for a time.”

Terry’s delight in the tunnels and the gate-house, and the awed reverence with which he inspected the Saxon crypt, the hermit’s well, and the Abbot Michael’s tomb, satisfied even Jen.

“He never said ‘quaint’ once,” she whispered to Joan.

“Belle must see all this,” he exclaimed again and again.

“We’ll fetch her, and we’ll show you both the rest of the Abbey,” Joan agreed. “Then we must go back to Mother. She’ll be wondering if everything is all right.”

Mrs. Shirley’s mind was set at rest when she saw Rykie clinging to her sister’s arm.

“Is everybody happy now? Then come and talk over your plans, my dear.”

Belle, Terry and Joan sat beside her, with Joy and Jen squatting on the rugs at their feet. Rykie, invited to join them, shook her head and stood by Belle’s chair, a strained look on her face.

“I’ve been telling Rykie that we start for France at the end of this week,” Belle said gravely. “We shall go to Paris and then perhaps to Brussels. Terry has bought the car especially for this trip, so that we can tour in comfort, but he’ll sell it again when we go back to the States; he has his own car there, of course. Rykie can come with us, if she likes. I’m sure, in the circumstances,

her school will let her off the exams, as she won't be going back next term. But——”

“But there's the play!” Rykie broke out. She stared at Joan. “You'd feel I'd let you down dreadfully, if I went, wouldn't you?”

“Must stand by your contracts, little sister,” said Terry.

“I should feel that,” Joan admitted. “I'm sorry about Paris and Brussels, but I'd hate to have you let us down, Rykie.”

“It's your old school, and they know I'm your cousin.” Rykie's voice shook. “I suppose you'd feel very bad?”

“I'd be terribly ashamed of you.”

“Then I won't do it,” Rykie cried. “I'll give up the trip to Paris and stick to the play, rather than upset you, after—after you've been so kind.”

“That's brave,” Joan said quietly. “Thank you, Rykie.”

“Oh, good for you!” Jen leapt up with one of her excited shouts. “I knew you wouldn't let us down! Belle, she really is marvellous as Jaques; couldn't you be there to see her?”

“But if I could, couldn't she come to France and be back for the performance?” Belle began. “I did want us to go together for our first visit!”

A spark of hope lit up Rykie's eyes. But it died at once. “There are last rehearsals, and especially the dress rehearsal. They wouldn't let me off.”

“Couldn't be done,” said Terry. “If she's going to be Jaques, she must be the best Jaques that school has ever seen. As to being at the show, that will need some thinking about. We'll do it, if we can, but I doubt if it will be possible. Sister Rykie, you've chosen the right way; I salute you! Good luck to Jaques! You can have a trip to Paris later on.”

Rykie coloured. “I said I'd do anything in the world that would please Joan. I didn't think it would mean losing Paris with Belle, but I won't go back on it.”

“You stick to that,” Joy said, from her lowly seat on the rug. “Joan and I could never hold up our heads at school again, if you left them in the lurch at the last moment.”

“I won't do it,” Rykie said fervently. “I'll make a success of Jaques, and then you'll be glad I'm your cousin, won't you?”

“Oh, you're not *my* cousin!”

“I looked at Joan,” Rykie retorted.

“I know you'll make us proud. But I'm proud already, because you're going to keep your promise,” Joan assured her.

Before the Van Tolls drove away, Terry begged for a few words alone with Joan. She led him, by his wish, back to the Abbey, and they stood in the refectory beside the case of jewels.

“These are very fine,” he said. “I hate to think the set has been broken. Miss Joan, I suppose you wouldn’t tell me who bought your ruby, so that I—I’d like to try——” He stumbled.

“I’m afraid I don’t know,” Joan said gravely. “Our lawyer might be able to tell us; it was sold through him. But I couldn’t let you do that. It’s a kind thought, but we’re glad to have helped Angus, and the matter is ended now.”

“The stones ought to be kept all together,” he urged. “I might be able to trace it and get it back for you.”

“No,” Joan said, her tone final. “Thank you very much. I’ll tell Joy, but I know what she will say. We’ll leave matters as they are. But thank you for the very kind thought.”

“Are they safe here?”

“Oh, yes! No one can get in. But we think perhaps we’ll take them to the house. There’s really no need for tourists to see Lady Jehane’s jewels.”

“I should do that,” he said, as they left the Abbey together.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THRILLS FOR JEN

Jen came in from school on Monday bubbling over with excitement.

“Joan! Joy! Such a thrill! Gillian’s mother—Gillian is Orlando, and her mother’s Mrs. Morton-Brown, and they have that huge house down by the river, with the lovely gardens, Home House. She’s offered her garden for the Hospital Fête, and the Head wants it to be before the end of term, so that we can all be there. And Miss Macey has bagged *As You Like It* to be the biggest item on the programme! She saw the rehearsal on Saturday and evidently she was terrifically pleased. The school performance will be a final dress rehearsal; the real thing will be much more important than we thought. And—such fun, Joy! As Mirry will be away on her honeymoon, and Marguerite will be still in France, and the President goes to Ceylon next week, *you’ll* have to lead the procession!”

“Procession? What is the child talking about?” Joy demanded, startled.

“Oh, Joy! You know there’s always a procession of Queens, and some dances, at the fête. The dancing will be before tea and the play afterwards, so Nesta and Beetle will have plenty of time to change into Rosalind and Audrey. And Rykie will see you two being Queens, after all.”

“I don’t mind leading the procession!” Joy’s chin went up. “I can do it quite as well as Mirry. I’ve done it before, when I was crowned, let me remind you! It will be a very little one; only four Queens. But Nesta’s the reigning Queen; she ought to lead. Outsiders will think I’m still at school.”

“Nobody could possibly think you are still at school. And Nesta has quite enough on her mind, as Rosalind,” Joan remarked. “I expect Rykie will think it’s very funny, but she’ll have to see you and me being Queens for once.”

“Why don’t you go first, instead of Joy?” Rykie’s whole-hearted adoration was given to Joan, to the intense though secret amusement of both Joan and Joy.

“Because I’m a year younger, as Queen. Joy was the Fourth Queen; I was the Fifth.”

“Will you dress up?”

“Oh, my dear kid, yes!” Joy assured her. “Crowns and trains and bouquets! We look perfectly beautiful!”

“Suppose we say quite impressive?” Joan laughed.

“I hope Belle and Terry will be there,” Rykie observed. “I’d like them to see you.”

“I’d like them to see the dancing,” Joan said. “Terry would want to put it on the films at once. Will the play be all right in a garden? It’s the proper setting, but will the girls’ voices carry?”

“I don’t know. I’m worried about some of them,” Rykie admitted. “Their voices are all right, but they don’t trouble to speak out.”

“Miss Cameron will see to that, when she knows it’s to be out of doors,” Joy remarked. “Are you sure about yourself?”

Rykie looked at her in simple surprise. “You’ll be able to hear me all right.”

Joy gave a grunt of amusement. “Hope so! You’re sure of yourself and that’s something.”

Two days later Jen rushed in to tea, once more filled with wild excitement.

“Joan! Joy! Joan, what do you think? Miss Macey watched my children yesterday, and she’d like them to do three singing-games at the fête, as a break between the country-dances! My babes, you know—at the fête, Joan! And one game is to be ‘Roman Soldiers,’ because she saw it and she’s sure the audience will love it!”

“Of course they’ll love it; anybody would,” Joan said, laughing. “It’s one of the very best to watch. I am so glad, Jen!”

“Some of the Sixth looked on one day, and they simply shrieked when we did ‘Now we’ve only got one leg!’” Jen said breathlessly.

“I’m sure they did! Your babies do it beautifully. It will be a real help to the fête.”

“Do you think the audience will laugh?”

“I should think they’ll yell, if you all hobble about with one leg and one arm and one eye,” Joy said. “You’ll be the star turn. The play will fade right out. The Head has really shown good sense this time.”

“I’m a wee bit scared,” Jen admitted.

“Not you!” Joan said bracingly. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. People always like seeing babies take part. What other games will you choose?”

“‘Old Roger’; we love that. Which other one?”

“‘Old Roger’ is good; it has quite a story. What about ‘Oats and Beans and Barley Grow’? It’s different from the other two, and it has the marriage verse, which will amuse people.”

“It’s a nice tune,” Jen agreed. “And if they want any more there’s ‘There Came Three Dukes A-Riding.’ We’ll practise those, and then we’ll see what happens.”

“Will the people know you’ve taught the kids?” Rykie asked.

"I don't know; I shouldn't think so. What does it matter?"

"You'll be jolly important."

"I don't care," Jen retorted. "And anyway, that's not the point!" And for the next few days she worked with her team at every opportunity.

After the final rehearsal of the play for the whole school, to which the elder girls were invited, even Joy agreed with Rykie. Her voice rang out clearly in the big hall, and there was no doubt it would carry in the garden.

"She's jolly good," Joy murmured. "She knows what she's talking about; quite natural, and as clear and certain as she can be."

"I hope the Van Tolls will come back in time for Tuesday's show," Joan said. "Rykie couldn't be better. Belle would be proud of her."

"Aileen could never have done it like this."

"No. I wonder if Rykie was right to grab the part? She was right in saying it was better for the school."

"Yes, but that wasn't why she did it," Joy retorted. "That was only an excuse. School or no school, she'd have thrown it up more than once, for her own sake, if we hadn't held her to it."

"She's excellent; she couldn't be better. I do hope Tuesday is fine, so that Mother can come!"

The arrival of Belle and Terry remained in doubt. They knew the place, date, and time of the fête, and they had promised to be there, if possible. That was all they could say.

The bustle of preparation for the State procession amused Rykie and even impressed her. The Hall was filled with flowers on Tuesday morning, and Joan wove crowns for herself and Joy and a wreath for Jen. Joy had found long trails of creamy "Traveller's Joy" in the hedges, and Joan mixed these with green leaves for her crown. For herself and Jen she had sprays of heliotrope, since violets were out of season, mixed with dark purple pansies.

"Everybody will come to smell you and me," Jen said happily. "You could have lobelia, if it was violet and not so very blue!"

"Lobelia blue would make a lovely train. Perhaps a Queen will wear one some day. But it would hardly do with my violet colours."

"Your first little girl could be a Lobelia Queen."

"My what? Oh, Jen dear, do stop arranging our future families for us!" Joan cried.

Jen grinned. "She's sure to have hair like yours. I'm looking forward to seeing Janice crowned in a lobelia train."

Joan stared at her, distinctly startled. "*Who?*"

"Oh, Joan! You know you've promised to call your first girl for Jandy Mac!"

Joan laughed. “I believe I did! When I see that little girl I’ll remember she is to be Janice—Janice Margaret, for Mother as well.”

“And tell her to choose lobelia blue when she’s Queen.”

“I shan’t do that,” Joan said firmly. “She’ll choose for herself or not at all. Do stop talking nonsense, Jenny-Wren!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE IN THE FOREST OF ARDEN

As the procession moved slowly across the lawn to the thrones prepared for the Queens, led with great dignity by Joy, Joan caught sight of Terry Van Toll, standing beneath a tree and holding up some curious gadget, through which he was peering. She thought of field-glasses; then guessed the truth and smothered a laugh as she took her seat on her flower-decked chair. She said nothing, but kept an eye on him during the country-dancing.

"There they are!" Joy said suddenly. "Belle has found Mother, and Rykie's with them. Where's Terry?"

"Over here, under the trees. I've been watching him."

"What's he doing?"

"Guess," said Joan.

Joy stared at Terry and his instrument. "What has he got there?"

"He's making a film of the dancing. Isn't that a cine-camera?"

Jen gave a little shriek of joy. "Will he let us see it? You said he'd want to film the dancing! How thrilled the girls will be!"

"He took you, too," Joan remarked. "I'm positive certain he took the procession as we came across the lawn."

Jen gave a real shout of excitement this time. "Then we'll be film stars after all! Oh, Joan, I never thought I'd see you on the pictures! Won't the President be mad? She'd have loved to be a film star!"

"This will be a very private film. I hope he'll manage to let us see it. The dances should be lovely. Go and join in, Jen! Your duties are over. Yes, do go; I hate to think you're left out."

"Sure you don't mind?" Jen sprang up and held out her hand to Beatrice, who, as Nesta's maid, could now be spared. "Come on, old Beetle! Have 'Jenny' with me!" She flung off her maid's wreath and ran to find a place in a set.

Joan saw Terry's eyes on her and knew he was following her with the camera, as she put her stout little partner into the middle of the set with a courtly gesture and then swung off in a beautiful skipping movement.

In an interval, the dancers dropped on the grass in a big ring, and Jen, a little breathless and pink with excitement and "Goddesses," led out a line of tiny children in white suits and coloured frocks, small boys as well as girls. Nesta, on her throne, and Beatrice and others of her form-mates, giggled rudely, but she had no time to notice them. She placed her babes in a circle,

the fiddler sounded a note, and everyone, dancers as well as little ones, began to sing "Oats and Beans and Barley Grow."

The game was rapturously applauded, winning almost more praise than the country-dances had done. "Old Roger" gave even greater joy, and "Roman Soldiers" was received with wild delight and much laughter. An encore was called for, and Miss Macey advised repeating the last game and then giving "Three Dukes" and "When I was a Schoolgirl."

To tumultuous applause Jen chased the children off the lawn and they ran like chickens before the mother hen, as she said afterwards. Everybody laughed and cheered, and Beetle, sitting at her Queen's feet again, nudged Nesta. "Call for Teacher! You're the Queen, it's your job! It will make Jen wild!"

"Teacher! Teacher!" shouted Nesta from her throne, and the cry was taken up by the dancers.

"How Jen will loathe us!" Beetle chuckled.

Thrust forward by those near her, Jen stood, scarlet and amused, just inside the ring, and bowed, and then bobbed a curtsy and fled. There were more cheers and everyone laughed again. Then, at a chord from the violin, the dancers ran to take partners for "Haste to the Wedding."

"Did you do that, old Beetle?" Jen demanded, meeting Beatrice in the dance.

Beetle grinned. "No, Teacher, it was the Queen. But I put her up to it."

"Rotter!" Jen flung at her, as she moved up one place. "I felt an awful ass!"

"You looked just like Teacher!" Beetle called over her shoulder.

"You made a film, didn't you?" Joan challenged Terry, when the end of this part of the programme released the Queens from their thrones and girls began to go round with trays of tea and cakes.

Terry sprang up and bowed. "Your Majesty! It's a great idea. May Day and all that, I presume?"

"You look lovely, Joan," Belle laughed. "The procession was charming; I do think you grown-ups are sensible to take part! It would be much poorer with only one Queen!"

"There ought to be seven of us. We four felt very lonely. Terry, did you get Jen in your pictures? She's a lovely dancer; one of our very best."

"I did," he smiled. "I thought she was quite beautiful when she danced. And I took those enchanting babies of hers in their games. I hope to be able to show you the results some day. I'd have liked to take more, but I had to keep some film for the play."

"Did you take my children?" Jen came racing to Terry. "I'm sure they were worth filming!"

“They were, and I did,” he assured her.

“I’ll love you for ever!” Jen beamed on him happily.

“It’s a perfect setting, both for the dances and the play,” Belle said. “It could easily be a glade in the Forest of Arden. Shall we be able to hear the girls?”

“You’ll hear young Rykie.” Joy came up, her green train thrown over her arm. “Her voice rings out like a bell. And she looks a picture; black is just right for her, with her white hair.”

“Lint-white, please!” Belle protested.

“She looks lovely, Belle,” Joan said.

In looks, in voice, and in manner, Rykie satisfied both Terry and Belle, and she was warmly congratulated at the end of the play.

“Her future will take care of itself,” Terry said exultantly. “We won’t give too much time to dancing; perhaps not even to singing. She shall have the best possible training in drama.”

“Educate her thoroughly as well!” Joan pleaded. “Her grammar isn’t always too steady!”

Rykie, bright-eyed and happy, came running to them. “Belle, the girls want to speak to you. They’re terribly thrilled to have you here.”

“Bring them along!” Terry said gaily. “Mrs. Van Toll will hold a reception!”

“I suppose you can’t tell us if those pictures you took are any good?” Jen asked wistfully. “No, I know you can’t; I’m not a baby! But you will let us know, won’t you?”

“I’m usually very successful,” he assured her. “I’ll try to arrange for you to see them presently.”

“But I shan’t be here! I’m going home to Yorkshire on Thursday!”

“That’s serious. We shall have to get over the difficulty somehow,” he said, with laughing eyes.

In a corner of the grounds Nesta and Beatrice had caught the reporter, who was going about making notes for his article on the fête.

“You’re putting down the names of everybody who does anything, aren’t you?” Nesta challenged him.

He looked at her—white crown on dark hair, silver train bordered with purple and decorated with gleaming white circles, big shower bouquet of white flowers—and made a low bow.

“One of the Queens! May I be honoured with your name?”

“The reigning Queen; Queen Honesty,” Beetle informed him.

“My name doesn’t matter,” Nesta said hurriedly. “But don’t you want to put in a bit about the girl who trained the infants in those games? She’s only a kid; she’s in our form. She did it for fun, and then the Head bagged the

babes and the games for the show. That's her over there, with the yellow pigtails; she's Jen Robins."

"Go and ask her about it. She'll be terribly shy," Beetle grinned. "Call her Janet! She'll have a fit on the spot."

The reporter made some notes. "Many thanks, your Majesty, and——" He looked at Beatrice.

"Her maid-of-honour, usually known as Beetle."

He laughed and went to speak to Jen. "Little brats! Giving away their pal like that!"

"Miss Janet Robins? Might I ask——?"

Jen whirled round. "Who told you to call me that?"

"Queen Honesty and her Beetle. They sent me to talk to you."

"I'll slay them!" Jen scowled at Nesta and Beetle, grinning at her from a safe distance.

"I'm writing a report for the local paper. Will you tell me how you trained your delightful children? I understand the games were your work."

Jen, conscious of Rykie's envious stare and Joy's wide grin, drew herself up with dignity.

"There's nothing to tell. We just played games after school, when I had to wait for a friend who is Jaques in the play. There she is! You can talk to her, if you like. If you put me in the paper, for goodness' sake don't call me Janet! I'm just Jen."

He made a note seriously and asked a few questions. Then he moved on in search of fresh prey, and Jen turned to face her amused friends.

"Your first encounter with the Press, Mrs. Wren?" Joy mocked.

"It was quite right, Jen. You and your babes deserve to be in the paper," Joan said. "If he wants a group of the children, you must certainly be taken sitting in the middle. Think how pleased your mother and father will be!"

"This is fame!" Jen said solemnly. "I thought Rykie was to be the star of the fête!"

"Everybody's raving about those kids of yours," Rykie said in puzzled surprise. "They've stolen the show."

Photos were duly taken, and on Thursday Jen carried home in triumph a picture of herself surrounded by small children, which gave great pleasure to her parents.

"But I'm much more thrilled about Mr. Terry Van Toll's films!" she said. "I'm simply dying to see them!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

FILM STARS AFTER ALL

To Jen, holiday-making in the heather on her moors, there came an urgent letter from Joan.

She went racing to her mother. "Oh, Mother, let me go! Just for a week-end, to say good-bye to Rykie!"

"It seems a long way for such a short time," said the matter-of-fact mother.

"Joy will meet me in London with the car; it's as easy as easy! And I may never see Rykie again. The Van Tolls are to be at the Abbey for the week-end. They've been to Rome and Vienna; fancy Rykie seeing Rome! And they've been to Glasgow to see Angus, and he's getting on awfully well. His McAlistair man thinks no end of him. It's all in Joan's letter. They're starting for Hollywood on Tuesday. Oh, Mother dear, do let me go!"

"You shall certainly go," her father said. "But I didn't think you were so keen on this friend?"

"Rykie? I loathed her at first. She was a complete and absolute stranger, and she didn't fit in with any of our ways and ideas. But she got a lot better, and I quite liked her before the end of the term. And she really is clever. She'll be a great actress before very long."

Joy and Rykie met the train and joyfully carried her off to the Hall. Joan and Belle and Terry were on the steps to greet her, and then she ran in to hug Mrs. Shirley and thank her for the invitation.

"Now you must be fed," Joan said. "And after that we have something to show you."

Jen looked round at them, her eyes very bright. "Pictures? Were they good? Have we really been in a film?"

"They're very good indeed," Joan said, laughing. "Set your mind at rest about that. But you won't see them till you've had a good tea."

As Joan led her upstairs for a wash after her journey, Jen said thoughtfully, "I want to talk! I'm alone a lot at home and I've had time to think. Joan, it does seem as if you needn't have sold that ruby! Mr. Terry Van Toll could have given Angus his music lessons, and you could have kept all Jehane's jewels together."

"I know. But I'm glad we did it. I like to feel we helped Angus to have his start. Presently Terry will take care of his career. And don't you think it has made a difference to Rykie?"

“Your selling the ruby? Of course it has! She’s much nicer than she was. You and Joy showed her how marvellous people could be. She’ll be different all her life, because of that ruby.”

“Then it has been well worth it. We don’t grudge one ruby.”

“All the same, it’s jolly decent of you,” Jen said. “Do you suppose we’ll hear about Rykie when she goes to Hollywood?”

“She’ll write once or twice and then she’ll forget us,” Joan prophesied. “I don’t expect her to keep up with us for very long. But she may come to see us, if she is in England at any time, and presently we may hear of her from the newspapers.”

“‘This brilliant young actress’; that’s what you mean? But I don’t believe she’ll forget you, and all of us, and the Abbey, though she may not write many letters.”

“You think we’ve made an impression on her? I wonder!” Joan said thoughtfully.

“A jolly big one, I should think. She won’t forget the refectory in a hurry! And I’m sure she’ll always squirm inside when she sees a ruby. I’m ready! Now for tea, and then pictures! It was lovely of you to ask me. Do my children come out well?”

“Beautifully. They make a charming film,” Joan assured her.

Jen sat in rapture before the screen which Terry had rigged up in the library, giving little cries and gasps of delight, at which the rest smiled in sympathy.

“The procession—Joy, how beautifully you did it! So slow and dignified! Joan—oh, you look lovely! I say! Aren’t I funny? Too funny for words! But I’m walking quite nicely; I don’t scuttle along like a frightened rabbit! Now the dances—oh, *how* lovely! Just exactly as they look! You are clever, Mr. Terry Van Toll!”

“You didn’t expect them to look different, did you?” he said, laughing.

“There’s me doing ‘Jenny’!”

“Jen, *dear*! Your grammar is as bad as Rykie’s!”

“There am I, doing ‘Jenny Pluck Pears,’ and not at all badly either,” Jen said, with dignity. “Oh, look at my babies! How simply marvellous!”

“Terry is giving us the film and the projector and other things, and he has shown us how to use them,” Joy said. “So we shall have a permanent record of our dances, and we’ll invite the Club for a private view.”

“Oh, glorious—super! But don’t you want to take the films to America?” She looked at Terry. “It’s terribly kind of you to give them to us!”

“We’re going to make another one for him to take away,” Joan explained. “To-morrow Nesta and Beetle and Muriel and one or two others, and Miss Lane and her fiddle, are coming to tea, and we’re going to dance

on the lawn, while Terry makes films, so that he can show English dancing to his friends. We'll do 'Newcastle' and 'The Old Mole,' and 'Picking Up Sticks' and 'Hey, Boys' and 'Jenny,' and some longways. We had to have you, of course!"

"And some morris jigs," Joy added. "You're going to do 'Jockie' with me, and 'Princess Royal' with Joan. It will be quite a decent show."

"Think of America seeing me doing 'Jockie'!" Jen chuckled. "We really shall be film stars! I never thought I should see Joan on the pictures!"

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Because of copyright considerations, the illustration by Frank Varty (1906-1984) has been omitted from this etext.

[The end of *Strangers at the Abbey* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]