

# THE ABBEY GIRLS AGAIN



*Elsie J. Oxenham*

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THE  
ABBEY GIRLS AGAIN

*by*  
ELSIE J. OXENHAM

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## CHAPTER I OFF TO THE PICTURES

“You’ll come, won’t you?”

“Of course she’ll come. We couldn’t go to the pictures without her. Six o’clock at the corner, all of you!”

“I can’t manage it before half-past,” and Biddy Devine hesitated. “I really ought not to come at all. It’s the third time this week, Doris. Poor old Mary won’t like it.”

“Oh, but she can’t stop you! You must have some fun, like everybody else. Be a sport, Biddy, and dodge her somehow!” said another of the girls, who were standing in a bunch at the door of a big commercial training college in the heart of London.

“Bring her, too,” suggested a girl who only knew Biddy slightly.

“My hat! She’d never go to the pictures!” laughed Doris. “She’s as old as St. Paul’s!”

“Can’t be, if she’s Biddy’s sister. Biddy’s only fifteen. Is she a step, Biddums?”

“No, she’s my whole sister. She’s the eldest and I’m the youngest. The three boys in between are abroad,” Biddy said. “She isn’t so fearfully old, but she’s settled down and doesn’t care about going out.”

“Awfully stodgy for you!” one of her friends said sympathetically. “But you must get round her this time, Biddy. For the boys are going to meet us, and you know they like you to come.”

Biddy knew it very well. She was pretty and good company, and a general favourite with this set into which she had drifted at the college, girls and boys alike. She knew her sister did not like her friends; but she argued that as they were all preparing for the same life, planning to be clerks or typists, she might as well find her companions among them at once.

But, reason as she might, an uncomfortable feeling remained, and as she climbed the long, bare stairs to their top flat Biddy was wondering if Mary would be very much upset to hear she wanted to go out again.

“It does leave her alone an awful lot!” she mused, as she went more and more slowly up the stairs. “I wonder she doesn’t *make* me stop in sometimes! I’d hate it if she did, but it’s queer that she doesn’t try it on. But I must have some fun; I’m only fifteen! Mary’s so awfully stodgy to live with!”

Then, perforce, she banished all such thoughts, and pushed open their door, which was standing ajar.

“Mary’s in before me to-night! I must have stayed talking longer than usual.”

The one who reached home first was expected to put the kettle on the gas ring and begin preparations for tea, so Bidy, putting away the latchkey she had had ready, entered hopefully, and was not disappointed. The kettle was singing, and Mary sat on the hearthrug making toast.

“Smells good!” Bidy sniffed happily. “Am I fearfully late, Mary, or are you early? I got talking with the rest, and you know what I’m like when that happens!”

“When doesn’t it happen?” Mary laughed a little. “You’re the biggest talker in London, I believe, Bidy. Come and finish this slice, and I’ll make the tea. I was just going to start without you.”

Bidy glanced at her as she curled up on the rug. “Anything nice happened? You look brightened up, somehow. Oh, is it those violets? Who gave them to you?”

Mary laughed again as she bent to fill the brown teapot from the kettle on the ring. “Wouldn’t you like to know? Well, I won’t tease. It was a girl who came into the office this afternoon. Sit in to the table, and I’ll tell you about her.”

“No, I’m going to sit here by the fire. We’ll put things on the floor. Tell me about the violet girl!”

“Such a pretty girl; such a happy girl!” Mary said wistfully. “She came in a little car, and brought some manuscripts; it’s a series of articles, written by her father, and I’m to type them. She asked to see the typist who would do the work, so Mrs. Taylor called me up, and Miss Robins—she’s the pretty girl—said I might take the work and look through it to-night, and her father would let me have some special instructions by to-morrow morning. She asked for my address, in case he wanted to post them to me, and left the papers for me to get used to the writing, she said.”

“But what about the violets?” Bidy demanded. “Everyone who floats in doesn’t give you flowers! At least, I’ve never heard of it before.”

“It’s not always done,” Mary agreed gravely. “Miss Robins was carrying these, and wearing some more. They smelt so sweetly that I had to look at them, and she said, ‘Aren’t they perfect? Would you like them?’ and she laughed and shoved the whole lot into my hands, and ran off. Wasn’t it kind?”

“What was she like? Dark or fair?”

“Oh, fair! Her hair was yellow, and cut short, all in curls, and she had the happiest blue eyes, and the sweetest mouth, as if she had laughed all her

life.”

“What was she dressed in?” demanded Biddy.

“A furry cap and a big fur coat. Her frock was blue, but I couldn’t see much of it. There was something about the way she walked that fascinated me. She cheered up our dull office just by appearing in it to-day. Have you much to do to-night?”

Biddy coloured, but spoke up sturdily. “No, I’ve almost done. But the girls asked me to meet them and go to the pictures, and I said I would. I know you won’t like it, but I can’t let them down.”

“No, but you needn’t have promised!” Mary jerked, and bit her lip. “It’s the third time this week. Biddy, you must *not*! You must stop this. You think of nothing but the cinema.”

“I must do something!” Biddy urged resentfully. “I can’t stick here all evening! I’m not so fearfully keen on the pictures themselves; sometimes they’re silly, and I get sick of them. What do you want me to do?”

“You might darn your own stockings for once!” Mary retorted sharply. “Or mend your clothes. You leave it all to me, as if you were a baby!”

Biddy looked conscience-stricken. “I will do my own this time, truth and honour, I will! You put them on my bed, and I’ll do the lot. Not just at once, perhaps, but I will do them. You see, I simply must go to-night; they’re expecting me; and I’ve saved enough off my dinners and bus fares, so it won’t cost you anything. And to-morrow is Doris’s party; her birthday, you know. But I’ll sit at home and darn all Saturday evening; I promise you that! So you don’t really mind, do you?” she coaxed.

“Yes, I do mind!” Mary’s lips had been pursed ominously as she listened, and now she broke out indignantly, “You’ve no right to save off your food for silly things like the cinema! You ought to begin to think—you ought to see—you’re such a baby! But I can’t—I’m no use at bullying you”—she rose hastily, her lips trembling, and began to clear the table.

Biddy gave her a scared glance. Then she began to help silently.

Mary, with her back to her, was tidying the cupboard. She spoke hurriedly, “You’d better go off to your friends. Don’t be too late home. I’m sorry—it’s so stodgy at home. I suppose it’s my fault.”

Feeling intensely uncomfortable, but determined to go out, Biddy crept away, leaving her sister rummaging in biscuit tins with unusual energy. “She’ll have got over it by supper time! When she thinks about it, she’ll know I couldn’t stick there doing nothing all evening!” she said to herself, as she flung on cap and coat and ran down the long stone staircase.

Mary heard her go. With tightened lips, she carried away the tea things and washed them up, and tidied the little sitting-room. Then, sitting on a footstool by the gas fire, she took up the manuscript Jen Robins had brought



and glanced through it. That was all she could do till the “further instructions” arrived. She put the papers away carefully, and took up a basket of mending.

Then she flung the stockings on to the table, and dropped again on her stool before the fire. All this, even the study of the manuscript, was shirking, holding at bay the thoughts which cried aloud for attention.

The biggest of all her problems was Biddy.

“Why did that happen to-night?” she asked herself brokenly. “Why am I such a failure? I can’t blame the child. If she finds home and me stodgy and dull, she will go out, of course. I can’t control her either. I can’t make her want to stay at home, and I can’t force her to stay against her will. She’s far more determined than I am.”

For a time she stared helplessly into the untroubled glowing asbestos. But there was no help there, no solution or hope for the future. The problem baffled Mary, as it had done before. This was not the first time she had been driven to face the question.

“It’s perhaps because Biddy was away at school so long. We’ve grown apart, and now I don’t know how to enter into her feelings as she needs me to do. I have tried! I’ll go on trying, but I don’t see that I’m to blame if I fail. I suppose I’m soft with her, but I’m made that way.”

She stifled the whisper of a long-suffering conscience, but an uneasy feeling of failure remained.

And then, all unconsciously—except for that restless whisper which tried to show her the truth—she answered her questions as they were answered every time. For, putting aside the thought of Biddy and her own failure, she took up the basket and settled to a long evening of stocking-darning, and promptly was lost to the outside world in an inner world of dreams.

It had happened so simply. She had a vivid imagination, inherited from her father. She had tried to write down her dreams, but he had told her plainly she was on the wrong lines and was producing nothing which could be published. To change all her way of thought, and become practical in her imagining, had been too difficult and troublesome. She had kept the dreams, but had kept them for herself alone. Whenever the outer world was dull, or when problems were too hard, Mary lapsed into her dream-world and was happy.

## CHAPTER II

### THE MARY AND DOROTHY

An imperative knock brought Mary to her feet with a start, her eyes dazed and dreamy. She threw her darning aside and hurried to the door.

“Oh!” she gasped, utterly taken aback, and stood staring amazedly.

“May I come in, just for a second?” a happy girl’s voice, full of music, asked the question. “Did I startle you? Were you asleep?” and the blue eyes searched Mary’s face curiously.

She was tall, but managed her height in a wonderful way, moving with that easy, unconscious grace which Mary had noticed in the office. She wore the same round fur cap on short yellow curls, and the big coat, which she had thrown open as she climbed the long stairs. The blue of her frock matched her eyes; she was keenly, intensely alive, and her face and voice had a radiant note of happiness very fascinating and quite irresistible.

“Please do come in!” Mary had found her breath again; it had gone completely in the face of Jen’s stream of eager talk. “Won’t you sit down? I’ve read through the papers.”

Jen’s eyes had seen the stockings and the mending basket, and had brightened at sight of the violets, on the table and on the mantelpiece. “I came to talk business!” she announced, taking the big chair by the fire, “but I’d far rather put it off. I brought you something; do you mind? When I got home I found a huge box waiting for me, sent by some girls I know. It was full of wild daffodils, far more than we can use even if we put them in every room. Our flowers are much later than yours here, you know. April is daffodil time with us. So I brought along a few to you. And a few early bluebells from the sheltered woods.”

“Oh! Bluebells and daffodils!” Mary’s hands reached out for the basket. “Oh, how did you know? I starve for them every April; we used to live in the country. I love them better than the summer flowers, I really think.”

Jen’s eyes were satisfied as she watched the change in her face. “Do you live all alone?” she demanded severely. “I suppose it’s frightfully rude to ask, but I simply must know. You couldn’t be as lonely as that, surely! Do you mind my asking?”

“Not a scrap,” Mary said swiftly. “It’s kind of you to be interested enough to ask. I have a little sister, who is only fifteen. She’s out; she loves the cinema, and I don’t care about it, so she goes with her chums.”

“And you darn her stockings?”

“Well, isn’t that an elder sister’s privilege?” Mary smiled. “If Bidly has to put up with a sister twice her age, she may at least expect to get her darning done for her. I shall put some of these daffodils on the mantelpiece beside the violets, against the mirror; then I shall have them twice over. I love flowers against a big glass, don’t you?”

“I never thought of it. It’s a lovely idea!” Jen watched her as she arranged bluebells and daffodils in a vase to stand against the mirror.

“I shall take some to the office to-morrow and put them on my desk, and I’ll see woods and fields all the time I’m working. I think Mr. Robins’ manuscript will be interesting to type; I’m looking forward to it.”

“I brought you this,” and Jen handed her an envelope.

Mary glanced through the instructions. “That will be a great help. I wish everybody would take as much trouble.”

“Oh, but we want it to look right!” Jen laughed. “It’s part of Daddy’s baby—the child of his old age! Some day he’ll put these papers together and make a book on Yorkshire out of them, and then he’ll simply burst with pride. He’s rather ill, and it gives him something to think about. I could have posted that note,” she changed the subject abruptly and plunged eagerly into another. “But I wanted to see you. I wanted to ask you to do a little job for me. Will you?”

Mary’s face lit up. “I’d love to! Have you been writing articles, too?”

“Not yet,” Jen twinkled. “Perhaps some day! No, this is nothing so thrilling as that. It’s too little a job to take to an office, but I thought somebody who had a typewriter might be willing to do it in an odd moment.”

“I’ve a typewriter here,” Mary said eagerly.

“I want about two dozen programmes for a show I’m giving with a few friends. I’m rather thrilled about it! Shall I tell you?”

Mary sat down on her stool by the fire again to listen. “Please do! I’d love to hear. What kind of show?”

“Oh, folk-dancing! There isn’t anything else I care about; nothing else worth while! It’s this way! We’ve taken a flat close by, right in town here, for six months, so that Daddy can have treatment from a specialist. Of course, we went to church here and made friends. The people there have a girls’ club, and the leader, who taught them gym and drill and singing, has had to go away for some months. So the club is stranded; and the committee people have found out that I’m a little bit mad on the subject of folk-dancing. Anyway, they asked me to carry on till the other person comes back, and gave me leave to teach all the folk-dancing I like.”

Mary managed to get in a word with difficulty. “What is folk-dancing? I’m afraid I’m very ignorant!”

“Oh, not more than lots of people!” Jen laughed. “You really only know the difference when you’ve seen country-dancing. Folk-dancing is country, morris, or sword; old dances that have come down to us for hundreds of years, with the most beautiful old music that haunts one for days. But the girls won’t know what it’s like, so I’ve asked a few friends to come along the first evening and give them a little show, just by way of a start and to introduce the new subject.”

“To introduce the new teacher, I should say,” Mary glanced at her eager face. “Lucky girls! How they’ll enjoy it!”

“I hope they’ll love the dances! But really I’m feeling frightfully nervous about the job. I’m only eighteen! There may be lots of them older than I am.”

“I don’t think you need be nervous,” Mary said quietly.

“I don’t know!” Jen said doubtfully. “I shall try to make them love the dances. Well, I thought I ought to have a few programmes for the friends who are helping me, and for one or two outsiders who may come to look on.”

“I’ll do them for you gladly. Who is going to give the show? Shall you dance yourself?”

“Oh, rather! There will be eight or a dozen of us. I know lots of folk-dance people now, and I’ve begged a few to come. They’re awfully decent, and they promised right away. But I mustn’t go babbling on like this. You should cough, or yawn, or tread on my toe, or pretend to go to sleep. My friends have to stop me sometimes, if they want an innings themselves. I’ll have bored you to tears!”

“I’m not weeping,” Mary assured her swiftly. “I’ve felt no desire to yawn. I’m very much interested. May I see your programme?”

“Yes, you’d better look through it; it’s in my fearful scrawl again. I ought to have printed it. Some of the names are unusual,” and Jen handed her a sheet of paper.

Mary read the names aloud. “‘The Helston Furry;’ is that Helston in Cornwall? But how interesting! ‘The Mary and Dorothy;’ is that really a dance?” She looked up, a touch of colour in her face, and laughed. “I hope it’s pretty! Those are my names. I never knew I was called after a dance!”

“Oh, it’s a dear! It was my first dance. You ought to learn it. We put that in for me. Wouldn’t you like to come and see my show?”

“Oh!” Mary looked up at her, her face flushing in excitement. “Did you see how much I wanted to be asked? I tried not to show it. I’d like it above all things!”

“You must come, then, and bring your sister. I’ll send you tickets. I hope it will be good, but you must remember we’re only learning ourselves. We

aren't very good. The girls won't know that, but I hope other people won't be too critical."

"Biddy and I won't know either. I'm sure it will be delightful. But won't you be nervous?"

"Of the audience, do you mean? Gracious, no! They simply won't exist, once the music starts. Now I simply must go. I've a great friend coming for a day or two, and she'll be there waiting for me by this time."

"Thank you so much for the flowers!" said Mary, with a little smile, as she opened the door. "And you will let us see your show?"

"I'll let you have all particulars. Biddy must come, too. Good-night!"

As she closed the door, Mary glanced at the clock, then went to uncover her typewriter. "I've a clear hour before Biddy's likely to come in. I'll get the programmes done at once," and she calculated distances, arranged the setting of her page, and set to work with real enjoyment.

Here was something pleasant to think over, something to look forward to which in its very novelty would be exciting. She wondered if it were the dancing that had made tall Jen move so beautifully; it would be a joy to see her dance! And was it this interest, this delight in music, that gave her her look of radiant happiness?

The sound of Biddy's latchkey brought her back to earth with a start, but it was from dreams of the future.

"Goodness *me*, Mary!" Biddy's voice rang out. "Who've you had here? Daffodils! Bluebells! *Mary!*" and she stared at her sister with accusing eyes.

"I've been down into Surrey on a magic carpet and brought them back for you. No, I mean my fairy godmother has been here in her chariot, and she's going to let Cinderella go to the ball some night soon. Aren't they too lovely for words? I'll get supper, and then tell you all about it."

### CHAPTER III

## THE FAIRY GODMOTHERS

“Did you have a good time?” Mary asked, as she laid the table for supper.

“No, it was silly stuff. I wished I hadn’t gone. The rest thought it was awfully funny, but I got sick of it. But they didn’t want me to come away before the end.”

Mary listened gladly, but made no comment. Now and then a remark of Biddy’s showed that there was hope for her still. It was this side of Biddy that Mary would gladly have strengthened, if she had known how. To-night, stirred to new and active thought by Jen’s visit, she made a really useful suggestion.

“Biddy, have you ever thought of joining the Guides? There are some who must meet near here. I often see them in the street.”

Biddy stared at her. “Whatever put that into your head? You are funny, Mary! You’ve never mentioned the Guides before! I don’t think I want to, thank you!”

“I thought perhaps you’d like to. It was a sudden idea. Do any of your crowd belong?”

“Help, no! They laugh at the Guides. You have to work too jolly hard. Now tell me about the flowers, Mary! What did she come for?”—she had already identified the fairy godmother with the violet girl of the afternoon.

“I’d have waited in to see her if I’d known!” she said, as Mary told her story. “Let me see the programmes! I’ll be very careful.—Oh, I know some of these! We did a few country-dances at school. I liked ‘Gathering Peascods.’”

“I didn’t know you had done any folk-dancing,” Mary said thoughtfully, a new idea dawning in her mind.

“We did this one at school, and the girls thought it was rather silly. You have hankies, one in each hand, and you clap and stamp. It’s weird to think of grown-up people doing these dances. I thought they were only for schools!”

“Miss Robins didn’t speak like that at all. She sounded as if she loved them. Perhaps it depends how they’re done.”

“I’d like to see how she does them! I say, Mary, couldn’t we ask her to squeeze us into a corner?”

Mary laughed, and coloured a little in unusual excitement. "I wouldn't have liked to ask, but she thought of it for herself. We're going, Biddy! She asked us both; she mentioned you especially."

"Oh, cheers! Cheers!" and Biddy sprang up and danced round the table, the programme held aloft in her right hand, and ended with both arms flung overhead. "Oh, she is a sport! I'll simply love it! When is it, Mary? What shall we wear? You'll come, won't you? You'd like it, I'm sure!" with a spasm of anxiety lest Mary should back out. "I'm sure you'll love it!"

"Of course I'm going," Mary said swiftly. "I'm every bit as keen as you are. This will be worth while."

"Tell me every word she told you about it!" Biddy begged. "We'll wash up afterwards!" and pushed Mary down on the stool before the fire and squatted on the rug herself.

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The fairy godmother went flying into her own flat. It was a ground floor flat, to Jen's endless regret; but that had been necessary on her father's account. She liked top storeys, and had hoped for one with a flat roof, but had been obliged to accept the inevitable and had characteristically found reason to rejoice in it.

"At least I can practise jigs and do capers without worrying about the people underneath!"

She played an impatient tattoo on the knocker, and as the door opened burst out, "Has Joy—oh, Joy! You dear!" and she hurled herself on the bronze-haired girl of twenty-one who had answered her knock.

"Don't knock me down, Jenny-Wren, or I'll never come again!" Joy gasped, half strangled. "Remember you weigh about a ton."

"I don't! Oh, I don't, Joy Shirley! How long have you been waiting?"

"Yes, you do, when you throw yourself at people like that. Oh, hours and hours! Long enough to have a bath, and unpack and change my dress! Where have you been my child? Who are these new people for whom you neglect your very-oldest-in-the-world friend? Your mother only said there was a girl you seemed interested in."

"I want to tell you about her," Jen sobered suddenly. "I want you to help me, 'Traveller's Joy.' That's why I went to see her. I told her I went because I wanted her to do a typing job for me, but really and truly it was to find out more about her. I think she's a case for you. I'll tell you all about her, but I must just run in to father and mother first, or they'll think I have been kidnapped."

"Oh, they've heard you long ago! You make noise enough for six!"

"They like it," Jen assured her heartily. "It cheers them up. You slip into my room, and I'll come in a sec., and we'll have a talkee-talkee. I want to

hear all about to-day from you.”

Joy was sitting in the firelight when she returned; Jen dropped on the rug beside her, and said quietly, “You tell first, Joy. My new people can wait. Did you see the Pixie? Didn’t she keep you longer than you expected? I’d nearly given you up. Or did you come up to town late? Or did you have a smash-up?”

“No, the car’s all right, and I came early,” Joy said soberly.

“It wasn’t the Pixie who kept me, though it’s always hard to come away from her. We’re to go and see her. She’s got some new and exciting stunt on, and she wants to show us all about it.”

“How thrilling! She is one for ideas! We’ll go, of course,” Jen said fervently. “But what made you so late, ‘Traveller’s Joy?’”

“The kiddies,” Joy’s face sobered again.

“Oh! The crippled children you were to take out for a ride?”

“Yes,” Joy moved restlessly. “I couldn’t bear to take them back again, and say they’d got to go home. They were just in heaven; I hated to tell them it was all over! The Pixie had them waiting when I called at the Club, five of them—poor little twisted things; Jen, it’s horrible! Tiny kids, and they’ll never be any better! I’d only meant to give them a two or three hours’ ride; but when I saw it was the great day of their lives, I couldn’t bear to cut it short. I took them to the inn and gave them lunch in the garden—eggs and jam and cakes and milk, because I wasn’t sure what they could eat. Then we went into a field and picked buttercups—and if you’d heard the shrieks of excitement! They’d positively never done such a thing before. And in the woods we filled the basket—it was a big one—with fir cones, which they thought perfectly wonderful, and with a heap of those lovely long yellow leaves of sweet chestnut that cover the ground in there; and they’ve taken them home, and stacks of wild flowers. So you’ll understand it was quite late, and they were all fagged out, before we got back to Plaistow! I apologised to the Pixie, but I think she understood.”

“Joy, what a beautiful day! For them *and* for you!” Jen said warmly.

“My dear, I was stiff with shyness!”

“I don’t believe you were shy. You’ve never been shy yet. And you always have plenty to say.”

“Well, I hadn’t plenty to-day. I didn’t know how to talk to those East-End kiddies.”

“We’ll know how to cool you off when we want to,” Jen remarked unkindly. “We’ll send for a Plaistow crowd and keep them in reserve. But it isn’t anything to joke about. Joy, you have been a real fairy godmother to those children to-day. I wish I could have seen you with them!”



“The trouble is,” and Joy’s strong hands, so used to the steering-wheel of her car, clenched in tense feeling, “that there are hundreds and thousands of them. And I can go once a week to take out five at a time!”

“I know,” Jen said soberly. “But you can be glad you’re doing even that. Think of your five to-night! Think how they’ll talk of it for months!”

“Think how they’ll want to go again! I’d have liked to promise to take them once a week. But it wouldn’t be fair. There are all the others. Tell me about your girl, Jenny-Wren! I’ve done my share!”

“She’s called The Mary and Dorothy,” Jen’s eyes laughed in the firelight. “Jen Robins!”

“She is. Well, Mary-Dorothy, then; and the little sister’s Biddy; there are only the two of them. She’s the typist who’s going to do Daddy’s Yorkshire stuff, and she’s going to do our programmes for next Wednesday. I’ve asked her to come and watch. I’m starting a Crusade, ‘Traveller’s Joy!’ I’m going to make Mary-Dorothy folk-dance, or know the reason why.”

“Will it be so awfully difficult?” Joy laughed.

“My dear, I think it will need an earthquake!” Jen said dramatically. “I haven’t dared to tell her! She’d die at the thought.”

“But why?” Joy asked, laughing again. “Why are you so keen to convert her? And why will it be so hard?”

“She needs it,” Jen said, with conviction. “I feel it in my bones, in every separate one of them, that Mary-Dorothy needs it. She looks as if she hadn’t ever done a thing in the way of games, or anything active, in her life. I don’t suppose she’ll be able to run or skip.”

“Help!” said Joy. “Aren’t you taking on rather a large order, my child?”

“You’d think so, if you’d seen her. I tell you, it’s a regular Crusade. But I mean to see it through.”

“You mean it will be difficult because she hasn’t done anything of the kind; at least, you think she hasn’t?”

“She’ll think she’s too old,” Jen said, in a tone of conviction. “She’ll be scared stiff; I expect she’s horribly self-conscious and shy, and miserable because of it. She looks all shut up inside herself.”

“You think she’s the kind of working girl who ought to be folk-dancing in her evenings; the kind we were speaking of last term?”

“Well, don’t you think so, too? Think how good it would be for her! The music, and the exercise, and the friends, and the fun of it!”

“Yes, I’m with you there. If she’s coming to your show, perhaps you could get her into the club; then you’d have your chance to wake her up.”

“I think that’s what I want to do; wake her up,” Jen said reflectively. “She struck me as only half alive. But she’ll need a lot of persuading, ‘Traveller’s Joy.’ She’s thirty; and I think she feels sixty.”

“Thirty! H’m! What made her tell you?”

“She didn’t exactly. But she said her little sister was fifteen. And later she said if Biddy lived with a sister twice her age, she might very well expect to get her stockings darned for her. It’s not too old, Joy. Look at the people we know who must be over thirty; and how beautifully they dance!”

“I know. But it’s different if you’ve been doing it for ten or twelve years. It’s old to begin.”

“I know that. She’ll be stiff, and awkward, and awfully shy and frightened of it. But she can get over that, Joy. And just think how she’ll enjoy it!”

“You’re a good little child, Jenny-Wren,” Joy said swiftly. “And I’ll aid and abet your schemes in any way I can. We’ll convert the Mary-and-Dorothy between us! Do you want me to ask her to Grace-Dieu?”

“They used to live in the country,” Jen said simply. “And if you’d seen her with some bluebells and daffodils I took! They’d just come from home. Mary-Dorothy nearly cried when she saw them, and held out her arms for them; and stuck them up in front of a mirror so that she’d get them twice over! If you’d got the hostel started, I’d have asked you to invite her, Joy. Perhaps later on you will be able to.”

“I’ll see her first,” Joy said evasively.

“Oh, Joy! I’d forgotten. I want you to come with me to-morrow night. You are staying till Saturday, aren’t you? I want you to come to see her; we’ll say we’ve come to fetch the programmes! But really and truly I’m going to take my pipe and let her hear some of the tunes, and see what effect they have on her.”

“Oh, you can play it, then?” Joy teased. “You’re getting on well with your new toy?”

“It’s not a toy. It will be most useful when I get my class started,” Jen said, with dignity.

“You don’t think you’ll be able to play for dancing, surely?” Joy mocked.

“I don’t think; I know!” Jen said calmly.

“Right-o! You take the baby music along to-morrow night. I’ll come with you,” Joy said willingly. “Then we’ll go on to classes, I suppose? There are classes, aren’t there? Aren’t the holidays over?”

“The first classes of the term. It’s the last week of April. I wonder who will be teaching? I mean to go every week.”

“I’ll go with you when I’m in town. But you’re coming to stay with me at the Hall when the others come home, and for the May-Day doings,” Joy reminded her. “You must come to see Queen Rosamund crowned!”

“Is she all right? And Maidlin?”

“Maidie’s been visiting her aunty in Cumberland, and Ros has gone to her folks for the holidays, so we’ve had a childless household since Easter. I nearly came to fetch you to fill the blank, but I knew you’d be still getting settled.”

“Have you seen Joan yet?” Jen asked wistfully. “I haven’t had a line from her, though she said she’d let me know when she was in London.”

“She doesn’t know your new address, my dear kid. She’s arrived; I saw her for half a sec. on my way to Plaistow this morning.”

“Does she seem different?” Jen asked anxiously.

“Not the slightest scrap of an atom! You wouldn’t believe she’d got a husband and had had a honeymoon. Looks ever so well and jolly and brown, and says they’ve had a gorgeous time in Switzerland and Italy; and if anything she’s prettier than ever. But otherwise she’s just our Joan, and not changed a bit.”

## CHAPTER IV TROUBLE WITH BIDDY

Biddy Devine went flying home from college next day. It was all important that she should get in before Mary. Biddy sighed in relief when she found the door still locked; and entering, shut herself into her own little room, and proceeded to unpack a mysterious case and put its contents out of sight.

With a wistful sigh of delight and anticipation, she shook out a soft pink dress, and hung it in her cupboard, though it was not crushed.

To-night she was to go to Doris's birthday party, and Doris was seventeen, and so grown up that Biddy, who was only just fifteen, though big for her age, felt uncomfortably childish beside her. They would all be very grown up to-night, and Doris had said teasingly that Biddy would be the baby of the party.

"Baby, indeed! I'll show them!" Biddy had said to herself, and had resolved to be as grown up as any of them; it would be difficult, but she would manage it somehow.

She was not practised in double-dealing, however, and felt very uncomfortable as she went, at sound of Mary's key to help to prepare tea. She had not been in the habit of deceiving her sister; it had not been necessary.

She hurried away to dress, and Mary sat dreaming and thinking. Biddy had seemed strange and unlike herself to-night; was she just excited over the party? "I wonder if I could help her to get ready?" she mused. "She'll be coming for me to hook her frock. I'll go and offer instead."

She went across to Biddy's door. To her amazement it was locked. "Biddy!" she called, startled. "Why have you locked the door?"

For one wild moment Biddy hesitated. But on the whole she was glad. Now Mary would have to know, and there would be no uncomfortable secret between them. It meant a scene; but Biddy always came off best in scenes. She would rather defy Mary than deceive her any day.

She threw open the door. "I'm nearly ready; how do you like the general effect? I simply couldn't go looking like a child, you know, Mary!"

For one long moment Mary stared at her. Biddy, but a grown-up Biddy, and prettier than Mary had ever dreamed she would be. Biddy in the pink frock, which hung in soft folds nearly to her ankles; with her pretty brown hair done up in the very newest style; how had she learned to do that?

“Where did you get that frock?” Mary was slowly growing less numb and awakening to the full seriousness of the situation. “You didn’t save that off dinners and bus fares!”

Biddy laughed, but with a touch of nervousness, “No, old dear, I didn’t! It’s Vivien Turner’s. It’s perfectly new; she only wore it once or twice, and then her father died and she didn’t go to any more parties. I couldn’t possibly go in last summer’s faded old rag; it would be horribly short for me now, too.”

“I don’t know how you can have thought I would let you go out like this, in borrowed clothes!” Mary pulled herself together and spoke resolutely. “Biddy, I simply won’t have it! Besides, you look ridiculous! You’re only fifteen!”

Biddy glanced at herself in the glass. “I don’t look only fifteen!” she said triumphantly. “Oh, don’t be silly, Mary! Don’t start to make a fuss now! I’m glad you came in. I did want to show you the frock. Isn’t it simply sweet?”

“You’re not going out in another girl’s dress,” Mary said decisively, but with a quiver of fear in her voice. “You may go if you’ll wash your face and take your hair down and put on your own frock.”

“Mary, you’re simply an idiot! As if I would!”

“You’re not going in that frock.” Mary moved towards the door.

With one leap, Biddy caught up hat and big coat and handbag, and reached the door at the same moment. “Don’t be mad, Mary! You know you can’t stop me. Of course I’m going.”

Mary’s blood was up. “I won’t have it, Biddy. It’s hateful of you,” and she clung to the handle.

But she was small and slight, and Biddy was big and vigorous and at least as determined as she. It was hardly a scuffle; Biddy wrenched the handle round and sprang out into the passage, and stood triumphantly on the stairs to finish dressing.

“Sorry! But you can’t stop me that way. Don’t worry, Mary; I won’t be late if I can help it. And I’ll be awfully good for weeks and weeks! If you think about it, you’ll see I couldn’t possibly back out now!” and she ran off down the long staircase.

Cold, and trembling with indignation, Mary turned brokenly back into the bedroom. For some minutes she moved about, mechanically tidying up the confusion, making the room ready so that Biddy could roll into bed when she came home very tired.

When there was no more to be done, she went back to the sitting-room, and stood helplessly before the fire.

“There’s nothing I can do! I can’t control her, and she’s only fifteen! She can do anything she likes; and she knows it. I’ve missed my chance with her

somehow, and it won't come back. Where have I gone wrong? How have I failed?" Her head dropped on the mantelpiece beside the daffodils from Yorkshire, and she stood shaken with sobbing.

## CHAPTER V

### MARY-DOROTHY HEARS THE PIPES OF PAN

Mary, standing brokenly by the fireplace, suddenly raised her head and listened incredulously. From somewhere outside came a sound she had never heard before, clear, high, silvery notes—a merry jiggling tune.

An imperative knock startled her, as it had done the night before. “Horrors! Is it that girl again? I’m not fit to be seen!” she cried, under her breath.

But there was no help for it. That rat-tat demanded an answer, and the merry piping had ceased. Glad that the light was not switched on and that her back would be to the window, Mary hurried to the door.

Two girls in big tweed coats stood there. The second was not quite so tall as Jen, and had pretty bronze hair under her hat.

“Oh, Miss Devine, I came to ask if you had had any trouble with the programmes,” Jen began gaily. “I’m not in a hurry for them, but we happened to be passing. This is my friend, Joy Shirley. Did you like my pipe? I thought you ought to hear some of the tunes, after typing the names so often!”

“Was that the sweet, clear music? How do you do it? The programmes are ready; I took them to the office to-day in case you came in for them.”

“Did you do them right away, last night? How nice of you! But what about the darning? Has Bidy had to do it herself? Oh, are you all alone again? Does she go out every night?” Jen’s keen eyes had caught a glimpse of Mary’s face, as she turned for a moment to find the parcel of programmes, and she knew there was something wrong.

Mary laid the packet on the table, and turned and stood gazing down at the fire. “Not quite every night! This was a promise given some time ago. It’s her friend’s birthday party.—How did you make that strange music, Miss Robins? It was unlike anything I had ever heard.”

Jen laughed and produced her new “toy.” It was a little brown wooden pipe, with two holes in the front, and one at the back for the thumb. “It’s an old English morris pipe; what the morris men used to dance to, you know. This is a morris!”

She followed with others and Mary listened entranced, and gazed at her in breathless wonder, and forgot to keep her face hidden.

Joy drew her own conclusions. “She’s been crying because the kid will go out and leave her alone. Must be a little beast! And yet I don’t know; I

used to do it, in my own way. I'm not the one to talk!"

"Oh, that's delightful!" Mary exclaimed, as Jen paused for breath. "How can you get all those notes out of three holes?"

Jen laughed, and explained the principle of the pipe. "It's awfully clever! Think of those old morris men working out anything so brainy, centuries ago!"

"I say, Jenny-Wren," Joy said quickly, "you are getting on with the new toy! You almost made me get up and dance!"

Jen laughed. "Joy hasn't got one yet, so she's jealous, and calls it a toy, or 'baby music.' I love the little thing."

"I love the queer minor note in all those last three tunes," Mary commented shyly. "It's strange and plaintive, and unfinished, but I like it. I'm sure it will haunt me when you've gone."

The visitors looked at one another, and then looked at her with new respect. "It didn't take you long to discover it," Joy remarked. "Are you keen on music? It's not minor; but if you don't know what it is that's quite a good shot."

"It's the old scale so much of the folk music is written in," Jen explained. "It is haunting! Here's the scale!"—and she ran up an octave from her second note. "The ordinary scale starts on the first; you see? Listen to these!"—and she played the strange modal tunes again. "Stop me when you're tired!" and she piped dance after dance.

"Could you play the tune that's called after me?" Mary asked, with a shy little laugh.

"Help! Called after you! It's two hundred years old, Miss Devine," Jen said reprovingly. "I refuse to believe you were here two hundred years ago!—I knew you'd ask me that," she added tragically. "I nearly didn't bring the pipe for that very reason!"

"Can't you play it?" Mary laughed at the dismay in her tone. "Oh, please don't trouble!"

"It doesn't fit the pipe," Jen explained gloomily. "I can play it all but the last two notes, and then I have to alter it, and that just spoils it."

"She won't know that," Joy remarked. "Can't you jerk it up a bit? Start five notes higher up! Or will that let you in for sharps and flats? I know they're the terror of your life at present."

"I avoid them whenever I can," Jen admitted solemnly. "I can't jerk 'Mary and Dorothy' up, 'Traveller's Joy.' It's up on the roof already. This is the nearest I can do for you, Miss Devine!"

"Oh, but that's pretty!" Mary said eagerly. "And it has that queer, strange note in it again."



“Oh, yes, it’s got it badly!” Joy agreed. “No, I don’t like that ending, Jenny-Wren. Spoils the whole thing.”

“I know it does. But it’s not my fault. You must hear it played properly on a piano or fiddle, Miss Devine.”

“Won’t you come along with us for an hour and watch our classes?” Joy suggested; her eyes had been curiously on Mary whenever they were not on Jen and the pipe. “We’re on our way to classes now.”

“I forgot to apologise for our gym things,” Jen began to laugh. “Joy, you’re showing yards of leg sitting up there! Do get off the table! Miss Devine, if you haven’t realised she’s in her tunic, you will think she looks a sight. We always go to classes in gymmies.”

Joy rose from the table and loosened her big coat to show the navy blue tunic underneath. “We thought we’d come in our legs, as we were in our own car; it would hardly do for trains or buses!”

“You don’t mind tunics, Miss Devine? Everybody wears them.”

“The tunics make me more than ever determined to ask a great favour of you, Miss Robins,” Mary began, hurriedly and rather nervously. “May I? Can you spare a moment?”

“Of course! But we’ll be late for class if it takes very long,” Jen warned her.

“Would it be possible for my little sister to join your club?” Mary begged anxiously. “She has nothing of the kind, and it would be so good for her. I thought, perhaps, if your club was for girls of about her age, if you could take her in, it would give her something new to do.”

“Of course she must join,” Jen said warmly. “And you, too. I’d like you both to come. But it’s not my club. I’ve nothing to do with it, except to teach the folk-dancing. But I’ll make inquiries for you. If I can’t get a friend in, it’s funny, when I’m going to be the teacher.”

“Oh, you’ll be able to work it!” Joy assured her. “You aren’t very happy about your sister, Miss Devine?”

“I’m troubled about her. Indeed, I’m desperately unhappy about Biddy,” Mary broke out. “I ought not to trouble you with my worries, but you’ve come just at the moment when I’m most needing help, and it seems as if you could, perhaps, give me help in the best way.”

“Won’t you please go on, and tell us more?” Jen asked gravely. “We did see you were in trouble. We’d like to help.”

Mary stood with bent head, and spoke quickly. “She goes to a college for shorthand and typewriting—she was at a good boarding-school until two years ago. She’s made friends with a set I don’t like—girls and boys; and she’s out with them night after night, at the cinema chiefly. She’s

determined, and she's pretty, and these friends flatter her; and I simply don't count."

Jen was staring into the fire as she listened intently, her face pitiful. Joy was watching Mary closely all the time.

Mary went on swiftly, "I'm not complaining of what has happened, on my own account. I must have been to blame somehow, though I'm not sure how. But I am anxious, and frightened, about Biddy. She's only fifteen, and in some ways just a baby. And she won't take warnings from me. To-night"—she drew a sharp breath; the thought of that scene still hurt—"to-night she was going to her friend's party. I found her ready to go, dressed in an evening frock borrowed from a friend, unknown to me, with her hair put up, and putting on cosmetics. I said all I could, and forbade her to go, unless she went in her own clothes. She's stronger than I am, and—and she went in spite of me. She has a healthy side; she's not silly all through; but there's nothing to keep that side of her alive, and it's dying for want of use."

"The side that wants to get into a tunic and kick about—play football in a gym—or dance 'Rigs o' Marlow'!" said Joy.

"And 'Flamborough,' and perhaps 'Earsdon!' She'd love sword-dancing," Jen cried eagerly. "Oh, Miss Devine, we'll start a crusade to save her!"—her eyes flashed a warning look at Joy, but Joy was tactful and did not refer to the other "crusade."

"I think she will be keen," Mary said gratefully. "She has done two or three of your dances at school, and seems to have enjoyed them."

"But you must come with her, Miss Devine. That's understood; I insist on it! I'll only have Biddy if you'll come too."

"I'd love to come and look on," Mary said, with unusual warmth. "I love the music! I'd like to see what kind of dances you put to it. And I'd like to watch you teach, Miss Robins. If I may come with Biddy, and sit in a corner, I'll enjoy it tremendously."

"Oh, do you think you will? It sounds awfully dull! But we'll see. Of course I want you to come. You know, Miss Devine," and Jen spoke with a serious air, as though the twelve years' advantage in age had been on her side, "you and Biddy haven't had enough interests in common. You must insist on sharing in this new thing from the first."

"Miss Devine's in it first," Joy pointed out. "And she'll know a lot more about it if she comes with us to-night and watches a real proper class with a real proper teacher, not just you, Jenny-Wren! Won't you get your coat on, Miss Devine?"

"May I really come?" Mary looked incredulous. "I'd love it, of course."

"Then do. You'll be home long before Miss Biddy, unless she gets fed up with her party. It's just round the corner."

## CHAPTER VI

### THE RETURN OF THE PRESIDENT

“Now, Miss Devine, you’ll have to tuck into a corner and watch!” Jen explained. “For we shall be far too busy to talk. Once the music starts, we’ll forget all about you. You mustn’t mind that. But there’ll be plenty to see. We don’t know who will be teaching to-night. If you hear one of us shriek ‘Madam!’ very joyfully, you’ll know it’s the one I told you of, who’s going to dance at my show. Here we are! Now will you come up while we change, or slip into the hall at once?”

“I’ll come with you, if I may. Will they mind me looking on?”

“Not a scrap.”

She peeped through swing-doors while Joy was attending to the car, and met her with radiant face. “It is Madam! Aren’t we in luck? Come on and get ready!” and they raced up the stone stairs.

By this time Mary Devine knew Joy Shirley’s face almost as well as she knew Jen’s. To her bewilderment, the first person they saw in the dressing-room was another Joy—another slim straight girl in a blue tunic and green girdle, with the same bronze-red hair and light brown eyes, as like Joy as if she had been her twin. Such, indeed, it seemed she must be; and Mary gazed from one to the other in unbelieving amazement, and then looked at Joy to see what she would have to say to her double.

Joy seemed in no way surprised to meet herself in the flesh. “Hallo! You’ve got here first. Have you spoken to Madam?”

“No, is she here? She wasn’t when I arrived. Super! I’d better go and ask if she’ll have me.”

“Oh, wait for us! We won’t be a sec.!” Jen pleaded. “I say, Joy, you might explain Joan to Miss Devine. She thinks she’s had too much tea and is seeing double.”

“My cousin, Mrs. Raymond,” Joy explained. “Everybody thinks we’re twins, but we’re not.”

“You can tell them apart by Joan’s ring, now she’s gone and got married.” Jen was sitting on the floor, changing to low black slippers with no heels.

As they entered the big hall, Mary Devine shrank back shyly, and found a seat in a corner; but watched everything with keenly interested eyes.

Joy and Jen, reinforced by a black-haired, blue-eyed girl whom they hailed as “Avice,” caught hands and surrounded Joan and her husband, and

swept them towards the platform. "Will you have us in your class? The whole lot of us? Do you think you can stand us?" cried Jen.

The teacher of the class had been talking to the pianist; she, too, was in a blue tunic. She turned to the group, and greeted them in pretended dismay.

"What, all of you? Must I? Oh, that's a bit too much!—Why—*hel-lo?* Joan? Where have you come from?"

"Italy, and only three days ago, so we couldn't give in our names. But we hoped you'd have us," Joan went forward eagerly.

"You look jolly well on it, anyway. Have you had a good time? Glad to see you again, Captain Raymond! I shall expect very good behaviour and very beautiful dancing from you all, you know. Perhaps if you're very good Miss Everett will take care of you."

"Be nice and kind to me, Avvie!" Jen took the black-haired girl by the arm. "You know tons more than I do!"

"Make up sets and let me see 'Step Back,'" Madam commanded. "If you five are going to dance together, you'd better find some lonely person to make up your number."

A "set," Mary saw, was six; the crowd of students began slowly to separate into groups. People hesitated, ran from one set to another, changing their minds continually and leaving other sets broken up. The five friends, with Joan and her husband as middle couple, watched the confusion with placid superiority; Madam looked on with the calm of despair, but of one long accustomed to this.

"Is everybody ready *at last?* Then start—'Once To Yourself.' And for goodness' sake, remember it's morris, Jen Robins! You've got to think about feet! Mind your Foot-Up!"

Madam was watching keenly, an anticipatory twitch about her lips, as if she knew just what would happen in another moment. The class did not disappoint her; Avie was one of the very few who started with the correct foot.

"Stop! That's all wrong—hopeless! Now think! *What* have you to remember in the Foot-Up of 'Step Back'?"

The class gazed back at her blankly. They had had four weeks' holiday, and had completely forgotten subtle exceptions to general rules.

"Oh!" said Joan Raymond, in a tone of amazed discovery. "*Inside* foot each time!"

"Well, I should have thought so. And what about the end of the first half?"

"Quarter galley inwards and downwards," Joy said limply, utterly crushed; she had done what she thought a very beautiful whole galley outwards.

“That’s better! Now start again. And suppose you think this time.”

The second attempt was more successful. Avice kindly kept Jen right throughout the dance, and, at Joan’s fervent: “Thanks awfully! Just saved us, Avvie!” made her directions loud enough to be heard by the whole set.

“Well, it’s not very brilliant, I must say. I think you’d better stay where you are and do ‘Rigs o’ Marlow,’ ” Madam said unkindly at the end. “Take a rest, and think it over.”

“The lady on the platform doesn’t love us!” Joy murmured, squatting on the floor where she had been standing. “But the rest are all just as bad. Avvie, you’re quite a shining light!”

From her corner, Mary Devine was watching in keen interest and delight. This evening was in every way a new experience to her. To her unaccustomed eyes the dances looked very complicated; when the whole room broke into winding “heys” she thought they were lost and was amazed when they found their places again.

But the thing Mary felt and enjoyed most keenly was the atmosphere of whole-hearted jollity and friendliness, which Madam created and nearly every person in the class seemed to share. The jokes were endless; though the work was strenuous and everyone was in earnest—more or less—yet there was laughter and enjoyment all the time. The music was fascinating; Mary knew bits of it would haunt her at night. She had completely forgotten Bidy and the troubles of the evening.

And then something else happened. The first stick-tapping of “Rigs” was in progress, and Jen’s curls were flying wildly up and down as she hopped and held her stick up for Avice to strike, when she missed her step and her turn to tap—Joan gasped out an astounded exclamation—Joy, staring wildly across the room, hit the Writing Person a sharp blow on the little finger; and the whole set went to pieces.

Madam was preparing some stormy comments for the end of the dance, and frowning as the three even numbers of the side lost their places completely in their hey, when from the doorway came another girl who had just arrived and stepped up on the platform to speak to her.

“Please, Ma’am, will you have me? May I join your class? I see you’ve got all the rest of our crowd.”

“Why, President!” Madam turned to her swiftly. “I didn’t know you were home again! They never told me.”

“I’m not; I mean, I wasn’t,” Cicely said placidly. “I’ve only just arrived. But we shall be in London or at Broadway End for some time, and I’m dying for some dancing.”

Then the dance came to an end. As the music stopped and everybody faced up, Madam said grimly: “Yes! Well, I don’t think much of that, you

know. You'd better do it again—and I'd better watch them this time," she added, for Cicely's benefit.

Cicely Everett laughed, and stood beside her, gazing calmly back at the infuriated faces of her friends. Dying to speak to her, they were yet helpless even to discuss her sudden appearance, for the music had started again and Madam's eyes were on them very critically.

"Madam's not playing the game!" Jen raged. "She's keeping Cicely all to herself, and she belongs to *us*! Avvie, did you know she was home? Oh, you rotter! And you lay low and said nothing? Is she stopping with you?"

"You can wait three minutes, surely!" Avie teased.

But that was about the limit of their endurance. As the dance ended, the crowd descended on Cicely, and Madam watched the excited greetings in amused astonishment.

"Didn't you know she was coming to-night?" she asked, when she could get anyone to listen to her.

"Didn't know she was in England! She never gave us any date. And you made us do 'Rigs' twice through, and kept her all to yourself!" Joy cried accusingly.

"You must have seen what happened to our dancing, anyway!" Joan laughed.

"I saw you all go to pieces. But I thought perhaps that was how you always did 'Rigs.' I just put it down to your bad dancing," Madam explained ruthlessly. "I say, I'm awfully sorry! I had no idea you were all in such agony! You hadn't seen her for three months, and I kept her away from you for quite three minutes! How frightful of me! But she never explained that you didn't know."

"I was enjoying their suffering," the President laughed. "Jen's face was priceless, and Joy's was one better still."

"When you've quite got over it, we'll have 'Laudnum Bunches,'" Madam suggested. "You'd better go in as Number One, Miss Hobart—oh, I *am* sorry! Mrs. Everett, I *mean*!"

"Call me any old thing you like," Cicely said easily. "But they were made up. I can't turn somebody else out."

The Writing Person, watching the excitement with interest and enjoyment, had gone to sit near Mary. Cicely went towards her. "I don't want to take your place——"

"Oh, but I'm not dancing this! Twice of 'Rigs' just about kills me. Please go in your own place! I was only making up their set."

"I say, don't you mind, really? Thanks awfully!" and Cicely went to take her place beside Joy.

## CHAPTER VII

### “OLD MARRIED LADIES”

Mary Devine watched the corner-crossing movements of “Laudnum Bunches” with fascinated eyes, her feet moving unconsciously to the rhythm of the tune.

The Writing Person moved up three chairs and took the one next to her. Her tunic was brown, and she had wrapped a brown knitted jacket round her shoulders. “Isn’t it a gorgeous tune? Don’t you dance?”

“I?” Mary gave her a startled look. “Oh, I never could! It’s the first time I’ve even seen anything of the kind.”

“I’d never done anything of the kind, either, till all this got hold of me, about three years ago. I don’t see why you shouldn’t.”

Mary looked back at her with startled eyes, then gazed at the “capers” in progress and shook her head.

“Oh, you don’t begin with that! Do you teach, as most of them do?”

“Oh, no! I’m a shorthand-typist.”

“You’d find it a jolly change from that. I type a lot myself,” the Writing Person explained. “I suppose you saw what happened just now, when Miss Hobart walked in. It was mean of her! They were all simply writhing under Madam’s eye.”

“I didn’t understand. I don’t know any of them but Miss Robins and Miss Shirley; and not very much of them yet.”

“I saw them all at the Summer School last August. They were a dancing club at school, years ago, and Miss Hobart was the president and taught the dances to the rest. The two Shirley girls, Joan and Joy, are cousins, though they look like twins. Joan owns a beautiful old ruined Abbey down in Oxfordshire, left to her by Joy’s grandfather, who left his huge house, the Hall, to Joy. Joan met Captain Raymond at the dancing school, and Cicely Hobart met Mr. Everett, and they were all married this spring.”

Now the Abbey crowd were gathered round Cicely again, each girl trying to make herself heard above the others.

“How does the dark girl belong?” Mary asked with interest. “Her tunic is different. Was she at school with them, too?”

“Miss Everett. No, she’s Cicely Hobart’s little sister-in-law. I’ve no doubt she knew the President’s plan for to-night, but of course she never said a word about it.” The Writing Person slipped her arms into her brown

jacket and pulled it straight, and went up on to the platform to speak to Madam, who was watching the reunion with amused, sympathetic eyes.

“Great excitement! Don’t those two look well? Marriage seems to suit them.”

“It’s very difficult to think of her as anything but Joan Shirley. And to change Miss Hobart for ‘Mrs. Everett’ is harder still.”

“I shall call the register. Perhaps if I write them down I shall remember.—Answer to your names!”—Madam raised her voice, and was instantly heard above the chatter that filled the hall.

At “Mrs. Raymond” and “Mrs. Everett,” Jen saw fit to giggle, and Joan eyed her coldly, while Cicely said aloud: “Baby! Infant!”

Madam laughed. “‘Princess Royal!’” she said, and the class sprang joyfully to their feet.

This, it appeared, was a solo dance, so there was no difficulty about places. Mary watched the movements with wondering eyes, delighted and amazed.

“Isn’t that gorgeous?” Jen came panting to sit beside her. “That’s the end of the morris. Now we’ll do country, and you’ll see the difference. How do you like it?”

“It’s wonderful, but very—very surprising!” Mary confessed. “It must be glorious to be able to do it.”

“It is, rather. You’ve been making friends! I saw you had someone to speak to, so I knew you were all right. Did she tell you she writes books for girls, Miss Devine? Your sister may know them.”

Mary turned to her in surprise. “She told me she did typewriting!”

Jen laughed. “She writes the books first, though. Now I’m going to ask the Writing Lady to dance with me. Dick Everett has arrived, so as Cicely and Joan have husbands, if Joy takes Avvie Everett and I get in an outsider, we’ll be eight, and we can have a set of our own. Perhaps Madam will be an angel and give us Running Set.”

Whether Madam was an angel or not, Mary did not know till afterwards; but she saw that the eight friends managed to dance together for the greater part of the next hour, and all looked supremely happy and pleased with life. The varied figures bewildered her, until she grasped the fact that each couple in turn was doing the same thing all the way round the set, with a lot of running round in couples with crossed hands in between each section. “Wind up the Ball Yarn” was another surprise; then with a final promenade round the set the dancers fell exhausted into chairs, panting and breathless; and Madam said grimly to the pianist: “I thought twenty minutes of that would do them all in. Even Joy Shirley and the President are silent at last.—I



suppose you haven't danced that since we danced with you, that night in the barn in January?" she asked of Cicely.

Cicely shook her head and eyed her helplessly.

"But I've dreamt of it a lot!" she informed her presently. "Twenty minutes without a stop! Gorgeous! But do you want to kill us all?"

"It was frightfully bad. I shan't let you go on another time. Next week we'll have it done properly," Madam said cuttingly.

"It makes me long to get my class started," Jen sighed to Mary Devine. "It's queer; the more I enjoy the classes here, the more I want to go away and try to teach somebody else. It's the feeling of sharing, I suppose; you can't keep it to yourself. You, for instance!" she said daringly. "I'd have loved to come and drag you in."

Mary coloured. "I don't think you'd want me there long. You'd soon be quite as anxious to get rid of me. I shouldn't be any good. But I'm more and more sure Biddy will love it."

"But Biddy's not to have all the jolly things! You ought sometimes to take something for yourself," Jen argued. "Besides, it's awfully hard on Biddy! If she's only got you, and you won't do things, it means she must do everything alone; don't you see? Or she'll find outside friends; and you can't choose them for her. I should go into this with her, if I were you."

Mary was looking bewildered, for the truth of Jen's forceful arguments could not be denied.

"I'd like to go to listen to the music," she said doubtfully. "But I could never be any good at dancing. The very idea would make Biddy laugh."

"Oh, as to that—!" Jen was equally emphatic on this point. "You've got to forget Biddy and everything else, and just enjoy yourself."

"Are you trying to convert your friend?" the Writing Person asked, as they formed the square for "Chelsea Reach." "No hands, Miss Robins!"

"Oh, sorry!" Jen had tried to make a ring, but had found the other seven unresponsive and even reproachful. "I always forget. And to-night I shall be worse than ever, for I'm thinking about her. I think she thinks she's too old, and that's silly."

"I hope you'll manage to bring her in." And then the urgency of the crisis forced them to concentration. "Gipsy, Miss Robins!" the Writer insisted, as Jen set out for the middle of the set.

"Oh, thanks awfully!" and Jen, very nearly lost, scrambled into her ring, and laughed as she caught Madam's amused eye.

As the good-byes were being said, Mary heard plans being made for the morrow.

"Are you old married ladies doing anything to-morrow night?" Jen cried, across the dressing-room. "For Joy and I are going to spend the evening with

the Pixie. Couldn't you all come, too, and descend on her in a large and noisy crowd?"

"It will be large and noisy if Jenny-Wren's there," and Cicely looked at Avice. "I'm afraid we can't, if those people are coming to dinner, Avvie?"

"I'll have to ask Jack," Joan said doubtfully. "I'd love it, of course."

"Must be a fag always having to consult a man," Joy remarked, sitting on the floor, to change her shoes. "You'll not find me ever taking a man in tow!"

The married girls and the rest of the class laughed.

"Your turn will come, 'Wild Cat.' You won't always be content to walk by your wild lone," said the President maternally.

"Never! It doesn't appeal to me one scrap."

"What's that? Marriage?" Madam had just come in.

"Yes. Do you really think it's worth while?" Joy asked solemnly.

"Oh, there are things to be said for it! Are you thinking of trying it?"

"Not I! Joan and Cicely have bagged the only nice men. Two in the crowd's quite enough," and the independent one flung on her coat. "Good-night, you two! Meet us to-morrow if your old man will let you, Joan! Come on, Jenny-Wren! This much-married atmosphere doesn't suit me!"

"Dear, dear!" Madam laughed. "If you meet my husband downstairs, tell him I'm just coming!"

Joy snorted, and stalked away, and said no more till she had tucked Jen and Mary Devine into the car.

"Miss Devine, what will you be doing to-morrow evening?" Jen asked suddenly.

"Biddy will be going to the pictures. Miss Devine will be darning Biddy's stockings, which will be in holes after to-night's party," said Joy solemnly.

Mary flushed. "I haven't any plans. Biddy often does go out," she confessed.

"If I came round in our car, would Biddy and you come out with me for the evening, without knowing where you were going? It would be to something really very nice," Jen coaxed.

Mary turned to her with startled eyes. "Of course I'd go! You're more than kind!"

"Well, you be ready; and Biddy must put on her party-est frock; and you, too, of course. That's all I'm going to tell you. I want to whisk you both away to a party. If Biddy asks where the party is, tell her in fairyland, and we're invited by a pixie. Now this is your door. Good-night! So glad you could come!"

"Thank you so very, very much!" Mary called after the retreating car.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE FRIGHT OF HER LIFE

“Mary-Dorothy’s tempted!” Jen said, with satisfaction, as they sped away. “Did you see her face? She’s very quiet about it, but she’s wildly excited inside over the music. I wonder if she’s really musical, and has starved herself of it for years?”

“If she is, she won’t sleep to-night, after the feast she’s had! Are you going to make her dance?”

“Shouldn’t wonder. I’ll take her to Plaistow to-morrow, and if she doesn’t dance before she goes home, I’ll be ashamed of her.”

“Do you suppose she could get off from her office, and the kid from classes, if I asked them down to the Hall for a week?”

“Oh, Joy! Would you? Oh, that would be lovely!” Jen cried eagerly. “But your hostel isn’t ready yet!”

“They’d have to go home with us. I’ve had other girls there, and found it quite interesting. Aunty wouldn’t mind, and even if Joan and Jack come there’s heaps of room. I’d rather ask them to the house. I want to watch your Mary-Dorothy.”

“That would be gorgeous! I’m sure she’d love it!” Jen said happily.

“I feel as if the Bidy child might be the careless sort of little wretch I was,” Joy explained carefully. “Caring for nobody but herself, wandering about and leaving other people to do the work at home. Do you suppose your Mary-Dorothy could get off?”

“I think she’d have a good try, if you asked her.”

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In the empty flat, Bidy Devine was having the worst few minutes of her life. Her conscience was uneasy; she had been unhappy all evening. Hurrying home in dire trouble to seek comfort from Mary, she had been the one to find a dark empty flat and a cold fire.

Overwrought and too tired to think reasonably, she had been seized with wild terror, which would listen to no argument. Mary was gone. Mary, unable to forgive her, had gone away and left her, and she was alone. A frantic search through every room revealed no message, nor any trace of Mary; only the fact that her hat and coat were gone. Bidy had never dreamed of such horror as this.

She was lying in a crumpled heap in Mary’s big chair, sobbing brokenly, when the door was thrown open, and Mary cried, her voice sharp with fear:

“Biddy, are you there? Oh, Biddy, what’s the matter?”

With one leap Biddy was upon her, her arms half choking her. “Mary! Oh, Mary! I thought you’d gone away and left me!”

“Gone away, you silly girl? How could I go away?” Then, realising from Biddy’s heartbroken sobbing how great the strain of the fear had been, Mary spoke very gravely and gently. “Biddy, dear, I’d never do that. I thought you trusted me, Biddy.”

“I did! Oh, I did! That’s why I went all to pieces when you weren’t here,” Biddy wailed.

“I’m sorry I was out when you came home,” Mary said quietly. “But I never imagined you would come so early. What brought you home so soon? Weren’t you enjoying it?” she asked hopefully.

“It wasn’t nice.” Biddy sank exhausted in a chair by the table and sat with bent head. “Mary, it was horrid. They—they meant to be kind, and I—I thought I liked them. But they were different to-night.”

Inwardly full of thanksgiving Mary said quietly: “So you came home early? I’m very glad. Have you had any supper? For I’m starving.”

“We had supper,” Biddy looked up suddenly, distress in her big brown eyes. “Oh, Mary! They got playing about—the boys, you know! And—and look! On Vivien’s frock!” Her voice broke in a wail of distress.

“Coffee!” Mary pinched her lips. “Oh, Biddy! And you borrowed it!”

“Isn’t it awful?” Biddy wailed. “What can I do? I came right home to show you. Oh, Mary! Tell me what to do!”

“We’ll sponge it, and see if that helps,” Mary was looking very worried. “But you’ll have to tell Vivien. Biddy, there’s only one thing to be done. You’ve spoiled her frock; you can’t give it back to her damaged. You must ask her if you may keep it, and if you may give her the cost of it.”

“But I haven’t got the money!” Biddy faltered.

“If you borrow frocks you must give them back, or their value, Biddy,” Mary said grimly. “You know I meant us both to have summer frocks; we must use that money, that’s all.”

“I’ll be glad to give Vivien mine. That’s only fair. But I can’t take the money for your frock, Mary!”

“The first thing we have to do is to be fair to Vivien. Nothing else matters very much,” Mary said quietly. “Get the frock off, Biddy, and we’ll see what washing it will do.”

Much subdued, Biddy slipped into her room, while Mary lit the gas fire and made preparations for supper. In a very few minutes Biddy came flying back, in dressing-gown and slippers, and fairly pushed her sister into the big chair.

"I'm going to do all the rest! And do, *do* tell me where you were when I came home!"

Biddy, keenly excited, raced to and from the little kitchen. "Don't begin till I've got everything! I'm dying to hear. Did the fairy godmother come with the pumpkin and the white mice?"

"But Cinderella was the beautiful younger sister!" Mary laughed. "Your fairy-tale is mixed, and so is mine. It was the Pied Piper who came. The chariot was waiting at the door, and I was whirled away to the ball. But it was a folk-dance ball, and the dancers all wore gym tunics."

"Really?" Biddy paused to gaze at her. "Oh, what fun! Was it that girl again? I'm dying to see her. But who was the Piper?"

"She was. She brought a little wooden pipe, and made music that almost made even me get up and dance. She played my tune—'The Mary and Dorothy'—and then explained that they were wearing tunics because they were on their way to classes, and asked me to go and watch."

"I say, I wish I'd been at home!" Biddy said enviously. "But who else was there?"

"She had a friend with her. And they met lots more friends; it was great fun to watch them."

"I'm going to make tea. It's far too exciting an occasion for cocoa," Biddy announced. "And you must tell me every single thing that happened, Mary!"

"Shall I tell you the last and best one first? Well, then, you've got to see Vivien in the morning and find out if you may buy the frock, and you've got to do anything you can to improve the look of it, because Miss Robins is coming to-morrow, to take us somewhere for the evening. She wouldn't say where it was, but she said it was a party, and you'd love it."

"Oh, cheers!" and Biddy danced wildly round the table. "I do think she's a sport! But why, Mary? I mean, why has she taken such a fancy to you?"

"I can't imagine," Mary said truthfully. "I can't understand it at all. But she has been wonderfully nice to me."

"But what sort of a party is it, Mary? Will our kind of frocks do?" Biddy's joyful face clouded.

"So far as I've seen them, they weren't the kind of people who dress up at all," Mary said thoughtfully. "Our frocks will have to do, Biddy."

"I'm dying to know what kind of party it is!" Biddy sighed rapturously. "And we're to go in her car? I wish I'd seen her dance!"

Mary laughed at the thought of Jen's wild scramble to get into her place in some of the dances. "She's great fun! I'm sure she'll be splendid when she teaches her club. Would you care to join, Biddy? I believe she'd have you. You'd learn the dances then; and you'd see her every week."

“I’d love it!” Biddy said fervently. “I’ve got a tunic! I’d love to wear it again. Did they really dance in tunics, Mary? All the grown-up people?”

“Everybody. They looked very nice, and very comfortable.”

“Oh, tunics are always jolly! But it’s not tunics to-morrow night? Then, Mary, darling dear! *Will* you help me to do something to that frock?”

“Only on condition you tell Vivien all about it to-morrow morning. You’re not going out with me in it unless it’s your own,” Mary said warningly.

“I will! Oh, I will! And she’ll be glad. She said she wished she hadn’t bought it.”

“Then bring it here, and we’ll see what we can do,” Mary said quietly.

She had been sponging the frock carefully for some time, when Biddy, watching her with a very sober face, said suddenly. “I’ll never go anywhere you don’t like again. I didn’t like it when I got there. And I kept thinking of you, Mary. I wish—I wish you’d come with me sometimes, when I want to go to places! It’s not nice always going alone.”

“We’ll go together to-morrow night, anyway,” Mary had flushed and her eyes had brightened. “It will be nice, won’t it, Biddy?”

And when Biddy had gone to bed, Mary sat dreaming beside the fire; but the dreams were not the unreal romances in which she had lived, but visions of a future of better understanding and fuller companionship. And behind these new hopes was a deepening background of music and new unknown beauty, of snatches of haunting ancient tunes, of the merriment and enjoyment she had seen in the faces of so many girls that evening.

## CHAPTER IX

### “A LARGE AND NOISY CROWD.”

“I’ve a confession to make, Miss Devine! I can’t keep it in any longer! It’s fearfully cheeky, but I must get it off my mind,” Jen Robins spoke seriously, but her eyes were dancing.

Biddy, to her intense joy, was sitting beside Frost the chauffeur; Mary and Jen were behind. Jen’s first quick glance had shown her several things—that Biddy was in a state of wild though suppressed excitement—that she was very pretty, with dark brown curly hair tied back with a wide ribbon, and cheeks that needed no artificial colour to brighten them—that she wore something pink and frilly, and that Mary’s dress under her big coat was grey.

“I can’t think of any confession you can have to make to me,” said Mary.

“Oh, but that’s because you haven’t begun to sound the depths of my cheekiness yet. Do you know what I call you; when you’re not here, I mean?”

Mary looked at her with startled eyes. “I never dreamt you ever thought about me! If it’s been worthwhile giving me a nickname, I’m immensely flattered. And I think it’s very nice of you.”

“It’s nice of *you* to put it that way! I only call you ‘Miss Devine’ when politeness really demands it. I always think of you as Mary-Dorothy. It’s so very tempting! Joy Shirley calls you that, too.”

“I take it as a tremendous compliment,” Mary said laughing. “I wish you’d stick to it altogether. ‘Miss Devine’ sounds so business-like!”

“Like the office!” Jen agreed. “Biddy!” She poked the front passenger in the back. “Would you like to know where you and Mary-Dorothy are going?”

Biddy turned to stare at her with dazed eyes. “Wh-what?”

“Where you and Mary-Dorothy are going?” Jen repeated composedly.

Biddy’s eyes met Mary’s in dumb consternation. Mary laughed as she said placidly, “It’s a very pretty name, Biddy. You never thought of it!”

“Goodness *gracious* me!” and Biddy stared at Jen again.

“You’ll have to get used to me,” said Jen. “Only children are invited, so please both grow downwards as quickly as you can. I’m about seven myself. Mary-Dorothy, you shall be very old; I’ll allow you to be eleven. Biddy, what are you?”

“Five!” Biddy said promptly. “What are we going to do? Play ‘Mulberry Bush’ and ‘Looby Light?’ ”

“You’ve been well brought up!” Jen said approvingly. “It’s going to be a big party. There will be a hundred and fifty children, without us.”

Mary and Bidy looked their astonishment. “Help! Where is it to be?” Bidy cried.

“In the East End, in Plaistow. The children have been asked through their school teachers, and the teachers have been going all winter to country-dance classes taught by a friend of mine. She thought of this party and planned the whole thing; she’s great at running parties! The children—which includes us, I hope—are going to dance, in a big, beautiful hall. We’re going to have tea with the M.C. first; we call her the Pixie! She’s *this* high! But she manages everybody; you should see her bully a class! We were all in her class last summer, and we loved her. Joy’s coming, of course. She couldn’t resist it when she heard about the party, so she wired home that she’d stop another night. But she’s gone round in her own car to pick up Joan and Cicely. Joan’s husband says he’ll spare her, for once; and Cicely’s friends couldn’t come to dinner, after all, so the President immediately rang me up to say she’d come too. You’ll enjoy it, Mary-Dorothy! It ought to be a pretty sight.”

“Can’t I dance?” Bidy asked hungrily. “Which dances are they doing? I know a few.”

Jen handed her a programme. “I’m sure the Pixie will let you join in. Which do you know?”

“‘Gathering Peascods’—‘Rufty Tufty’—‘Goddesses’—‘Butterfly’—I know all those,” Bidy cried eagerly.

“Splendid! And ‘We won’t go Home’ is very easy; and ‘Galopede.’ Nobody needs to learn those.”

“Oh, cheers! I shall love it!” Bidy jumped in her seat with joyful anticipation.

“Will she mind our coming?” Mary asked nervously.

“I rang her up this morning to make sure. Not that I had any doubt of it; she’s kindness itself; I knew she’d be pleased. But I thought you’d rather I asked her first.”

“It was kind of you to think of it. I’m very glad you did,” Mary said, in evident relief.

“We’re early. The others were to meet us here at five,” Jen said, as the car drew up before a huge white palace of a building, after what seemed an endless journey through busy streets. “But we won’t wait for them. Oh, there’s Eirene!” at indignant hooting from outside. “Eirene is Joy’s car, though she’s anything but peaceful!”

The “large and noisy crowd” came hurrying up the steps to remonstrate, Joy wrathfully accusing Jen of racing her on purpose. Avice Everett, Cicely



and Joan were with her, but without the husbands. "We left them to console one another," Joan explained with a laugh.

"Come on! We must break it to the Pixie what she's got to put up with," Joy said ungrammatically, and led the way into a big restaurant. "She was in here last time."

"Here you are!" and a tiny person in emerald green broke off an animated conversation with several waitresses, and came running to meet them. "Why, *Joan*? President? Where have you come from? I say, *isn't* this nice?" her voice rose in eager, delighted welcome. "But I didn't know you were home? When did you come? Have you had a good time? I say, don't you both look *well*! Do you like being married?" and she smiled up at tall Joan in a motherly way.

"I like it heaps and heaps!" Joan assured her, laughing.

"It's not half bad," Cicely declared. "Will you let us dance at your party, Pixie? We only heard about it last night. We simply couldn't keep away."

"Of course you couldn't! It's going to be great fun. But it's only for the children; you'll have to sit on the platform.—Oh, well! We'll see!" relenting at sight of their faces.

"I should die, if I had to look on at a country-dance party!" Cicely said solemnly.

"I'm so glad to see you that I suppose I shall give in," the Pixie confessed. "But it's supposed to be only for the children. Come along and have tea, everybody! Isn't it jolly to have such a big party? I love a crowd!" and she bustled ahead of them to secure two tables, and to call for "Tea for eight and lots and lots of cakes," to one of the friendly girls in brown.

But though the whole lively meal was a brisk interchange of questions, chaff, and laughter, with endless references to happenings in the past, the tiny hostess did not forget the strangers in the corner. She did not, indeed, insist on drawing them into the conversation, for that would have been impossible and would only have made everybody uncomfortable; but she kept Bidly supplied with cakes and Mary with tea, and threw a laughing remark at them continually without waiting for an answer just to make them feel they were part of the party.

"What's the new stunt, Pixie?" Jen demanded. "You said you had something to tell us."

The Pixie's eyes began to dance; she knew the consternation her words would cause.

"I'm working in a shop," she announced gleefully.

"A—what?" gasped Jen.

"It's true. I love it. It's in the West End. You must all come and see me. I'll love to show you round. We have beautiful things," the Pixie said

proudly.

“But why? How? What for? Where? What kind of a shop? What are you doing it for, anyway?” A perfect storm of questions showered upon her.

“To earn my living,” she explained calmly.

“But—but—but you teach dancing!” Jen gasped.

“Only at night. It isn’t good enough. People have only time for dancing at night. I can’t afford to do nothing all day. Shall I tell you all about it?”

“Yes, please, *do!*” an indignant chorus answered her.

“We make lovely handwoven materials, for frocks and curtains and things; you’d better come to us if you’re going to furnish!” to the newly-married ones. “Such beautiful colourings! It’s a joy to work among them.”

“Do you make the things?” Joan asked, with interest.

“Oh, no! The girls do the weaving. I’ve never learned that. No, I make up frocks for customers. I’m happy all day long, designing beautiful things—for they *are* beautiful!—and working with such lovely materials. I’d love to design a frock for you!” to Joan.

“Joan will consult her husband!” Joy said solemnly. “I’ll have a frock, Pixie. What would do for Joan will do for me.”

“*Good!* If she doesn’t snap it up, you shall have it! We have other things, besides the hand woven goods; rugs and carpets straight from the desert! But we’re forgetting the party. What’s the time? Gracious! They’ll all be waiting for us! It’s going to be great fun, you know. Come up to my room and change your shoes,” and she hustled them all away.

## CHAPTER X

### THE PIXIE'S PARTY

Biddy went up to their little hostess, with a touch of shyness. "I know some of the dances, and Mary says you all wear flat shoes, so I brought an old pair of plimsolls. Will you, *will* you let me join in, Miss Pixie?"

"Why, of *course* you must dance! I'll find you partners!"

"Now you're going to see me being really official," their hostess announced impressively. "I shall be all over the place, too. You'd better keep out of the way, and you must dance together."

"Oh, this is gorgeous!" Jen cried softly. "Where can we go to see?"

"Platform! Come on!" said Joy, and they made a dash for the piano on the platform.

Small girls in frocks of every rainbow colour filled the hall. Already they were fairly jumping with excitement, racing about wildly to find friends or call greetings to mothers up aloft; new groups kept arriving to swell the crowd. The Pixie, a vivid green spot, seemed in every corner at once, like a very active fairy in a world of brilliant butterflies.

The pianist played the air of "Galopede," and with a wild rush from every corner of the hall, every child was on the spot assigned to her, thrilled to the limit, desperately determined that not one moment should be lost.

"Oh, isn't it *fun*?" the Pixie's thoughts were all for her party. "Aren't they darlings? Did you ever see anything so pretty? Good dancing, too; good style! And see how happy they are, the dears! Don't you want to dance?" with a lightning turn to Biddy Devine.

"I'm simply dying to! But I don't know this."

"We'll put you into 'Ruffy Tufty.' You can make a set in this corner. Joy—some of you—dance with her, won't you?"

"Right-o! I'd love to," Joy said warmly.

"Won't you come too?" Joan turned to Mary. "Perhaps we could make two sets."

Mary looked startled. "I? Oh, thank you very much, but I don't dance. I wouldn't know what to do. I'd only be in your way."

"You go with Cicely, Joan," said Jen. "We'll look on. Pixie, I don't want to dance. It's too wonderful. I couldn't see it down there. I just want to go on looking for ever. I love their faces; they're just one beam of joy! Don't you feel the same, Mary-Dorothy?"

Mary sat down beside her; Jen, enthralled, had sunk into a chair and was gazing in rapt enjoyment at the radiant faces of the children.

“This is better fun than dancing!” Jen murmured, as the children honoured their partners and all, with one accord, turned to the platform for orders from the little lady in green.

“Now! Do we all know it?” and she addressed the eager children. “Very well! Make your squares for four. Now! All those facing me run away to *that* wall! All with their backs to me run this way. Got it? You ready down there?” to the visitors in the corner. “We’ll have it twice through. Now go!”

“How pretty that is!” Mary whispered, as the whole hall bobbed up and down in the “set and turn single.” “I love watching this dancing!”

“You’d love watching much more if you’d done a little, though. It would mean so much more to you,” Jen roused herself from her rapt contemplation of the children’s enjoyment. “I say, your Bidy isn’t at all bad! She’s got some of the usual school faults; she’s on her toes and that’s not allowed. But she’ll dance well when she forgets a little; there’s a lot of bad teaching in schools, the Pixie says.”

At the first notes of “Gathering Peascods,” there came that swift yet ordered rush of children again. The tiny figures fairly swooped down on the floor from every corner, each to her appointed place, and stood in palpitating eagerness ready to start.

“The music’s quite enough. It gives the signal and they all know what to do,” Mary said, marvelling.

At the notes of “Butterfly,” the children made their lines again, and stood, hot and panting, but eager to begin.

Jen sprang up; the rest had already gone, Bidy hand in hand with Joy, Joan and Cicely together, to find places in the line.

“Now, Mary-Dorothy, you’re going to dance this! Come on—run! Or we’ll be left out.”

“But I can’t. I’ve never danced,” Mary gasped.

“No one will take any notice of you; they’re all far too busy enjoying themselves!” At Mary’s startled incredulous look Jen almost laughed, but managed to keep it in. “Come on, Mary-Dorothy! The next one’s far more difficult! I’ll tease you into that if you don’t come into this one. There! We’re Twos,” which conveyed nothing at all to Mary, who had found herself somehow at the end of a long line, dragged there by the sheer force of Jen’s strong right hand.

Gasping with amazement, Mary found herself dancing; found herself instinctively keeping time to the music; found herself enjoying this new thing as she had enjoyed nothing for years.

At the moment she could think only of what she must do next; of running or skipping; right hand or left. For a wild agonised second she did not know how to skip; then it came to her suddenly. She was not sure if she had ever skipped in her life before, but she had watched children, and found her feet discovering what to do.

Mary did not see Biddy's astounded face or hear her incredulous cry, "Mary! She's dancing!"

"Swing and change!" Joy said ruthlessly. "And look here, Miss Biddy Devine! There's no reason on earth why your Mary shouldn't dance, and it will do her all the good in the world. D'you want to be allowed to join Jen Robins's club, and learn piles of new dances, and perhaps morris and sword too?" Joy asked severely.

"I'm dying to. Will she have me? And will they let me in?"

"Probably, if she insists on it. But she wants your sister, too; and she's to take part, not just to look on. So if you want to go, play up and encourage Mary-Dorothy all you can. Tell her she's got to dance."

Biddy said no more, but her eyes followed Mary in stunned amazement. "She likes it!" she said at last.

"There! How do you like it?" Jen put her partner gently into a chair. "Now don't ever again say you've never danced! Quite good fun, isn't it?"

"I liked it!" Mary panted, in a tone of incredulous amazement. "But how do you remember? And you aren't out of breath!"

"Oh, that's practice! You'll learn the others at my class!"

And Mary, watching as little rings of six formed themselves all over the hall, wondered if perhaps she would, after all.

## CHAPTER XI

### MARY-DOROTHY'S WAY

On Sunday evening Mary, with a determined face, sat down to write letters. Bidy was out with Vivien; it was a friendship of which Mary heartily approved, so Mary's mind was at ease about her sister.

She sat with her pen and paper before her, and wondered. It was not a question of age; she realised that though she was a good deal older than these girls who danced, yet it was absurd to talk of thirty as elderly—as if it had been fifty or sixty. She did not feel too old; that was not where the difficulty lay. It was rather that she had never in her life done anything of the kind; there had been no opportunity for it since she had left school. Could she not enjoy it as much as they did or more, because it would all be so very new—even though she could never hope to dance with their ease, though it was sure to be always an effort to her? What was it that Writing Person had said? That she had had never done anything of the kind until three years ago. It had been all new to her, too; and yet she had not seemed afraid to attempt even advanced morris. Mary wished she could see her again and ask a few questions.

Mary wondered, and sighed wistfully again; and at last began to write. These letters had been waiting for months hanging over her, put aside because at night she was always too tired to face so big a task. Those aunts in South Africa, and the cousins in Australia, expected such long letters, giving all the family history; and there was so little to tell, except trivial everyday happenings at the office!

But to-night she had something to tell. Just as Bidy had gone to tell Vivien all about the party, so Mary sat down to write the story to her aunts. It was just the kind of thing to interest people on an up-country farm in the colonies. With a sudden impulse she put a sheet into the typewriter, and began to tell her story, with far more ease and in far greater detail than she would ever have troubled to do when writing by hand.

It proved to be a long letter. In telling the whole story, from the first appearance of Jen in the office, Mary lived it all over again and enjoyed it anew. A writer by instinct, she had great descriptive powers and revelled in their use; but her first attempt at story-writing, many years ago, had been a failure; and, discouraged and without confidence in herself, she had let her gift lie undeveloped. To-night, under the stimulus of the music and the unusual exercise, she wrote and described events and people with real

enjoyment, and told her story well. She was tired out at the end, but had a satisfied feeling very new to her.

Tired, but happier than usual, she put the letter aside at last, for Biddy to read, and dropped in a big chair before the fire. And, her work done, she gave herself up to the dreams which had been haunting her all day, crowding into the background of her mind.

But to-night, though the dreams claimed and won her, because to-night her imagination was more active than it had been for months, the feeling of discomfort was greater than usual. It almost amounted to a sense of guilt. It was so strong that she actually faced it for a few moments.

"I suppose it isn't right! But it does no harm to anybody. Why do I feel bad about it every now and then? No, it's all the time; but I keep the feeling down. But it isn't natural; other people don't do it. So it can't be quite right. Why am I thinking about it to-night? I've gone over it all so often."

She sat gazing into the fire. "It's through meeting all these new people," she said aloud at last. "None of them would do it. They're all so—so healthy and normal! I wonder if they'd even understand? I suppose not; they'd think me crazy. And the dancing is so healthy and good; and the music is so simple and natural. It's all so—so different! So real! Oh, well!" she said restlessly at last. "It may be all wrong, but I could never be any different now! I've no fight left in me; I've been beaten too often!"

And she thrust the disturbing thoughts aside, and lay dreaming till Biddy's noisy entrance brought her back with a start to real life and the distressing fact that it was nine o'clock, and no preparations had been made for supper.

But that was nothing new to Biddy; it was Mary's little way.

"Hallo, half asleep? Did you get the mighty task done? I say, you have written a young volume! I don't wonder you're exhausted! May I read it? Thanks awfully! I always love your letters," and she sank into the chair with the typed sheets in her hand, while Mary hurried to put on the kettle and lay the table.

"I say, what a smashing letter!" Biddy looked up in frank delight. "The old folks will simply love it, Mary-Dorothy! Do you mind if I call you that sometimes?"

"I don't mind what you call me," Mary laughed. "I'd certainly rather have a name that's all my own! I don't know what made me write such a screed. I just wanted to tell about the party and the classes, and all these new people. I had a spasm of energy for some reason!"

"You've told it awfully well," Biddy said warmly. "I can just see the hall, and the kiddies, and the green tiny Pixie! You ought to write books, you know! I've always said so. Well, stories or articles, then!" as Mary shook

her head and coloured, and began to cut bread vigorously. “You do know how to describe things! Why don’t you have a shot at it? I believe the papers would print an article telling all about those children last night, if you described the whole thing as well as you’ve done in that letter! And you might get a guinea for it! Think of it, Mary Devine! A guinea!”

Mary laughed. “Biddy, don’t be silly! My writing’s no good.”

“I don’t think I’m silly. If you could make a guinea, instead of going to sleep over the fire, *that* wouldn’t be silly either!”

“It certainly wouldn’t,” Mary agreed, her cheeks flushed. “But there’s a lot of ‘if’ about it, Biddy dear.”



## CHAPTER XII

### DANCING FOR JENNY-WREN

In a corner of the girls' clubroom, Mary sat watching Jen's "show" with wide eyes, rapt enjoyment in her face.

Biddy was busy, in the intervals of the dances, making friends with girls in the audience, but Mary, in the grip of a new experience, did not want to talk. From the first moment she felt the thrill of enjoyment and anticipation, not only in the audience of girls and friends, but among the dancers themselves. A glance at their faces showed that they meant to enjoy the evening as much as anyone. She knew most of them, though not all; and was grateful for the previous meetings, which made Joan and Joy and Cicely and Jen and Avice seem like old friends. There were three or four others with them, companions from the classes; and one slim girl with black bobbed hair, a head shorter than Jen, whom she introduced as "Jacky-boy, my first chum at school."

They were all radiant with eagerness, and all, as Jen explained, much elated to find themselves wearing the blue frocks they had gazed at longingly so often in demonstrations by folk-dance specialists.

"Madam borrowed them for us. Just for to-night," Jen added. "It's so much better to dress alike; but we couldn't have special frocks just for one evening. It does look nice doesn't it?"

It certainly did, with glimpses of vivid blue here and there in every corner of the hall. And when presently the blue procession came dancing in, hand in hand, Mary caught her breath in a smothered cry of delight, and watched the dances with eager joyful eyes.

But the biggest revelation was when Madam, after a few words of introduction and explanation of the first dances, stood up to dance a morris jig. She wore a blue frock, too, just like those of the girls, but there was something indefinable that marked her out among them all.

"How does she do it?" she said, under her breath, as Madam retired, and six of the girls took sticks and went out to dance a morris dance.

"She'll sing presently; she's promised. You'll love that too," Jen sat down beside her.

"Why aren't you dancing in this?"

"Because it's only for six; and they want Joy and me to dance a jig together presently. Of course, it will be awful, just after Madam, but she won't let us off, and we're fearfully meek and obedient; at least, we do what

she wants! It will be all right about joining the club, Mary-Dorothy. I've arranged it. So I hope you'll come with Biddy."

"I don't think I could bear to stay away," Mary confessed, flushing a little. "I'll come, if it's only to hear the music! It haunts me night and day. Biddy's got a whistle, and we try to find out the tunes, but we only get bits of them."

"I know. Isn't it maddening? I had to buy it all before I could be happy. But, of course, I'd learnt a lot of it at school. I could lend you some of it; I wouldn't like you to go crazy! Now I must go and do my best."

It was towards the end of the show, when Mary was realising how tired out she was with merely watching, that she recognised at the back of the hall the Writer of Books, whom she had met at the classes and who had advised her to dance herself. When the dancing was over, and the blue girls had gathered in an eager group round Madam, thanking her and asking for her criticism, Mary made her way to this other friend, with an eagerness that would not be denied.

"May I speak to you, please? Do you remember at the classes telling me I ought to try to dance, not just look on?"

"Looking on is much more interesting if you've done some yourself. Have you had a chance to find that out yet?"

"Oh! Do you find that, too?" Mary cried eagerly. "I've only tried two dances, at a party last Saturday, but it did make a difference to-night, even that little bit."

"Every bit you do helps you to understand more. That's partly why I've learned all those advanced morris dances; so that I'd understand them when I saw them done."

"This was what I wanted to ask you!" Mary pleaded eagerly. "Miss Robins has asked me to come with my sister to her class. But could I try the morris? I've never done anything of the kind; never! And—and you said you'd been the same. But you do it, even those difficult movements. I thought perhaps you'd advise me. Do you mind my asking?"

"I do them frightfully badly! No one knows it better than I do!" the Writing Person laughed. "But I get heaps out of it, all the same. I should try everything, if I were you. If it's too much you can always drop it. You may never be able to get the certificates, Miss Devine; I know nothing about that. I've never even tried for any of them myself. But you can have quite as much fun out of it as the certificate people. It's a tremendous help to one's work, too, you know," she added. "If you do any work that needs imagination, all this helps intensely."

"Oh, please tell me!" Mary asked swiftly. "I've been feeling all stirred up; and I did after that party on Saturday. Do you feel it, too?"

“Every single time. I always want to go home and plunge into work. But I must go and thank Miss Robins for letting me come to watch; I’m afraid I begged for an invitation! I’d go anywhere to see Madam dance and to hear those songs. And I wanted to watch all that crowd dance, too; I love the whole lot of them!”

Mary was watching the laughing chattering crowd with sombre eyes, when Joy Shirley turned from the rest with a swirl of blue drapery and white underskirt, and came up to her.

“Miss Devine, could you get off from your office, and Biddy from college, for a week or so? If I asked you into the country for a little while, could it be managed?”

Mary, breathless, stared at her, without a word to say. Joy said encouragingly:

“It’s all right, really. I’m not proposing anything very dreadful, am I? I often ask business people. I’ve a huge house down there, half empty, and I feel such a pig unless I share it with somebody.”

“Oh, what a nice way to put it!” Mary cried. “How we would love it! But ought we to?”

“I should think so, if you can,” Joy said laughing. “See here, Miss Devine! We shall have a busy time next week, for it’s the coronation of the May Queen at our old school, and we all have to be there, having been Queens in our time. Joan and her husband and Jacky-boy will all be staying with us. Besides that, the new Queen happens to be one of my adopted daughters; you’ve heard I have twins? Her people live up in the North; so we’ve asked them to come to us, too. For once the Hall will be reasonably crowded! But the next week will be very slack; won’t you come then and cheer us up?”

Mary looked at her, quite unable to speak, overwhelmed as much by the heartiness of the invitation as by the idea itself. Joy added, “You’ll really get a better time than if you came now. Of course, we *never* get the may out for May Day! It will be quite another fortnight. But when it does come out, the country all round is just gorgeous.”

“Oh, let us come when the may is out!” Mary said wistfully. “I haven’t picked may for years!”

“You shall pick may!” Joy said solemnly. “But can you get off, Miss Devine?”

“I think I could, when Mr. Robins’s work is finished,” Mary said hungrily. “I worked over Easter, because the others wanted to go away and we had extra work to be done. I haven’t had any break since last August. And it would be very good for Biddy. I think we could manage it, Miss Shirley.”

“I shall be in town on Wednesday and Thursday; I come up every week for a regular engagement,” Joy explained. “I’ll take you home in the car. You be ready early on Thursday afternoon. That won’t take you away from Jen’s class on the Tuesday night. Right! I hope you’ll like my house, and Joan’s Abbey!”

“Thank you *very* much!” was all Mary could find words to say.

“Good-night! and good luck! I hope you’ll enjoy the class!” the Writing Person passed on her way out, as Joy nodded and turned away. “But I say! If you’re going to do morris, you’ll have to get into a tunic, you know! You’ll find the first time as trying as I did, perhaps. But it’s worth it. You must forget all about yourself, that’s all. I’m sure you’ll love it,” and she said good-night again and hurried away to catch her train.

## CHAPTER XIII

### MARY-DOROTHY'S GYM TUNIC

With grimly-determined face, Mary-Dorothy sat at the sewing-machine, running up seams in navy blue serge. The typewriter was much more familiar to her; she did not like sewing of any kind. But there was a lot to be done, and it left no time for dreaming over the fire.

Biddy, kept at a late class, was safely out of the way. Mary seized the opportunity, and borrowed her sister's school tunic for a pattern. The work proved easier than she had expected; the pleats were not difficult to arrange, and she was tacking them into place when Biddy came in.

"Oh! You'll want some tea! Just one moment, Biddy, and I'll get it for you."

"What are you making, Mary-Dorothy? What are you doing with my tunic?"

"Copying it," Mary said briefly, but she coloured apprehensively, and waited for Biddy's amazed, and perhaps scornful, laugh.

"Copying—?" and Biddy came up excitedly. "You're making yourself a gymmy? I never thought you'd really do the thing properly! Did Jen Robins say you'd got to have one?"

"Oh, no! She never mentioned it. But if all the rest wear them, it seems to me I'd feel worse in a skirt than in a tunic," Mary said grimly. "I may feel queer in this at first; it's years since I wore one!"

"You are making it nicely, Mary! Those pleats are simply beautiful!"

"I want it to look as ordinary as possible," Mary explained, and bundled the blue serge away to make room for the tea things. "Are you going out again?"

"I can't be bothered. Doris asked me to go to the pictures with the rest of the crowd, but I told her I'd got sewing to do. She laughed and tried to rag me about it, so I said haughtily that I'd been asked to a country-house in Oxfordshire, and my wardrobe is hardly adequate to the occasion, so I'm making myself some new clothes," Biddy explained, as she set the table.

"Was Doris properly impressed?"

"Oh, she gaped at me. She didn't believe it. *Do* you think that blouse is going to be all right, Mary?" Biddy asked anxiously.

"I hope so. I'll help you all I can. And I'll cut out the other one, if you'll whistle 'Ruffy Tufty' and 'Butterfly' for me."

They spent several of these evenings together, with mingled music and dressmaking, and much happy looking forward to the first class next week, and to the glorious prospect for the week after.

All through the following Tuesday, Mary worked with the feeling at the back of her mind that the evening's new experience might be something of an ordeal, though it would certainly be a great joy. She was longing to dance again, and to see Jen teach; but she was very distrustful of herself, sure she would do badly and keep all the rest back; and she quite expected to feel very uncomfortable in her tunic for the first time or two.

Biddy, too, though looking forward to the evening intensely, had her own fears for herself.

"They didn't teach us properly at school," she said resentfully. "Jen Robins came to me before that show last week, and told me to watch particularly how none of them, most of all Madam herself, ever danced on their toes. She said she'd watched me at the party, and I was on my toes all the time, and I'd got to get out of it if I wanted to do folk-dancing well. I'm sure I shall never remember! She'll be mad with me!"

But one, at least, of Mary's fears proved unnecessary, simply because, when the moment came, she had no time to think about herself or how she felt. Starting in plenty of time, they were delayed by traffic, which held up their bus; and arrived, hot and annoyed, at five minutes past eight. A girl directed them to a small dressing-room off the big hall, and they hurried across, handing the music to another girl as they went, and getting an impression of many girls in blue tunics standing in a big ring, while Jen, on the platform, addressed them.

"I expect some of you will always have to be a little late," Jen was saying tactfully. "So we won't begin country-dancing till half-past eight. The keen ones who come early will get half-an-hour's morris. Now we'll make a start with the morris step. All do this! Stand with your weight on one foot. Now change your weight to the other. Let the free leg hang loose."

"We mustn't miss this. We shall never get it right if we don't begin with the rest!" Biddy groaned, changing her shoes in frantic haste. "Oh, hurry up, Mary dear!"

Mary fully appreciated the importance of the moment. There was no time to think. She ran after Biddy to find a place in the ring, forgetting everything but the urgent need for haste. When she remembered presently, it was with deep thankfulness that she was wearing a tunic, since everyone else in the hall was doing the same. And by the time it was possible to go and explain their late arrival to Jen, Mary had forgotten that she had expected to feel strange. She had done half-an-hour's morris step on the

spot, and then going round the hall in a big circle; she had felt how it fitted the rhythm of two new and very fascinating tunes.

She stood looking up at Jen, who was sitting on a small table on the platform, swinging her long legs and knitting her brows over her register.

“You look like a tall, slim, curly-headed sprite, Miss Robins.”

“A sprite!” Jen laughed down at her, recognising with delight the new glow of enjoyment in Mary’s face. “That’s very nice of you, Mary-Dorothy, but a very bad comparison. Well, and how do you like morris?”

“It’s more than liking. I love it! It’s what Biddy would call a simply gorgeous feeling.”

“That’s how we all feel. You’ll come to my extra sword class, won’t you, Mary-Dorothy? I’m counting on you and Biddy. I know you can get off; so many of them can’t.”

“May we? We’d like to try it; if you think I’d be good enough! But wouldn’t you rather have one of the girls?”

“You shouldn’t be so distrustful of yourself,” Jen said severely. “You can do it quite as well as the girls. No, I want you. I want you to try it. Where did you get the nice tunic? Don’t you find it very comfortable?”

“Very! I made it. Is it all right?” Mary asked doubtfully. “I copied Biddy’s. I thought I’d better have one.”

“Oh, it’s far more comfortable for morris! I was so glad to see you’d risen to the occasion,” Jen said warmly. “I didn’t like to tell you you ought to have one, but I was sure you’d be happier in it.

“Toes, Biddy Devine! You must get off your toes! And don’t do those fancy steps! Look! This is what you’re doing!” and she leapt from the platform and came flying across the room. “This is how you ought to set! Don’t you see the difference? And don’t get all twisted round. Keep facing her—What’s wrong over here?” and she whirled away to another corner where heated discussion was going on.

“She takes their breath away. They’re all a bit stunned,” Biddy said laughing. “But they like her, you know.”

“Oh, yes, they’re going to love her!” and Mary thought often of that remark afterwards, for it had included herself.

She was surprised and amused to find how often Jen, and her dances, and their music, came into her mind during the next week. Everything she did, and all her ordinary life, had received a new background.

It was the same with Biddy; and unconsciously both the sisters were happier for their common interest, which was such a new thing.

The following Tuesday they stood, with six other girls who had come early, with long wooden swords in their left hands and eyes fixed expectantly on Jen. Mary’s eyes were a trifle apprehensive also; she was

inclined to be nervous of this new attempt. Biddy was frankly eager to know what she was to do with her sword, and was amazed to hear she was expected to dance left-handed. The making of the lock thrilled them to the limit; Mary was stunned to find how easily it had been done; but there was a triumphant delight in her bewilderment, at which Jen laughed in sympathy.

“And how do you like swords?” she asked, smiling down into Mary’s eager face as the morris class assembled.

“Oh, it’s great fun! That clashing is quite thrilling. But I never skipped so hard in my life before.”

“You’ll find every bit just as thrilling,” Jen promised. “It is fun, isn’t it? Now I want to see how your morris is getting on! Big ring, everybody! Biddy Devine, what have you got to remember?”

“Toes!” said Biddy solemnly, and balanced herself on the ball of her foot.



## CHAPTER XIV

### “OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY”

Jen, in a deep blue evening frock, met Joy in a soft white one, in the course of a “longways” country-dance at a party in the big hall where classes were held. Joy, up for the day to keep her weekly engagement with the Pixie at Plaistow, had only arrived after the party had begun.

“Hallo, Joy! You’ve got here, then! Remember you’re having the next with me,” Jen called, as she set towards her opposite corner in “Indian Queen.”

Joy took her outstretched hands to turn her. “Right you are! Are those two coming with us to-morrow?”

“Rather! They’re dying for it. I say! Mary-Dorothy’s improving! She’s ever so much jollier already.”

“Splendid!” said Joy, and left her as she went on up the line.

When their own dance came there was more time to talk. “Your crusade is getting on, then?”

“Oh, splendidly! You never saw anyone happier than Mary-Dorothy when she’s dancing. And she isn’t so bad, considering. She’s got more spunk than I’d have believed; she tries everything, and loves morris. And she’s made herself a tunic!” triumphantly.

“Gosh! You have converted her! How does she look in it?”

“Better than you’d think; better than lots of them. Some of them are so lumpy; at least she’s neat. She made it jolly well!”

“I’m jolly glad to hear she’s made it at all!” said Joy.

Biddy was waiting at the door next afternoon, her suitcase on the step, her face full of excited joy, with just a touch of fear lest the beautiful dream should really turn out to be a dream, after all. At sight of the car, and Jen leaning over the side from the back seat, she gave a wild shout and bounded up the stair, crying to Mary to come.

Jen laughed, and sprang out to help to stow away the cases; and laughed again at sight of Mary’s radiant look.

“Come and sit by me, Mary-Dorothy,” said Joy. “Jen and Biddy can babble behind. Besides, you feel the wind less here.”

“We like the wind!” Jen retorted, and climbed into her back corner.

“I feel like a duchess,” and Biddy lay luxuriously back in hers.

Under cover of the noise of the engine, Joy spoke quickly to Mary, her eyes fixed steadily on the road in front. “I’m so glad you’ve come. I’ve an

idea it may be very good for your Bidy. I've two very jolly kids at home, just about her age, and absolutely healthy and normal. Well, Rosamund is! Maidlin has a temperament but she's getting the better of it."

"It's more than kind of you to think of it," Mary said gratefully. "I had been thinking something of the sort myself."

"Now we're going to shoot ahead into the country," announced Joy. "This is Uxbridge, and we leave the busy roads, which I hate, and have good country roads. Here we are in Buckinghamshire!" as they flashed across several bridges in quick succession. "Good-bye, London! We're clear of it at last. See the may!"

"I can't take my eyes off it. Every hedge is a dream," and Mary gazed joyfully at the white cloudy wall that bordered every field.

"Here's another spot of colour for you!" Joy said presently, as they reached Wycombe and she drew Eirene up at big gates set in a high wall.

"This is the renowned spot which had the privilege of receiving our President Cicely and witnessing the birth of the Hamlet Club; then of welcoming Joan and myself, and later of sheltering Jenny-Wren," Joy began impressively. "Much-to-be-envied school!"

Joy was sounding Eirene's horn vigorously, and creating much interest in the rather dreary street. "Our spot, or rather spots, of colour seem to have got lost! My—er—adopted daughters insisted on being picked up on the way home, Miss Devine. They usually cycle, so they'll have to leave their bikes and come by train in the morning, starting heaps earlier than usual. I pointed that out to them, but it made no difference. I also suggested that they should go by train this morning, instead of to-morrow, but Rosamunda wouldn't hear of it; she argued that if I and Eirene didn't turn up for any reason, and they hadn't got their bikes, they'd be properly dished; that, I regret to say, is the exact expression she used. Ah, here they come at last!"

Biddy was leaning forward eagerly, looking for the girls. She had been trying to find out from Jen why Joy had had to "adopt" them, but Jen, for once, had not been talkative. Rosamund's relations lived in the North—her parents were abroad—she had been sent to Wycombe as a boarder, but the air of the valley-town had not suited her, so Joy had invited her to live out in the country at the Hall; Maidlin was fourteen, a year younger, and an orphan, and Joy was bringing her up. Since Jen would tell no more, Biddy had to turn to the girls themselves to see what she could guess from looking at them.

There was considerable difference in size between them, though only a year in age. Rosamund was tall, and big for fifteen, with two yellow plaits; Maidlin was small and neat, and very dark, with black eyes and dusky hair in a thick pigtail.

“You’re awfully late, Joy! We got tired of waiting and went in to do some prep., so that we’d have more time to talk to Biddy at night. You are Biddy, aren’t you?” Rosamund had opened the door of the car and was jumping in before she had finished introducing herself. “Aren’t you coming in, Maidie?”

“I want to sit with Joy. Is there room?” Maidlin evidently had a mind of her own.

“For half a person only. You must squeeze in and make yourself very thin,” and Joy made room for the small one between herself and Mary. “Are we crushing you too much, Miss Devine?”

“I came all the way from town between you and Jen,” Maidlin pointed out.

“Yes, but it doesn’t matter squashing the family! Miss Devine’s a visitor.”

“She isn’t nearly as big as Jen,” Maidlin argued.

“And she likes being squashed, when the squashing’s done by her friends,” Mary added. “There’s heaps of room for a little one! But I *am* feeling crushed, Miss Shirley. Why have you stopped giving me my new name?”

Joy laughed, as the car sprang ahead and made for the country again. “Don’t you mind, really? But I think you ought to return the compliment. You stick most severely to ‘Miss Shirley’ and ‘Miss Robins.’”

“Oh!” said Mary, and coloured shyly. “Oh, but it’s different!”

“I shall think Mary-Dorothy wants to quarrel, too, if she insists on being so fearfully polite,” Joy remarked. “Our back seat seems to have made friends, doesn’t it? I’d back Rosamunda in a chattering race any day! How’s school, Madalena?—It’s Maidlin’s first term,” she explained, as the car climbed a long hill carefully. “She’s only been coming here for a fortnight; of course, she’d been to school before, but not to a big school like this. Ros!” she called over her shoulder. “Is Maidie making friends?”

“She’s fearfully slow,” Rosamund called back, “but she does speak to people now. For the first week she didn’t.”

“Good child! She’s getting on. Now here is where we take to the hills, Mary-Dorothy. You’ve seen our woods and fields and orchards and commons. We could go all the way round by the low road, as the train does, but we all prefer the hills.”

The wind here was cool and strong, and very refreshing after the warmth of the valleys, and still more after the London streets. Mary sat enjoying it, in blissful content; then gave a cry of delighted surprise as a wide view showed far below them.

“We’re several hundred feet up,” Joy explained. “That’s Oxfordshire. We go down to it, through the woods,” and she guided Eirene carefully into a winding way among tall, bare-stemmed pines.

Then a swift flight towards a tree-clad hillside brought them to roads bordered by smooth grey beeches with new leaves of vividest green; and they crept through big ancient gates and along a winding beech avenue.

Mary held her breath and gazed about. Bidy had stopped chattering with Rosamund, and was staring wide-eyed. Jen looked at them both with satisfied eyes.

“What glorious trees!” Mary murmured. “They weren’t like these in the other woods!”

“They’ve been taken care of. I won’t have them touched, except for their own sake.” Joy leaned forward and stopped the car.

“They’re Joy’s giants,” said Jen. “She loves each separate one. I believe they all have names, but she won’t tell.”

Mary turned incredulously to Joy. “This is all yours? This is where we’re going to stay?”

“The house is just round the bend of the drive. Hop out, Jenny-Wren, and pipe us home. We’ll do the thing in style! Something triumphant and happy!”

Jen laughed. Throwing off her fur coat and tossing her cap to Rosamund, she jumped down pipe in hand. “I never go anywhere without Baby! But I think you all ought to get out and walk, too.”

“No, that would look like a funeral,” said Maidlin unexpectedly.

Joy smothered a laugh. “Quite right, Madalena! We’re a triumphal procession. Go ahead, ‘Tom, Tom, the piper’s son!’ ”

“Keep Eirene quiet, then, or you won’t hear Baby. She hasn’t such a very loud voice,” and Jen, in a yellow jumper and with wind-blown yellow curls, strode ahead, manfully piping processions, from Helston and Winster and Tideswell by turns.

Bidy and Rosamund were hanging out of the car behind. Maidlin looked up at Joy, and Joy smiled down into her eager little face; the understanding between them was evidently complete.

Mary sat in her corner, and listened and gazed in rapt delight. “That’s the finishing touch!” she said, under her breath.

“I like being a procession!” Bidy chuckled.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE ABBEY AND THE HALL

“Oh, I’m glad we came! I’m glad to have seen this! We’ll be richer all our lives! It’s a place one could never forget,” Mary said gratefully.

The great grey Hall, with its gardens and lawns—the gentle welcome of Joy’s aunt, a frail little lady who made an ideal hostess for the old house—the beautiful bedroom set apart for them, with windows wide open and looking over the woods—and tea in the big entrance-hall under the portraits of Joy’s ancestors—had all blended into a wonderful kind of fairy-tale for Mary and Biddy.

Now, in the early evening, and preceded once more by the piper, they had crossed the lawn, where the lilacs and laburnums and hawthorns made a wall of many colours and sweetest scents, and entered a little path among the bushes.

The strangers had no idea where they were going. Rosamund and Maidlin had been sent back to do their preparation for next day, much to their annoyance; they had only stayed because of Joy’s threat that there would be no “fun with Biddy” till the homework was done.

Joy unlocked an ancient door in the wall. “Seven hundred years old, perhaps!” she said briefly. “Oh, this is much older than the house!”

She opened the old door, and beyond the little Abbot’s garden, full of old-fashioned flowers, Joan’s ruined Abbey stood before them. A cry of amazement broke from Biddy, of incredulous delight from Mary. Neither had dreamed of the grey pile lying buried among the trees; now that the leaves were so thick, the glimpses they had caught of walls and towers had told them nothing.

The vivid green of the cloister garth, the evident age of the long, low buildings on three sides of it, and the high, beautiful refectory on the fourth, the pointed arches of the chapter-house, the broken tracery of the cloister windows, the peace of it all, stilled even Biddy to awed silence.

“I couldn’t have piped here,” Jen murmured. “Not to-night. Isn’t it quiet, after London?”

“And we once danced here, fiddle and all,” Joy reminded her.

“But it didn’t spoil it. We weren’t noisy. The moonlight bewitched us, and we danced like shadows, out there on the garth, Mary-Dorothy. Now come and see where Joan’s white-robed monks used to sleep, and eat, and

hold their councils, and care for their gardens, and look after the sick old folks.”

“Jen can tell you all the stories,” said Joy, and her movement broke the spell. “I want a word with Ann Watson,” and she went off to talk to the caretaker, who had appeared on the other side of the quiet green garth.

Joy joined them presently in the chapter-house, but left the telling of the story to Jen whose love and enthusiasm for the Abbey were manifest.

Biddy was full of delight in the stories, and especially in that of the discovery of the secret passages, which she was to be allowed to explore with Rosamund and Maidlin.

“They made me promise they should take you there,” Joy said, laughing. “You’ve seen enough for one evening!”

“I shall dream of monks and ladies and Henry the Eighth and your grandfather!” Biddy said, with conviction. “Mary, I should think this place would simply make you write poetry!”

“What’s that?” Jen turned sharply and stood in the middle of the path, blocking their way through the Abbot’s garden. “Does she?”

Mary crimsoned. “No, I’ve never done it in my life. Biddy, don’t be silly!”

“Then what did she say it for?” Jen demanded. “She meant something! Confess, Mary-Dorothy! There’s something about you I don’t understand. Is this it?”

Mary, flushed and shy, spoke swiftly. “There isn’t anything to confess. I tried to write once, years ago; our father was a journalist. I felt as if there was something in me that wanted to come out. But my things were no good; Father told me so plainly. So I gave it up. I haven’t tried to write for years. As for poetry, I’ve never thought of it. I don’t know what Biddy means. I couldn’t make two lines rhyme!”

“I only said ‘poetry’ because all this place seems to want poetry,” Biddy explained. “It makes even me feel poetical! She writes wonderful letters, Miss Robins! You should have read the screed she wrote about that party at Plaistow, and you, and the music, and the classes she’d been to see!”

“I wish I had!” Jen said yearningly. “Oh, well, we mustn’t tease her! She’s here for a holiday. You shan’t be worried, Mary-Dorothy! But if I were you I’d try again. Now come on home to the children. They’ll have finished their prep., and be wailing for Biddy.”

“The children” met them on the lawn, and carried Biddy off at once to the tennis-court.

Joy stood looking after them. “Now I wonder what those two have been up to? Rosamund, I mean, of course. Maidie’s been in it, too, but only as an accomplice. She wouldn’t meet my eye. But did you ever see anything so

guileless as Rosamunda, Jenny-Wren? It was beautiful; but she overdid it. She gave the show away. They've been making apple-pie beds! Do you know anything of this, Aunty?"

"I heard a great deal of giggling upstairs," Mrs. Shirley admitted. "But I thought you wouldn't want me to stop them."

"Stop them! Not for a second! If it pleases them, let them mess up our beds as much as they like! All the same, I'm going to remake mine. Come and investigate, you two!"

"We could always return the compliment," Jen laughed.

"He laughs best who laughs last!" Joy said solemnly, as she turned down her bed, found what she had expected, and proceeded to pull it to pieces. "Better look at yours, Mary-Dorothy!"

"Biddy's a more likely victim," said Jen. "Mine's all right. Wait a sec., though!—oh, the little bounders!"

At her wail of wrath Mary and Joy came to their doors to hear the worst. Jen was sitting on her bed, her lap covered with pale pink pyjamas.

"I just looked to make sure! The little rotters have sewn up the arms and legs!"

"Rosamunda's worked hard." Joy chuckled. "Rip them up, Jenny-Wren! The stitches will be inches big! I'll fetch you Ros's nightie, and you can have your r-r-revenge!"

"Let me sew Rosamund's up!" Mary suggested. "They've left my bed alone, so they'll never think of accusing me."

Joy laughed, and tossed the night-gown to her. "Good for you! Gather it all up into a bag! What about Biddy's bed?"

"I fancy there's a brush in it," Mary said demurely, "but I thought it would be better fun not to inquire too closely!"

"Cheers! We'll leave Biddy to their tender mercies. I'm going to turn up Maidie's sheets, and put a cold rubber bottle in for Rosamunda. She'll think it's a body, and let out a howl."

"Unless the state of her nightie has given her warning," Jen said grimly, busily unpicking the stitches in her sleeves. "Joy, you know you ought not to encourage them! It's no wonder sensible people go crazy when they get near you. You're every bit as bad as the children. You'd better go and get your millions of letters! This job will take Mary-Dorothy and me ten minutes yet."

"You are slow with your needle, Jenny-Wren!" Joy mocked. "Now"—sadly—"I shall have to be really grown-up while I attend to my correspondence! I'll see you at dinner, Mary-Dorothy. Even I have to work sometimes, you know."

“Now!” Jen rose and spoke in a tone of deep satisfaction when Joy had disappeared. “We’ve got rid of her for an hour! The coast is clear! Mary-Dorothy, you and I will now proceed to put things in Joy’s bed, and sew up Joy’s pyjamas, and hide Joy’s brushes! Come on and do your worst!”

Mary sat and stared at her, then went off into a peal of laughter. “After what you said to her! Which of you is the worst, I wonder?”

“Oh, she is, because she’s three years older! But I’m a very decent second!” and while Mary watched with fascinated eyes, Jen hurled Joy’s sponge and towels behind the dressing-table, poked brushes into her bed, and crackly paper into her pillow, stuffed dusters into her night-dress case and hid the night-dress in the wardrobe, sewed up the case with lightning stitches, and finally ran downstairs to steal a couple of biscuits, and crumbled these into the bedroom slippers. This last idea seemed so promising that she went for more biscuits, and put two into each of the beds, so that the owner would jump in upon them and fill her bed with crumbs.

“I’m just afraid they’ll guess there’s something up, and find them in time!” she said mournfully. “I’m afraid we’ve overdone it, Mary-Dorothy! If we could only arrange a failure of the electric light at bedtime!”



## CHAPTER XVI

### MAKING BIDDY FEEL AT HOME

Anything more innocent than Jen's face during dinner, and during the music that followed, Mary had never seen. Rosamund had dancing eyes, which were easy for those in the secret to read; Maidlin lapsed occasionally into fits of giggling which she could not account for. Biddy, the only really innocent one of the party, was much too excited by the novelty of everything to be suspicious; it had not dawned on her yet that this was a house in which one's hostess might put brushes in one's bed. But Jen, by far the guiltiest, seemed to have forgotten all about the surprises upstairs, and was perfectly natural and casual.

She demanded folk-songs after dinner, and led Joy to the piano. And then Mary and Biddy saw a new Joy, whose exuberant high spirits calmed into something deeper when she sat down before her loved piano, and played to them for an hour, sometimes songs with rollicking choruses in which Jen and Rosamund and Maidlin joined, more often unknown melodies which seemed to grow as she played.

The music held Maidlin by a spell, too, and she sat on a stool gazing up at Joy, everything else forgotten. Rosamund and Biddy whispered together in a corner for a while, then dropped over a window sill into the garden, to talk in earnest outside. Jen watched them go, and murmured, with a ghost of a smile, "So long as they don't go upstairs! The joke's two layers deep already; we don't want it improved on any more!"

"I'd forgotten all about it! And I was sure you had!" Mary whispered, in a startled tone.

Jen shook her head, with another fleeting smile, then gave herself up to the music again. "Look at Maidlin!" she murmured once. "She loves Joy, and she loves music! She really has forgotten all about beds!"

Joy rose at last, and closed the piano. "To bed my children! Where are they, Maidie? Have I driven them all away?"

Rosamund's head appeared at the window. "We're here. We wanted to talk. We were afraid we'd disturb Maidlin and Jen. They were looking so soulful and sentimental and mooney and musical, that we thought we'd better fade away."

"Rosamunda, you're horribly matter-of-fact! Fade away upstairs, all you three. I think we others will come too. Mary-Dorothy looks tired."

“Oh, no! I’m only feeling sentimental with the music!” Mary said, laughing. “Thank you for a very great treat! You’d already given me beauty and colour and nature and romance, all in one day; I didn’t know we were to finish up with music, too.”

“Oh, that’s not the finish! Don’t you think it!” Jen murmured, as they followed the younger girls upstairs. “You don’t know us yet! Things only begin when we go up to bed!”

Every one said good-night decorously at the head of the big staircase; and everyone but Biddy knew it was only a pretence.

“Good-night, all!” sang Rosamund.

“Sleep well, my children! Good-night, baby!” Joy kissed Maidlin and left her at her own door.

“Don’t talk to Biddy all night, Mary-Dorothy!” Jen said severely, and retired into her room.

Biddy closed their door. “Mary, I’m so glad we’re sleeping together! I haven’t had a chance to speak to you yet. Isn’t it the most gorgeous place? And aren’t they a super crowd?”

“The loveliest place, and the kindest people, I’ve ever seen,” Mary said warmly.

“Yes, that’s how I feel.”

Suddenly she gave a wild shriek. She had thrown off her clothes and jumped into bed while she was talking, meaning to get up again and proceed to more serious matters presently. Her toes met a bristly brush, and with one leap and one shriek Biddy sprang out of bed; then plunged under the sheets to investigate.

Her shriek was echoed from Rosamund’s room. A door was flung open, and an indignant voice demanded, “Who put that beastly thing in my bed? I thought it was a dead fish!”

“Well, I thought I’d got a—a hedgehog or a porcupine in mine!” and Biddy bounced out into the passage, her brown curls unfastened and hanging wildly over her pyjamas.

Mary followed to see the fun. Maidlin gave a wail of astonished dismay. “My bed’s all crumbs! There was a biscuit in it, and I sat on it before I knew. Ros, you are a pig! You never said you’d do anything to mine!”

“I never did anything.” Rosamund, with vengeful eyes, marched down the corridor. “It’s these others. They must have done it while we were at tennis! Call themselves grown-ups! Babies! Infants!—I *say*! You have been quick!” and she stared incredulously at Jen, who, clad in her pink pyjamas and a long dressing-gown, had appeared at her door and was eyeing them all in mild surprise.

“What’s the matter? Is it a fire?” she asked innocently.

“How did you get into those things?” Rosamund demanded indignantly.

“The usual way. Shall I demonstrate? Why? What’s the difficulty?” Jen asked mildly.

“You came up and unpicked them!” Rosamund raged. “And then you messed up our rooms, you and Joy! Maidie, is there anything wrong with your bed?”

“I’m making it over again,” Maidlin said plaintively. “It was all upside down, like you made Joy’s.”

Biddy, grasping what had happened, both parts of it, with the sharpness of a schoolgirl and a Londoner, went off into a peal of laughter.

Rosamund glared at her, though her eyes were beginning to dance at the way the tables had been turned. “Who did it? That’s what I want to know. Oh, I did yours!” to Biddy. “I wanted to make you feel at home!”

Joy’s door opened with indignant emphasis. “Jen Robins, you’re a disgrace!—a traitor to your friends! Go home at once! I’ll never ask you here again!”

Rosamund deliberately turned a joyful somersault, and sat, very much dishevelled, and laughed up at them.

“Has Jen been at it, too? I’m glad she’s paid you out. Or was it all Jen? Jen Robins, did you put that dead fish in my bed?”

“What’s the matter, ‘Traveller’s Joy’? You seem agitated about something,” Jen asked gently. “Is there anything wrong?”

“Anything! Ten solid minutes I’ve spent unpicking this wretched thing, which was sewn up in every corner,” and Joy flourished her night-dress case, “only to find it stuffed with rags! And I sat on my bed to do it, and some silly idiot had put biscuits inside, and it’s a mass of crumbs! Jen Robins, I’ll—I’ll—” and she made a dash for Jen—“I’ll put the crumbs down your neck and stuff the rags down your throat!”

“Clear the course!” gasped Rosamund, and hurled herself and Biddy out of the way. “I back Joy! Two to one on Joy!”

“Jen’s the biggest! She’ll win!” shouted Biddy.

Jen made a dash for her own room, but Joy was after her before she could close the door, and leapt upon her and flung her down on her bed. Biddy and Rosamund cheered from the doorway; Maidlin watched, a little startled.

“Where’s my nightie, Jen Robins?” Joy was demanding.

“Go and look!” Jen crowed, half stifled by pillows.

“Girls! Joy, what are you thinking of?” and Mrs. Shirley appeared between Biddy and Rosamund in the doorway, real reproof in her gentle face.

“Aunty dear, we’re just going to bed,” Joy coaxed. “If you’ll retire, we won’t make another sound. I’ll send all these silly kids off to bed at once, honestly I will.”

“If you’d set us a good example, it would be much more to the point,” Jen suggested. “And you’ve heaps to do in your room yet!”

Joy ignored her, and managed to persuade Mrs. Shirley to go back to her room. She returned alone in a moment, and held up a warning finger. “Not another sound, anybody! She mustn’t be worried; and she really doesn’t like it. I wouldn’t let you off for anyone else, Jen Robins; but for her sake you shall escape the pummelling you deserve!”

“I’ve had it!” Jen sighed. “I’m sore all over, but it may be with laughing. But I’ve got to have a drink!”

“The only sound henceforth is to be the tinkling of the glasses!” Joy announced, as Rosamund and Bidy reappeared, with a tray of glasses and a jug of home-made lemonade.

“And the gurgling of the drink as it swishes down our parched and aching throats!” Jen murmured, and held out a weak and trembling hand.

“You’ll slop it all over your bed!” Rosamund said warningly.

“Biscuits!” groaned Joy. “They’ve brought a plate of biscuits! As if our beds weren’t full of them! You might have risen to cake, Rosamunda!”

“We found these first. If you want more, you can pick up the crumbs in your bed,” Rosamund retorted.

“I’m exhausted!” Joy said solemnly. “And, my hat! I’d forgotten tomorrow’s early breakfast! You infants will lose your train if you don’t fly off to bed this instant! Hop away, now, Madalena! Good-night, Mary-Dorothy! This is positively our last appearance for to-night!”

“I’m feeling thoroughly at home, thank you!” Bidy said laughing, as she disappeared.

## CHAPTER XVII

### JOY DISAPPOINTS THE PRESIDENT

As doors closed, Jen slipped out of her room and into Joy's. "In the wardrobe, silly! There!" and she hauled out the night-dress. "And everything else is down the back of the dressing-table. Didn't the kids love it? I thought Biddy would have hysterics."

"You are a silly infant, Jenny-Wren!" Joy said indignantly, as she rescued her property from its various hiding-places. "You're as much a kid as any of them!"

"Well, what about you? But, I say, Joy! Mary-Dorothy writes poetry."

"Used to write! And it wasn't poetry . . ."

"I want to know what it was, that her business-like Daddy said was no good at all. He sat on her first attempts, and she's never tried again. Doesn't it help to explain her?"

"How do you mean?" Joy took the pins out of her mane of bronze hair and began to brush it out.

"Well, if you were the beginnings of a poet, or a writer of some kind, and somebody sat on you heavily and told you your work was no good, wouldn't you want to curl up and die? I feel I'm beginning to understand Mary-Dorothy a little. If that's what happened, she's not quite such a puzzle as she seemed. And I'm going to bring her to life and start her writing again, if there's any way to do it."

"How do you propose to set about developing Mary-Dorothy's gifts?"

"Ask that Writing Person's advice, next time I see her," Jen said practically.

"Now you're talking sense! There really is something in that idea! And in the meantime, shall you tell Mary-Dorothy?"

"No, I shall say nothing more about it," Jen decided. "I'm going to get her wakened up first. She's a lot better than she was, already. The music and the dancing began it, and the change to the country will help her on. And ragging like to-night's is all good for her. I want her to have more, as much as she can get——"

"Not ragging! Have mercy on us, Jenny-Wren!"

"No, I mean music and dancing. I'm sure it will help to wake up her imagination; I believe it's gone to sleep for years, since her Daddy sat on it. You know how that Writer Person speaks about folk-dancing; how she says

it helps her, and she always gets new ideas after classes. I'm going to see if the same thing happens with Mary-Dorothy."

"Going to give her dancing lessons here?"

"Yes, I am," Jen said stoutly. "I'm going to teach her and Biddy morris jigs, as Joan taught me."

She proceeded to carry out this programme next day, when Rosamund and Maidlin had been whirled off in the car to school; for Joy relented at the last moment, and agreed to spare them the long and hurried walk to the station and the awkward train journey.

Out on the sunny lawn, in a little arbour where they could not be watched—a round glade walled in by drooping laburnums in full flower, with an old stone seat under a great bronze copper beech—Jen laid two golf-clubs on the grass in the form of a cross, and called to Joy to come and demonstrate the "Bacca Pipes" jig.

"The clubs ought to be long clay pipes, but you only use pipes when you've learned it. You'd smash them a dozen times while you were practising," Jen explained.

She put the little wooden pipe to her lips, and Joy, only too glad to leave her business letters for ten minutes with music and sunshine, began to dance across the "pipes." Her deft "Heel-and-toe" movements roused Biddy to wild excitement and a desire to do the same herself at once; but Mary sat on the grass, clasping her knees and seeing and drinking in far more than Biddy was even awake to; the brilliant colours in the clear country air, the silvery bird-notes called out of the brown pipe by Jen's loving fingers, the sheen of Joy's bright bronze hair in the sunshine, and the breeze lifting Jen's yellow curls, the golden rain from the trees behind and the rich coppery glow of the beech; these were as much a part of her enjoyment as the slim, lithe figure of the dancer and the neat placing of her feet.

She was called out of her dream by Jen's peremptory demand that she should "get up and try it," and Joy went reluctantly back to her work.

"You ought to have a private secretary!" Biddy called after her.

Joy laughed back at her. "I believe Maidlin thinks of applying for the job. She says she's going to live with me for always."

"I'm going to give you a lesson every day," Jen remarked, when they were both breathless but delighted to find the dance really not so difficult as it looked. "You're going to work hard, except on the days I'm in town."

"Aren't you staying all the time with us?" Mary asked disappointedly.

"I must go up to town on Tuesday. There's the club at night; I can't let the girls down, when I've just taken them on," Jen said gravely.

On Saturday, after a thorough exploration of the secret passages between the Abbey and the Hall and of the underground church below the Abbey

ruins, the dancing class was reinforced by Rosamund and Maidlin, and Jen piped “Ruffy Tufty” and made the other four dance till Rosamund cried out for a change of tune.

A sudden interruption was caused by the hooting of a motor horn, and a cycle and side-car came panting up the avenue.

“Which of our married couples is it? Joy, here’s a side-car!” Jen cried. “Oh, it’s the President!”

“Joan would have let us know,” Joy came through the long window to greet Cicely Everett and her husband.

“Come and make up a set for eight! You’re just in time for ‘Goddesses!’ ” Jen hinted.

“No ‘Goddesses’ for me! We’re flying round the country, issuing invitations; royal commands, in fact! You’re the last, and everyone else has accepted. We’re having a picnic in our woods next Thursday; lunch out, then tea at home, and all go on to the Hamlet dance in the barn together. Miriam and Marguerite and Georgie and Edna can all come, and I’ve written to Joan and her Jack, and to Jen’s Jacky-boy. That’s all our crowd, with you and Jenny-Wren, ‘Traveller’s Joy.’ Of course you’ll bring your visitors, too.”

Jen was looking at Joy in consternation. “Oh, but not on Thursday!” she wailed.

“Can’t be done!” Joy said briefly. “I’ve got to go up to town that day.”

“Oh, rot!” the President disposed of the objection easily. “You can put it off. Go on Friday!”

“Can’t be done,” Joy said again. “Look here, President, I’m awfully sorry, but I’ve made a promise for that day, and I can’t back out now. I’d love to have a picnic with all the old crowd, but I’m not in the habit of letting people down, and I’d be doing it if I didn’t go to town on Thursday. I’ll see the girls at night; I’m going to get back for the dance, of course. Jen can come back early and go to the picnic; she’s going to town for her class on Tuesday night. But I can’t change my plan for Thursday. It concerns folks in town, you see.”

“But couldn’t you go another day?” Cicely urged, bitterly disappointed. “It will spoil everything not to have you! Who is it in town that’s so important?”

“It’s my promise that’s important,” Joy said shortly. “I’m meeting some friends, and I don’t know where they live, so I can’t put them off. You’d like something to drink, I expect, after tearing through the air like that; I know Dick’s favourite pace,” and she went in quest of lime-juice and cakes.

“Doesn’t know where they live!” Cicely Everett said indignantly. “Who are they, Jen?”

“It’s no use, President,” Jen said swiftly. “It’s East End cripples; she takes them out in the car for a day in the country. She gives them the time of their lives.”

“My aunt!” gasped Cicely, and stared open-mouthed at Joy, as she came back with a laden tray.

Joy poured out a glass of lime-juice and offered it to her, defiance in her eyes. The President’s face told her that Jen had explained.

“Laugh if you want to,” she said grimly. “I don’t care a rap. But if you’d seen what I’ve seen, Mrs. Everett, you wouldn’t want to laugh. And you’d know why I can’t disappoint those kiddies.”

“I had no idea you’d gone in for this kind of thing! Somebody might have warned me!” the President said weakly. “Since when has it happened, Jen?”

“If you will get married and go off to the ends of the earth—meaning Ceylon—you must expect to be out of date when you come home again,” Jen retorted. “It’s been going on for quite a long time. Ever so many East End kids look on Joy as a kind of fairy godmother.”

“It’s the biggest shock I’ve ever had,” Cicely assured her husband earnestly. “Come on, Dick! We’ve got to run round all those people again and see if they can picnic with us on Friday instead. I won’t have the party without Joy, though if I’d had any idea she had such pressing engagements I’d have asked her first. Does she take anything else out for drives on Friday, by the way?” she asked anxiously of Jen.

“Friday is at your service,” Joy assured her cheerfully. “I’m sorry to give you so much trouble, but Thursday is not.”

“It’s a fearful bother! I shall have to write to Joan and Jacky-boy, too,” Cicely groaned. “Bother you, Joy Shirley!”

“Even when you’re married, you can’t always have all your own way!” Jen remarked pensively, as the side-car bore the disappointed President away to make new arrangements.



## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE HAMLET CLUB

Cicely Everett rang up Joy during the evening. "I say, Joy, neither Miriam nor the Gilks girls can come on Friday or Saturday, and Marguerite's going to France on Monday with her husband. Wednesday's impossible for Jen, and Tuesday's too soon. Thursday's the only day I can get the whole crowd together. Can't you possibly put those kids off for once? Couldn't the Pixie tell them you'll come on Friday instead? I do want all our old lot together, and Thursday's the only chance."

"Then you must leave me out and have the rest," Joy urged. "I'm sorry to have given you so much bother. I'd have liked to come, but I'll see them all at night in the barn. No, President, I can't possibly; I'm awfully sorry, but I can't."

"And I shan't be back from town," said Jen, at her elbow. "Say she'll have to excuse all the party from the Hall! We'll turn up at the barn."

To Mary's secret relief, no persuasion of Joy's could move Jen from this decision. Mary had felt naturally that she and Bidy would be very much outsiders in such a reunion, and that they had only been asked by the President because she could not very well help it. It was a distinct relief when Jen and Joy turned from the telephone, and Jen said cheerfully: "That's done it! Poor old President! She shall have her picnic, but without this crowd. It wouldn't have been much fun for you, anyway, Mary-Dorothy; you wouldn't have known the rest. We'll have a picnic of our own on Monday, and go maying, and I'll go home on Tuesday laden with may. I'll pipe you and Joy and Bidy to the woods! We'll pretend we're an ancient spring festival."

The ancient spring festival duly took place, and the tune of "Laudnum Bunches" recalled to Mary for months the sight of the snow-laden hedges and the scent of the may. For Jen piped it incessantly, declaring it the "most springish" of all the morris tunes.

They went home laden with may, and, scorning superstition filled the house with it and still had plenty for Jen's car next morning. Joy drove her home, and invited Mary and Bidy to share the ride.

"I'll bring you back after tea," she promised. "I won't leave you in London!"

"We're missing our class," said Mary. "But think of all the extra lessons we've had!"

“Yes, the club hasn’t learned ‘Bacca Pipes!’ Oh, isn’t it topping to know we haven’t got to stop here!” Biddy sighed rapturously, as they swung out into the great west road and headed for the hills and the Abbey. “You are a brick, to keep us for another week!” warmly to Joy.

“Oh, we couldn’t let you go till you’ve joined in a meeting of the Hamlet Club, and danced in our barn! It’s only through the Hamlet Club and the President that we exist, as a crowd of friends. The Club’s still going strong, under the reigning Queen, our Rosamunda.”

“Will it be in tunics?” Biddy asked eagerly.

“Oh, no, not for a party! Dancing frocks. Your pretty pink will do very well.”

The Hall seemed to have lost something while Jen was away. Mary felt it, but did not remark on the gap Jen had left, feeling it would hardly be polite to their hostess. But Joy voiced her own feelings and Mary’s also.

“Mercy me! Don’t I miss that Jenny-Wren! I don’t know how we ever get on without her. I’m looking for her all the time.”

Joy had hoped Joan and her husband would come for the dance in the barn, and help to fill the gap. But a letter came to tell of the illness of Jack Raymond’s father, which had called all the family to his home in Sussex; and Joan had reluctantly to give up the thought of a visit to her Abbey at present.

The evening with the Hamlet Club was another of the joyful memories of that radiant holiday to Mary and Biddy. The meeting was held at Darley’s Bottom, at the home of one of the original members of the club. Dorothy Darley welcomed her friends and all the newer members, most of whom she hardly knew, and sent them out to the lawn in the garden of the big farmhouse. This, on a fine evening, was a great improvement on indoors, and here the girls, schoolgirls and old members, danced country and morris dances for nearly two hours, till darkness and dew drove them to the barn, the original home of the club. The big lanterns were swinging from the rafters, the ground was hard and smooth; and the dancing went on merrily for an hour longer, to the music of Margia Lane’s magic fiddle.

Many of the dances were simple well-known ones, and Mary and Biddy joined in “Peascods” and “Rufty” and “The Old Mole” and many an easy longways set. But when “Newcastle” or any morris came along, they climbed on the chairs to watch, and found the changing moving mass of colour very enthralling.

“It’s as if someone stirred up a pool full of floating jewels!” Biddy murmured sentimentally.

“But there’s such beautiful order in it! See those rings! And then the lines, and stars! I love the patterns and the music put together,” Mary said,

her face alight with happiness.

“I am so glad to have seen that!” she said warmly, as Joy packed them all into the car. “I shall often dream of your barn! How you all enjoy it!”

Joy and Jen had only arrived from town in time for a hurried meal and a quick change of costume. There had been no time for questions, but Mrs. Shirley was sitting up for them and anxious to hear not only all about the party but about Joy’s day in town and Jen’s father and mother.

“She will do it!” Joy complained. “Aunty dear, why *don’t* you go to bed? We’d tell you everything in the morning! Now, children!” sternly, to Rosamund and Maidlin. “You have school to-morrow morning! Sandwiches and milk, and then you disappear, or it’s the last time you go to the barn during term, Queen or no Queen!”

This awful threat took effect, and the two raced away, to calm down as best they might in quietness upstairs.

“They’re wildly over-excited. I suppose I used to get like that once!” Jen sighed a middle-aged sigh and balanced herself on the arm of a chair, with a glass of milk in one hand and a sandwich in the other.

“You’ll be over-excited now, in a minute, when you spill that milk over your frock!” Joy said suggestively.

“I’ve been out with Joy all day. She’d promised to take me sometime. I had a cripple in my lap, and another on each side of me; and Joy had two in front with her. We were a tight car-full of jolliness.”

“Aunty, it’s too bad! It’s disgusting!” Joy burst out.

Mrs. Shirley looked at her in mild surprise.

Jen began to rock with laughter, and Mary hastily rescued her glass and put it down safely on the table. “Confess, Joy! Tell them all about it!”

“Aunty dear, that man! That Marchwood man from next door! I wish ‘next door’ was half a county away, instead of half a mile!”

“Joy, dear, what is the matter?” her aunt asked gently, while Jen giggled again.

“As usual, he saw more than he was meant to, that’s all! We brought our cripples out this way; we nearly got them here, in fact, but it looked like rain, so we turned back. But we were up on the hills behind here, when that Jenny-Wren—it’s all her fault!—insisted on going into a dirty little shop at a crossroads to buy bulls’-eyes for the kiddies. And she came out giggling because she’d found two long clay pipes, just the thing for ‘Bacca Pipes.’ Of *course* she bought them, and of *course* I had to try them then and there, out in the road, to the great joy of the cripples, who simply shrieked with excitement! Of *course* Jenny-Wren had her pipe in her pocket, and stood there whistling like a schoolboy; and of *course* that man and his mother had to come driving past, in that huge car! And there was I, out on the high road,

with my heavy coat off and no hat on my head, doing a beautiful ‘Heel-and-toe’ over two clay pipes, to an audience of London slum children, all hanging out of the car and cheering like lunatics! Can’t you just see the picture?” she appealed to Mary.

“I can just see that poor old lady’s face!” and Jen went off into a peal of laughter again. “She always did think you were a disgrace to the neighbourhood, Joy Shirley, ever since she saw your legs as you raced across the garth in your tunic after me and Madam! You’ve only confirmed the idea, that’s all! And you smashed my pipes to atoms!”

“Of course I did. I came bang down on them in my annoyance. I wished it was the Marchwood gang I was jumping on, too!”

“Joy, dear, it is time you tried to be a little more restrained,” Mrs. Shirley looked annoyed, too. “Will you never give up these wild ways of yours?”

“’Fraid not, Aunty! I’m afraid when I do I’ll be somebody else, not me myself.” Joy kissed her consolingly. “You don’t want me to be all different, do you, dear?”

“No, just a little different now and then!” Mrs. Shirley laughed ruefully.

“Come along to bed, dear! Never mind about those silly people! I don’t care a scrap, but I knew you’d be annoyed. Don’t you think it was honest and noble of me to confess?”

“You were afraid I’d give you away!” Jen laughed. “If they liked you, Joy, it might matter, for you’d be sorry to spoil their good opinion of you. But I’m quite certain sure they don’t!”

“So much the better! I assure you I don’t like them!” Joy said haughtily.

“Oh, but you’ve got to be friends with them, because you want to go boating on their lake!” Jen teased.

“Um!” said Joy thoughtfully. “There is that about it, of course! The only pond for miles round, Mary-Dorothy, and it belongs to an aged lady and a sulky man! And I love boating! Isn’t it a waste?”

“Hard lines!” Mary said, sympathetically. “You’ll have to remove that bad impression somehow.”

“I seem fated to deepen it!” Joy said sadly.

## CHAPTER XIX

### MARY-DOROTHY'S CONFESSION

"You've done every kind thing you can think of!" Mary said, with deep feeling, as she walked through the spring woods with Joy and Jen. "Will you add one more thing, before we go away?"

Biddy was on in front with Rosamund and Maidlin. It was Saturday, and by rights the visitors should have gone home at the end of their fortnight on Thursday. But Jen had explained that she could not allow that, as she had had to be away for two days out of each week, so that the weeks could not count as real ones; and Joy had warmly begged them to stay on. At Mary's explanation that she must really be back at the office on Monday morning and that Biddy must not miss any more classes, Joy had amended her invitation to bring it within practical bounds.

"Till Sunday, then! I'll run you up to town on Sunday evening; then the children can have Saturday together. It would be brutal to tear Biddy away from Rosamund on Friday!"

"Take me home, too!" Jen said sadly. "My daddy and my mummy want me! They say I've been away long enough. Won't you miss us all, 'Traveller's Joy'?"

"We shall sit in sackcloth and ashes, and water the lawn with our tears!" Joy promised. "And the house will feel like a deserted mansion."

Both she and Jen turned quickly as Mary made her request, in the woods on Saturday morning. Jen eyed Mary curiously. Joy said quickly: "Of course I will! If it's anything I can do."

"Is it something very difficult, Mary-Dorothy?" Jen asked curiously.

"I don't think so," Mary flushed. "I want to tell you something; to confess! I wondered if perhaps you'd be willing to listen some time—after Biddy and the others have gone to bed."

Jen burst out: "*If* we'll listen! We're simply dying to know what you're talking about!"

"But what can you possibly have to confess?" Joy stared at her in puzzled amazement.

But Mary would not start on her story then. They had to wait, in keen anticipation, till all was quiet upstairs that night, and even Mrs. Shirley had gone to bed. No more had been said, but Mary knew by the sparkle in Jen's eyes, and the meaning look in Joy's, that they were waiting eagerly for the time to come.

“Now!” Jen turned to her, in a whirl of suppressed excitement. “Shall we stop here in the moonlight? Or go into the Abbey? Or go up to Joy’s room and sit on her bed with our hair down, in our nighties?”

Joy glanced at Mary’s restless face, and realised that here was something serious, and that it was no time for light talk and laughter.

“Bring cushions, and we’ll go into the cloisters,” she said abruptly. “We don’t want to be interrupted.”

Armed with cushions and keys, they invaded the Abbey. The cushions made safe seats of the broad stone ledges of the windows; and Mary, while she spoke, gazed across at the beautiful arches of the chapter-house, while Joy and Jen gazed at her, and sometimes glanced quickly at one another.

“Now, Mary-Dorothy, tell us the secret!” Jen begged.

“It is a secret, and I thought it always would be,” Mary began nervously, but soon forgot herself in the deep earnestness with which she spoke. “I want you to know how big a thing you’ve done for me, before we go away. All the time, for years, I’ve been missing the real things of life; and I’d have gone on so for ever, I believe, if you two hadn’t come along and simply hauled me out of the life I was leading.”

Joy looked at Jen, and Jen at Joy. Then Jen gasped: “But how? How do you mean? We didn’t know!”

“As a child,” said Mary gravely, “I always made up stories. I tried to write them down, and one day, with a great effort, I showed them to my father. I told you he was a journalist. It was the night before he left for China as special correspondent. So I showed him some of the fancies I’d written down. And of course he knew what was good and what was bad. He found a lot of nice things to say; the writing and the descriptions were good, but none of it was the kind of thing I could ever hope to sell. But I waited for him to come back and tell me more; and he never came. He was taken ill out there, and died before he got proper medical skill. Well, you see what that meant!” swiftly, to prevent any words of sympathy. “I had to work. I didn’t know how to go on. I burnt all my papers—oh, none of them were any good \_\_\_\_!”

“Mary-Dorothy, how could you?” Jen cried indignantly, with the optimism of her age. “Why, some of them may have been priceless manuscripts!”

“So I—I kept the stories for myself,” Mary said slowly, picking her words with care and trying to make the girls understand. “I went on making up romances, but nobody knew. They were real to me; I lived in them, but it was an unreal world. There was nothing bad in them; on the contrary, I put in all the good and beautiful and uplifting things that I seemed to be missing in real life. I dreamt about them; I lived among these people I’d invented,

and loved them, and knew them. And it went on for years and years, till the inside life was almost as real as the outer one, and much more fascinating.”

She paused, her eyes searching their faces wistfully to see if they understood, if they would sympathise or condemn.

Jen looked frankly puzzled. This was a thing unlike anything she had ever met.

Joy’s face was troubled; she was older and had a little more experience of life to help her judgment.

“I never heard of anyone doing it before,” she said slowly, “but it seems to me it couldn’t be quite right, Mary-Dorothy. Didn’t it make you—well, dreamy and half-awake?”

“That’s what we said about her when we first got to know her!” Jen exclaimed triumphantly. “But I thought it was only because we didn’t know her very well. Now that we know her so much better she seems quite different; much more alive!”

“No, you were right. I am different,” Mary said swiftly. “That was the result; I’d come to live more in my secret world than in the real one. But I didn’t realise what it was doing to me; how serious its results would be; until, just lately, I found that I couldn’t cope with Bidy, couldn’t control her, couldn’t satisfy her. I realised I had failed with her; and in my heart I knew the reason, and that this was the result, or the punishment, if you like, of the way I’d lived for years. That’s the dreadful trouble I was in when Jen walked into the office one day and gave me violets.”

“Oh, I’m glad I came!” Jen said pitifully.

“Won’t you tell us what happened?” Joy asked anxiously; her face was still much troubled.

“You and Jen came into our lives. You gave us new interests of every kind. Then you brought us here; but it had begun to happen before we came here. It was more those happy, jolly, healthy evenings in town that cured me than this time in the country, though it has all helped.”

“Cured you?” There was an eager note in Joy’s voice. She had been waiting anxiously for this.

“It all began to slip away from me; all that unhealthiness. I can’t tell when it began. I only realised after a while that it was happening; that I was thinking more of other things and dreaming less. You’ve made me live again.”

“Oh, I’m glad!” Joy’s voice had a deep note of strong feeling in it. “Of course we didn’t know. You won’t ever do it again, Mary-Dorothy?” her voice had a stern note which was not all a joke.

Mary flushed. “I’ll never make any promise,” she said, in a low tone. “I’ve promised a dozen times, to myself, and broken my word every time.

I'll try; I'll try very hard. I'm just afraid, when I get used to all the new thoughts you've given me, that they may lose their power to hold me back; and then I may drift into those ways again. I daren't promise."

"Oh, but there will be other new things!" Jen was privately resolving that there should be plenty of these. "There are always new things, as long as you're alive! There are new dances, and new tunes, and new friends. You're not likely to get to the end of any of those for some years!"

"As for friends," said Joy, with one of her sudden changes of subject, which, Jen had learned, meant that no more was to be said at the moment, but that the matter would be discussed in private later, "don't our three children get on well together? Bidy will have to see Rosamund sometimes; we can't part them entirely."

"It's not only Rosamund," Mary remarked.

"I saw they were all three getting chummier and chummier. There'll be tears to-morrow night!"

"Oh, they're too big to weep! But Ros will be grumpy, and Maidie will go into her shell and be silent for hours. Do you know it's nearly midnight? Come to bed, my children! The kids will have been asleep for hours!"



## CHAPTER XX JOY'S HEIRESS

"I doubt it!" Jen murmured, as they crossed the lawn. "The kids being asleep, I mean. After all, it's their last night together! Think of our own young days, Joy!" and she sighed her middle-aged sigh, and pointed to a faint glimmer of light from Rosamund's window.

"Candle!" Joy deduced. "Midnight feast! You won't find Bidy in her bed, Mary-Dorothy. Shall we go and row them, or shall we leave them to it?"

"Oh, Joy! You couldn't!" Jen's tone was shocked. "Let them have their fun! You know we'd have done it ourselves!"

"So long as they don't set the house on fire," Joy amended. "I will not have the Hall burnt down, even if it is Bidy's last night. Creep up like ghosts, then, and don't let them know we've been out. I hope Bidy won't disturb you when she comes to bed, Mary-Dorothy."

A note pinned to Mary's pillow saved her from the need to lie awake. It was brief, and scribbled in haste.

"DEAR MARY

As it's our last night, I'm going to sleep heads and tails with Maidie, as she's smaller than Ros. We're going to have a midnight. Don't be a rotter and give us away to Joy and Jen, though I don't believe they'd mind. Won't it be awful not being here to-morrow night? I can't bear to go away, can you?

Yours sadly,  
BRIDGET."

In Rosamund's room, which opened out of Maidlin's, final schemes were being hatched by the three, sitting on her bed in their dressing-gowns, by the light of a single candle on the table.

"Well, I will, then," Rosamund agreed at last. "As it's our absolutely last chance. I don't really think Joy will mind, Maidie. Pass the lemonade, Biddums; thanks! I don't see why she should. Of course, it's trespassing, but we shan't do any harm, and it's only next door; and anyway, it belongs to that Marchwood man, and she doesn't like him."

"No, she only likes his pond!" Bidy remarked. "Ever since I heard there was a lake next door I've been dying to see it. If any man's got a lake big

enough to boat on, he ought to throw it open to the public.”

“Joy wants it for skating in the winter, too,” Maidlin said. “Can I have an orange, Ros?”

“Here, catch! Have a biscuit with it. Joy and Joan used to go on the lake a lot, when the next door place was empty; Jen told me so. But this wretched man’s coming has stopped all that.”

“Joy had better marry the pond; the man, I mean! The pond would be thrown in,” Bidy suggested.

“She’s not going to marry anybody,” Maidlin objected hurriedly.

“I don’t know if he means to stay at home now,” Rosamund said doubtfully. “He’s a traveller, and rather famous, you know. Oh, he’s a frightfully big chap! Important, and all that.”

“I’d like to see him!” Bidy wailed.

“You shall see his pond, anyway. We’ll take you to-morrow afternoon. But don’t tell the girls or your Mary, for we aren’t supposed to go into his grounds.”

“Couldn’t we fall in, and yell till he had to come and rescue us? I want to see what he’s like.”

“Not worth it. You’d get beastly wet; and he’s nothing to look at.”

“He always looks cross,” said Maidlin, helping herself to the chocolates they had provided that afternoon.

“May be only lonely or bored,” Rosamund amended. “But he doesn’t ever look frightfully nice or cheerful!”

Happily ignorant of the plans being made for her future, Joy slipped into Jen’s room to brush her hair and talk.

Jen sat up in bed to listen. “I knew you’d come! Is it about Mary-Dorothy? Or Bidy? Aren’t you going to tell them about Maidlin, Joy?”

“I may tell Mary-Dorothy the story before they go. I’m worried about her, Jenny-Wren.”

“Oh? But she’s heaps better, Joy.”

“I’m more thankful for that than I can say. I liked her, and so I’m simply awfully glad you found her when you did. But there was more wrong than she thinks. We’ve got to see that she never goes back to all that again,” Joy was brushing and speaking vigorously. “Have you had time to think how it would have ended, if she’d gone on like that, living half the time in another world, inside her mind?”

Jen gazed at her wide-eyed. “Do you mean it would have affected her brain? You can’t mean that, Joy! Just making up stories?”

“I believe she’d have had a bad nervous breakdown. But now—now that she’s trusted us and we know the danger she was in better than she does herself—it’s up to us to hang on to her and see that she never goes back.”

“But what can we do?” Jen pleaded. “I shall be in town of course, and I’ll see her at classes. I can keep an eye on her between times, too.”

“See that she keeps on coming to classes. The music and exercise have evidently helped her. But there’s one thing I’m going to do next time I’m in town,” and Joy flung back the thick braids of hair and spoke decidedly. “I’m going to talk it over with the Pixie, and get her advice.”

“Cheers! I’ll come, too! We must ask somebody, Joy.”

“Yes, it’s too difficult for us alone. I know Mary-Dorothy meant it to be a secret, and I won’t tell another soul, but I do mean to consult the Pixie. I’ve an idea in my head, but I want her advice about it first.”

Jen looked up quickly, but did not question her. “Oh, well, you’ll tell me when it’s ripe! We’ll go and see the Pixie at her shop, shall we? That will make an excuse.”

“I’d forgotten the shop. Yes, I’ll go and order my handwoven frock. Then we’ll take the Little One out to lunch, and talk over this other business.”

“Come into the Abbey for the last time, Mary-Dorothy!” Joy commanded, after lunch next day. “Of course, I don’t mean really the last time! I hope you’ll soon come here again. But if you really must go up to town after tea, we’ll have a last walk in the Abbey. The children are out somewhere, also for a last walk, I suppose!”

“Did you see the innocent faces at breakfast-time?” Jen laughed, as they entered the cloisters. “What time did Biddy come to bed, Mary-Dorothy?”

“She never came at all. She left a note on my pillow, saying she was going to sleep at the bottom of Maidlin’s bed, as they were going to have a feast,” and Mary handed the note to Joy. “I knew you wouldn’t mind. You’ll see what she says about going home to-day.”

Joy’s only comment on the re-arrangement of the sleeping plans for the night was, “It’s very good for Maidie. She’s getting less shy every day. Biddy’s done her good. Don’t you think so, Jen? She’s forgetting she wasn’t brought up as Rosamund was. It weighed on her fearfully at first,” she said to Mary.

A wild shriek cut through the still air; and a second later another, full of terror.

Suddenly white-faced, Joy said breathlessly, “It’s those girls! Where can they be? Somewhere near! Jen, where are they?”

“In the tunnels?” gasped Jen, and darted towards the chapter-house.

“No, come back! It wasn’t underground. It was over there, in the Marchwood grounds. The lake, Jen!” and Joy was off, racing back to the garden of the Hall, Jen at her heels, Mary following, but far behind.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE POND NEXT DOOR

“Oh, this is gorgeous!” Biddy cried exuberantly, and raced across the grass to the water.

As a lake, it was all that could be desired. It stretched away among the trees, reflecting pines and hawthorn; but at the lower end, where the girls had come upon it, there were open grass banks, and beds of rushes, and a low islet in the middle, covered with flowering thorn bushes round one big oak tree.

As a crowning joy, a small boat lay on the nearer bank. Biddy whirled down upon it in a wild joyous rush, and had it in the water by the time Rosamund and Maidlin caught her.

“We simply must see the island! Oh, it won’t do any harm, Ros! I believe the boat’s left here on purpose. Even the oars are here! Come on!”

Rosamund wanted to see the island badly, and there was no one in sight. She took one oar and Biddy the other, and if their rowing was unscientific it was at least effective. They all landed on the island, and made a thorough exploration.

“I’ll stay here, and build a Robinson Crusoe hut!” Biddy giggled delightedly. “You’ll bring me food! Then I can’t go back to town!”

Sitting perched rather dangerously on a long arm of the oak tree, hanging out well over the water, they talked and made plans for future meetings. Maidlin, the last in most adventures, proved herself an adept at tree-climbing, and fearlessly crept farther along the bough than either of the others would have ventured.

They were talking eagerly of the future, when Biddy’s jaw dropped and she pointed in speechless dismay at a man who had appeared on the bank farther down the lake.

“It’s him!” gasped Rosamund. “I say, now we’re in for a row!”

“Who? What?” Maidlin twisted round in alarm.

Then her wild shriek rang out, as she lost her balance and fell, striking her head on a lower branch as she plunged into the water.

With a scream, “Maidie! Oh, Maidie!” Rosamund hurled herself to the rescue, hanging by her hands for a second and then dropping with a splash.

In a flash, quick-witted Biddy saw two things: if Rosamund could swim, she could save Maidlin; if she could not, she would need to be saved herself, and she could be helped more successfully from the boat than by another

girl also floundering in deep water. So Biddy went along the bough and down the trunk like a squirrel; but, in her breathless haste, caught her foot in a streamer of ivy and fell the last two yards, giving a nasty twist to the entangled foot.

Bruised and shaken, she wrenched herself free, and a sob broke from her as a sharp pain stabbed the foot. She could not stand on it.

“But I *must!*” she gasped desperately, and with a frantic effort dragged herself to the boat and rolled into it.

A fierce thrust of the oar against the bank sent the boat leaping towards Rosamund, who had thought she could swim but was only managing to keep herself afloat, badly hampered by her Sunday frock. Maidlin was nowhere to be seen.

Biddy, shaking with fright, leaned over and called frantically. “Ros, hold on to me! You’ll go down! Where’s Maidie?”

She was holding out her hand to struggling Rosamund and seriously endangering the balance of the boat, when a hand gripped the other side, steadying it and jerking her backwards, and a stern voice said sharply:

“Sit down! You’ll upset the boat. Give me an oar; now sit still and leave it to me.”

A wild thought flashed through Biddy’s distraught mind, of the midnight feast and her own desire to be rescued by the unknown owner of the lake. She had not seen him racing down the bank or plunging in at the nearest point; but here he was, thrusting an oar towards Rosamund. Then he disappeared, diving in search of the child in the pink frock who had been the first to fall.

“Oh, there she is!” shrieked Biddy, as Maidlin’s black head appeared. “Oh, why doesn’t he come? She’ll go under again! Oh!” she gasped. “She’s dead; I’m sure she’s dead! She isn’t moving!”

Maidlin was indeed lying alarmingly still. Rosamund was pushing towards her with her oar when the diver reappeared, saw the small dark head, and plunged towards her.

“He’s got her!” Biddy cried shrilly.

“But what if it’s too late?” Rosamund moaned, and reached out to the boat again and hung there panting.

The man was swimming to the bank; one glance at Maidlin had told him there was no time to spare, and the other two were safe enough if they kept still.

Rosamund, sure that Maidlin was dead, hung on to the boat, crying helplessly in the reaction after the moment of strain. Biddy’s first impulsive move to help her into the boat had told her what would happen if she persisted, and the stern words had come back—“Sit still and leave it to me.”

Their tone, and the fear of obvious consequences, compelled obedience; she instinctively threw her weight to the other side to balance Rosamund, and leaned back, her face white with terror and pain, her injured foot clasped tightly in both hands.

“He’s looking at her on the bank,” Bidy whispered. “He’s putting her face downwards. He’s coming back for us.”

A strong push of Andrew Marchwood’s arm sent the little boat towards the island again, just far enough for him to climb ashore and jump in. Rosamund and the oar were lifted aboard, and he put her and Bidy quickly into the stern and took the oars.

Rosamund summoned up all her courage and faltered, “Please tell us! Is Maidie dead?”

He saw the terror in their eyes, and said in abrupt reassurance, “Certainly not. But she has had a blow on the head. I’ll see to her now. You must go and tell Miss Shirley.”

“Yes. I’ll go and tell Joy,” Rosamund said bravely. “We oughtn’t to have come. It was my fault.”

“Oh, no, it was mine! I teased—oh, Ros! Here come Joy and Jen! How did they know?”

Joy was the first to reach the bank, to find her neighbour bending over Maidlin, for his first look at her when he returned from the island had not been reassuring. He said nothing to the anxious girls, but began to rub her limbs; then called sharply to Rosamund.

“Come here! You can do this. Rub her, so, steadily,” and he began to raise and lower her arms.

Rosamund gave him a scared look, and, half crying, followed his instructions. There was a big bruise on Maidlin’s forehead, and she was horribly still, and such a queer colour that Rosamund’s heart almost stopped as she looked at her.

As Joy raced up, he spoke without stopping in his task. “The doctor, Miss Shirley, at once. Phone him first, and then go for him on your cycle. And tell them at the house——”

“I know!” Joy said, breathless, but quiet, and keeping her head. “Hot bottles and blankets, and hot drinks and brandy. I’ll see to all that.”

“Take this child with you. She’ll have a chill. The other girl can take her place.”

“Jen!” Joy called sharply, and Jen sprang to her side. “Take Rosamund’s place here.”

Jen slipped into the place, and Rosamund, not daring to protest, raced away after Joy, but was soon left far behind, for her wet clothes were heavy, and Joy, in cold terror, went like the wind, as she had come, Maidlin’s grey

face always before her eyes. They passed Mary, but did not stop; only Joy cried, as she sped past her, "Go on! You may be able to help!"

As Mary reached the bank, Andrew Marchwood paused in his task and looked down at Jen. "This is Miss Shirley's Italian heiress, of whom we have heard?"

Jen raised her frightened, tear-filled eyes. "Yes. Joy's wrapped up in Maidie. Can you save her?"

"Then run after her and tell her there is hope. The child isn't going to die. Her heart's working again. We want the doctor at the earliest possible moment, however. There's some concussion, and very severe shock. She'd better tell him that."

"Tell me what to do," Mary faltered. "I want to help."

Jen, with an inspiration, ran straight to the gates of the Marchwood estate, which Joy must pass on her way to reach the doctor; and Andrew Marchwood laughed grimly as he realised her intention. "She'll catch Miss Shirley there, if she's started. Might have missed her at the Hall. Good child! Her head's on straight."

Out in the road Jen stood waving her arms wildly, as Joy came racing round the corner from the Hall. Her motor-cycle was temporarily out of action, but the little car had been ready for the evening run to town.

She pulled up just in time to avoid running over Jen. "What's the matter, idiot? Why did you stop me? Oh, Jenny-Wren, your face says it's good news!"

"He sent me to tell you. She's breathing, so she won't die. You're to tell the doctor there's concussion and severe shock, but she isn't going to die."

"Oh, the blessed man!" Joy said fervently. "I think I'd have died before I got to the doc, if I'd had to go all the way thinking Maidie was dead. Tell Rosamund as soon as you can, Jen. She's all broken up. But fancy that man thinking of sending me word! I'd never have believed it of him! Saving Maidie's life is the kind of thing you'd expect him to do, but fancy him thinking of me! I'll never say a nasty thing about him again!"

"He's bringing Maidie home. I guess he's saved her life twice over! He asked me if she was your Italian heiress, and then told me to run after you and tell you she'd be all right."

"Bless him! He's a dear!" Joy said, with heartfelt gratitude. Thanks awfully, Jenny-Wren!" and Eirene sped hooting on to fetch the doctor.

## CHAPTER XXII

### MAIDLIN'S PRIVATE SECRETARY

Until Joy came back with the doctor, Jen would not leave Maidlin's room. Andrew Marchwood gave directions and made some useful suggestions, and these Jen carried out carefully, and was rewarded by seeing faint colour creep into Maidlin's grey face, and by feeling some warmth in her body again. Then there was nothing to do but wait.

The hero of the hour went off to carry Bidy home; then went back to his own house to change; and Jen came to the door of Maidlin's room and called softly to Mary.

"Mary-Dorothy, there's a job waiting for you. Do be a dear and help us out! I daren't leave Maidie; but someone ought to be with Mrs. Shirley. If you'd talk to her and tell her all you know, it would help a lot."

"And good for Mary-Dorothy, too!" she said to herself, as she turned back to Maidlin's side. "She isn't much use at a crisis! She looks scared to death."

She said as much to Joy later in the evening, when Maidlin was sleeping, and Rosamund and Bidy were having dinner together in bed.

Joy agreed gravely with Jen's comment on Mary. "Don't you think it's a result of all she told us last night? It seems to me just what you'd expect. I'm not a scrap surprised to find her no use in an emergency."

"Mary-Dorothy, you'll have to stay a few days longer, whether the office likes it or not," Joy said, as they were saying good-night.

"I can't spare you," Joy explained. "Jen must go up to town on Tuesday; and if Maidie's fit to be left, I must go just for the day on Thursday as usual. But your work's here, for this week, and it will be better for Bidy, too. She couldn't possibly get up all those stairs; and you couldn't carry her."

"You know how glad I'll be to do anything I can," Mary said doubtfully. "But I'm afraid I'm not very much use. I never know what to do."

"I had a heart-to-heart talk with Mary-Dorothy last night." Joy announced, when she met Jen on Thursday night. Maidlin was so much better that there had seemed no reason, with Mary at the Hall, why Joy should not carry out a cherished plan, and stay the night in town with Jen, so that they could go together to see the Pixie next day. "I got her talking, and after a while she opened her heart to me. I made her talk as much as I could, and collected several valuable bits of evidence for the Little One to-morrow. And she said slowly, as if she were thinking it out. 'I suppose the trouble



really is that I don't think enough; I mean, think deeply about things. It was so much easier just to go off into dreams and be happy,' or something like that. 'So I suppose I'm paying out for it now,' she finished up."

"That wasn't bad for Mary-Dorothy," Jen said, with approval. "She'd thought that out, anyway."

"She's been thinking it over since Saturday night, and she's decided that she's a coward and very lazy and useless. That's what she says. I said she might have been, but there was no need to go on being like that, now that she'd found it out."

Jen laughed. "You didn't deny any of the dreadful things? Poor Mary-Dorothy! You are merciless, 'Traveller's Joy!'"

"I didn't. They're true. It wasn't unkind to agree with her, when she said it herself. But I like her heaps, in spite of all that. I like her more and more. People are more interesting if they aren't perfect, so long as they're sporting enough to realise it and struggle to be better."

"You're a good sort, 'Traveller's Joy,'" Jen said fervently. "You'll help her better than anyone else could. I'm glad I took you to see her!"

"I'm glad you found her out, and were quick enough to see there was something wrong! There's one other thing I must tell you!" and she broke into a laugh. "Biddy has re-arranged her future!"

"Oh—Biddy!" Jen laughed. "She's a business woman through and through! Yes, I suppose it would need some re-arrangement! What's the latest plan?"

"I only heard through Maidlin. She whispered it last night, when I went in to say good-night. I think Biddy was shy, impossible as it seems! Maidie wanted to know if I didn't think she'd need to have a private secretary when she comes of age? And if so, couldn't Biddy be it? For she'd simply love to have her!"

"A beautiful plan!" Jen laughed. "Were you nice about it?"

"Oh, rather! I said I thought she'd probably be the better of someone to help her, who could travel with her, as she'll have to live in Italy at times. And I thought Biddy would make a very jolly one; but she must get experience with someone else first. So Biddy's to work hard for the next seven years, on the understanding that she becomes Maidie's secretary when Madalena's twenty-one. And they're both very happy in the thought of it."

"I call it a very good plan!" Jen said warmly. "But where does Mary-Dorothy come in? Is she to be left alone?"

"I've a plan for Mary-Dorothy! But I want to ask the Pixie about it first."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### HOLDING THE ROPE

“Here you are!” and the Pixie came running out of the back of the little West End shop to greet them.

On the little counter, on the shelves behind, and on the ledges against the opposite wall, were piles of beautiful handwoven materials, in vivid, or delicate, or soft shades of colour. The Pixie pulled out piece after piece of the finished goods and spread them on the counter to tempt Joy.

“Dear Pixie, stop!” Joy implored. “I’ll have every single one! I simply can’t resist such gorgeous things!”

“The colours are weird, though,” Jen exclaimed, as one after another original design caught her eye. “I’d never have dreamed of putting some of them together. They’re right, of course; you feel that as soon as you see them.”

Downstairs were more and larger looms; upstairs they saw the Pixie’s workroom, and the dresses she was working on. In the shop were piles of carpets and rugs, of strange rich colours also, some “straight from the desert,” as the Pixie told them proudly, others from China and Japan.

“It’s a most fascinating spot!” Joy sighed. “I shall come to see you often here, Pixie. And I quite expect I shall order a frock every time! And now come out to lunch! You must tell us where to go. We’ve a big problem for you, and we’re dying to hear what you’ll say about it.”

“Oh?” the Pixie looked up in eager interest. “Is it your children again? Aren’t they happy together yet?”

“They’re inseparable; adore one another, and all that kind of thing. Oh, do you know, we had such a fright on Sunday!” and as they went out together they told of the accident and explained the presence of Mary and Biddy at the Hall.

The Pixie made no comment, but her eyes kindled as she glanced appreciatively at the two girls taking the seats opposite to her at the table she had chosen. Her favourite place for lunch was on the balcony of a big corner restaurant, where five wide busy streets met, and streams of buses came slowly down each, or taxis whirled round all the corners. The traffic and the endless crowds fascinated the girls, and they hung over the railing and forgot their lunch and their problems.

But at last, when the coffee stage was reached, the Pixie drew them back to the business of the moment; and Joy plunged eagerly into the story Mary

had told in the Abbey.

“Well, what are you going to do?” came the eager question. “You’ve got to help her now; you’ve simply got to!”

“You do think it was serious, then?” Joy asked soberly. “We’d never heard of anything like it in a grown person.”

“It ought not to be in a grown person. It’s abnormal, and horribly dangerous. She was living two lives, and the unreal one was getting stronger every day. At last it would have conquered, since she was feeding it all the time; the real life would have slipped away, and she’d have lived only in her dreams; happy enough, perhaps, but ruined for life, with no mind left to use.”

“But how can we help her now?” Jen burst out explosively. “You don’t want us to warn her?”

“I wouldn’t. How to help her? You know that for yourselves. You gave her music and dancing; probably she was starving for both. Then you gave her new friendships and interests and change of scene; and you found you’d changed her too. Don’t you see? You’d wakened her mind; it had to work. But now, unless she’s to go back, to be worse than before, you’ve got to help her to express that life. She must find her outlet; something worth living for. She must *do* things; that’s what it comes to.”

“Dance, do you mean?” Jen asked doubtfully.

“That’s a step; a big first step, for her. But she mustn’t stop with merely dancing; that’s not an end. It is expression, but it’s not enough. She must use that dancing for other people—as you’re doing,” to Jen. “Make her teach. Find her a little class and make her start. At least she’ll know more than they do.”

“She’d die at the thought,” said Jen.

“She’ll get used to it. Make any reason you like; say it’s to help you, and you’ll be so grateful. And then you’ve got to make her begin writing again. That’s obvious.”

“But we can’t advise her, Pixie,” Jen objected. “And she says her stories were no good.”

“We can find some one to advise her. Why don’t you ask our Writing Friend? Tell her all you can about Mary’s attempts at writing, and ask her advice. And always remember, she’s your responsibility. You threw the rope that saved her; now you’ve got to hold that rope and never let her sink again till she’s safely ashore.”

“We’ll hold on for all we’re worth!” Joy said fervently.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### MARY-DOROTHY MAKES THE PLUNGE

After a happy, quiet week-end at the Hall, Mary and Bidy came back to town late on Sunday night. Bidy's foot had recovered from the wrench she had given it in the ivy; Rosamund's cold was better; and Maidlin was throwing off the effects of the shock, though still shaky and easily tired.

On Tuesday Bidy came flying home from college, full of eagerness for the evening's dancing. "Won't it be lovely to see Jen again? Isn't it gorgeous to have this to look forward to once a week?" she cried exuberantly, and caught up her whistle and ran through "Rufty Tufty."

"It just makes all the difference," Mary was excited too, but more quietly.

They were almost ready to start for the class, when imperative knocking sent Bidy flying to the door. She flung it open, and Jen came hurriedly in.

"Mary-Dorothy! I want you badly! I say, you'd like to be a dear, and help me out of an awful hole, wouldn't you?"

"I'd like to do anything I can," Mary said, with anxious eyes. "What's the trouble?"

"Some very old friends of Mother's have turned up unexpectedly, and she's asked them for the evening, and there's a girl of my age, and Mother wants me to be at home for dinner. I don't see how I can get away! I simply can't leave Mother to do everything; she gets so worried, poor dear, and it's so bad for her! I hate to feel I'm letting the girls down! They'll all be so awfully upset, and it's a whole week before they can come again! Couldn't you take the class for me, just for this once, Mary-Dorothy?"

"I?" Mary cried, and eyed Jen as if she suspected her of sudden softening of the brain. "I couldn't teach a class! Jenny-Wren, I should be terrified!"

"Oh, you needn't be!" Jen and Bidy spoke together.

"Oh, but I can't!" Mary wailed, every shy bit of her nature and every shred of self-distrust coming to the surface. "I've never done anything of the kind!"

"That's where the fun comes in, for you," Jen told her promptly. "It's always jolly doing things for the first time. You might grumble if I asked you to do shorthand all evening! But a new excitement like teaching 'Bacca Pipes' to girls who have never seen it before——! You ought to be thrilled at the chance. You'll have an awfully jolly time!"

“I can’t feel like that. It seems to me a horribly difficult thing to do. I don’t feel as if I could face it,” Mary said nervously.

“Oh, Mary!” Biddy wailed. And then, wildly, but more wisely than she knew: “What does it matter how you feel, if it helps Jen out of a hole? Think how nice she’s been to us! You can’t let her down!”

Mary looked up, frightened courage in her eyes, her face determined. “I don’t think I can do it. But if you’d like me to try, I’ll do my best,” she said hurriedly. “As Biddy says, we can’t let you down, if you really want anything from us.”

“You dear!” Jen said fervently. “Then I can be happy. Now I’ll run; but I’ll look in again later, if I can. Good luck to you! The music’s all there, and Miss Gardner will play anything you want. ‘Bacca Pipes’ is in Morris IV. I’ll be grateful to you for ever!” and she fled, before Mary could change her mind.

Only six girls besides themselves came for the first half-hour. To these Mary explained Jen’s suggestion, and the girls took her meaning to be that Miss Robins could not come early, but would, of course, appear presently for the real class. They laughed, being more than doubtful of their power to remember what they had done.

“I guess we’ll make some jolly old muddles, but let’s have a shot at it, and see how far we get,” one said good-naturedly.

The ensuing muddles reduced them all to helpless laughter and despair; but they struggled with the problem till all were hot and breathless, and till the movements began to go more smoothly.

In the tension and the laughter which relieved it, Mary had forgotten the ordeal before her. It came on her like a blow, when a girl cried: “Where’s Miss Robins? Isn’t she here?”

“Coming late,” said one of the sword-dancers, hurrying away with the bundle of wooden swords.

Biddy looked at Mary. Mary, with a horrible shock of remembrance, turned white, and her lips tightened. She dashed into her ordeal to get it over.

Running up on to the platform beside the piano, and unconscious that her knees were shaking, though she knew it afterwards when they ached all night, she stood and hammered on the desk with a morris stick, as Jen had often done to gain silence. As the girls turned in surprise, she said quickly, sudden nervous colour in her face:

“Girls, Miss Robins is very sorry, but she can’t be here to-night. She had no time to get any one else, so she asked me to take her place. I’m afraid it’s a case of either that or closing the club for this evening. She was most anxious you shouldn’t miss your dancing, so she asked me to teach you one

or two new things she has taught Bidly and me while we've been away in the country. Could somebody find us a piece of chalk?"

Chalk, in a folk-dance class, was an unusual and exciting requirement. Some was speedily forthcoming, and the girls watched wide-eyed while Bidly, much amused, drew a white cross on the floor.

"Bidly will show you the dance, and then, if you like it, you shall all try. Please play this!" and Mary placed the "Greensleeves" music before the pianist. "It's a very well-known Old English tune, and very haunting."

She stood by the girl and timed her and told her when to change the figure, while Bidly, in the centre of a breathless delighted ring, danced the jig.

The girls, watching Bidly's gymnastics, were utterly thrilled and delighted with this new and most extraordinary development of a morris dance. Bidly was excited, too, and her hopping was wild and her feet were tapping all over the place; but she got through without a breakdown, and the room rang with applause, and then with an insistent demand: "Can't we try? How ever does she do it? Oh, won't you teach us, Miss Devine?"

"It was very bad," Mary said severely. "If Bidly had had real pipes, they'd have been in splinters by the end of the first figure."

After that the evening went with a swing. The girls were happy, each hopping round and over her own particular cross of chalk.

There was no time for country-dancing; no one wanted to do anything but "Bacca Pipes," and Mary, not too sure yet of her power to control them unless they were happy and interested, let them have their way, and went round criticising and giving advice, forgetting that she had expected every moment of the evening to be a separate ordeal.

## CHAPTER XXV

### MARY-DOROTHY'S PROMISE

Mary was tired out by the time they went home, but as bright-eyed and happy as the rest; and she flushed in embarrassed delight, as girl after girl, changing shoes or getting out of tunics, thanked her for taking Jen's place and giving them such a jolly evening.

They were preparing supper when the sound of the morris pipe took Biddy flying to the door. Jen had halted at the last turn of the stair to play a triumphant "Laudnum Bunches." Waving the pipe, she came racing up to Biddy.

"Well how did she get on? Was it all right?"

"Simply great! They all say they've had a wonderful evening! Jen, she did it beautifully! Don't listen to a word she says!"

"I was fearfully nervous," Mary faced Jen shyly, but with satisfied eyes because she had not failed her.

"You poor dear! I was afraid you would be. But I was sure you could do it. Tell me all about it, Biddy!"

"It was rather priceless!" and Biddy launched forth into a long story, interrupted continually by Mary, who tried to tone down her exaggerated style and had to be sternly suppressed by Jen.

"I'm just awfully glad!" Jen said warmly, at the end. "Now I want to know something. The Pixie knows a club of children in North London, not far from here, who are just dying to do country-dancing once a week. Now, would you take them on, Mary-Dorothy? It means a regular evening once a week, with Biddy to help if she can spare the time. They'd be your own kiddies, and you'd choose their dances and teach them from the very beginning."

"Oh!" Mary said slowly, and stared at her, doubt and hope struggling for mastery in her face. "Oh, but would I be good enough?"

Jen reached for a cushion and held it poised threateningly. "I've orders from Joy to throw something at you whenever you say you don't think you're good enough! After to-night you know perfectly well you can do it beautifully. That's settled, then. I'll ring up the Pixie to-morrow."

"But will she think I'm good enough?" Mary asked anxiously.

"My dear, she wants you to take them on. She'll be ever so grateful! It will keep you busy, for you'll find you want to think a lot about your class during the week; the best dances for them, and the best way to teach the

dances, and how to correct their faults, and so on. But you mustn't think all the time about the class! There's another thing you're going to do, or I'll be horribly disappointed in you."

"What's that? I don't want to disappoint you," Mary smiled at her, a trifle nervously.

"Do you remember that evening you came to watch our classes, when Madam was teaching? Well, do you remember talking to that Writing Person?"

Mary nodded, with interested face.

"I had a long talk with her about books last week. I told her about your writing, and——"

"Jen!" there was dismay and reproach in Mary's cry.

"Of course I did, silly. She was very much interested, and she says you've got to try again and go on trying; she says it's the only way. She wanted badly to see something you'd written, but I said I thought you'd burnt them all," Jen paused.

Mary, with flushed bent face, nodded vigorously. "They were no good. Why did you tell her?"

"Because we all know you can write, and you ought to be doing it. You've slacked for years," Jen said severely. "Now you've got to start again. You may not write only to make money; you shouldn't, and of course you won't. You'll write because it's the thing you care most about doing. But it's no fun writing things that nobody's going to read; things are written on purpose to be read! So you've got to write things that will get put in the papers, or that are good enough for books. And of course they'll be paid for."

Mary looked at Jen anxiously. "Did your friend say anything about the kind of thing that would be likely to be printed? I've no idea how to start."

"She said you must write about real people and real things. I don't mean put all your friends in your stories, though you may put me in, if you like! I'd love it!" Jen laughed. "Now you will have another shot at it, won't you? If it's only to please me and Joy?"

"If I ever do write a book," said Mary, her voice full of deep feeling, "I shall dedicate it to you. I shall word it: 'To my Fairy Godmother, Jen.'"

"I shall be more than proud!" Jen said wistfully. "I'm sure you will do it some day, Mary-Dorothy!"

THE END



## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.  
[The end of *The Abbey Girls Again* by Elsie J. Oxenham [Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley]]